



YS UP GOVERNANCE AND BOARDS PODCAST

Episode 1 – Leading through change with Jo Willoughby

Transcript

Intro:

Welcome to YS Up Governance and Boards podcast brought to you by 3YS Owls Governance Consultants. Covering hot topics in governance, risk, latest regulatory changes, and issues keeping directors and executives awake at night. Here are your hosts, Ainslie Cunningham, and Deb Anderson.

Deb Anderson:

Welcome to YS Up - Governance and Boards podcast. Today, we are excited to be joined by the amazing Jo Willoughby. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us today Jo.

Jo Willoughby:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Jo Willoughby is an experienced company director and advisory board chair working with a diverse portfolio across manufacturing, importing, e-commerce, distribution, professional services and cyber security. Drawing on 20 plus years experience as an accomplished change agent and business builder, Jo is recognised by boards for her breadth of industry experience and deep knowledge of marketing, revenue and profit growth, strategy, change and transformation, risk, and nominations.

Jo currently serves as an independent Non-Executive Director for Winson Group (the holding company for Signet and Insignia) and as the Advisory Board Chair for FamGuard. A graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, a certified advisory board chair through the Advisory Board Centre and a Fellow of the Australian Marketing Institute. Jo is motivated by creating winning businesses that are great places to work and future ready. Wow. What an impressive bio Jo.

Jo Willoughby:

Thank you.

Deb Anderson:

Tell us about your journey that's got you here today.

Jo Willoughby:

Well, my journey, it started, I think like all of us we start with a passion when we're young and for me, my passion has always been people, business, and change. I've always been a driven person. Driven to see how far I could go, how I could test myself and so forth. So much of my career has been established in opportunities, I guess, and organisations whereby I've really jumped in the deep end and learned how to swim. Not too many times have I taken on a role or an opportunity that I've done before, but it's always been I found my way. So for me taking opportunities that some might consider

risks, I guess much of my career has been very much opportunities finding me and certainly embracing them and then working it out along the way.

Jo Willoughby:

I've had an interesting career. I started my career in retail with Freedom Furniture and that was a very interesting time pre IPO and post IPO. That really set me up for essentially... was the foundation of my sales and marketing career. I moved then into product management and into larger organisations, such as Australia Post. And I had lots of great opportunities in that organisation to really learn and contribute, and certainly get comfortable with being uncomfortable in many aspects.

Jo Willoughby:

Whether that was turning around product performance, whether that was creating new strategies for the organisation from a digital perspective, or certainly leading the transformation of the Salesforce. Then moving beyond that into working in financial services. As I mentioned before, for me, I don't have a linear progression. I'm not somebody that's been in banking for 20 or 30 years or in one particular industry I've got diverse experience. That's what people value me for. It's certainly my point of differentiation and that's really all come about through putting myself out there, the school of hard knocks and learning on the way through, dusting myself off and getting up again and moving forward.

Ainslie Cunningham:

What do you think are the major challenges facing directors and businesses in 2020, Jo?

Jo Willoughby:

I guess one of the things that for me, I guess over the duration of my career as an executive and then moving into being a non executive director I've grown up in an era whereby we've had the GFC. I was a manager in that period of time. And so lots of change and ambiguity also working for traditional organisations that needed to redefine and reposition themselves for the future. A lot of uncertainty in that regard, in relation to who are we when we want to grow up.

Jo Willoughby:

I find as my role as a Non-Executive Director, and just generally the landscape here we are in 2020, starting off the year in what has been unprecedented circumstances, we find ourselves in. I think one of the challenges for directors is really keeping pace with change, being comfortable. If you can say, this is almost an oxymoron, but being comfortable in the uncomfortable, and I guess being agile and nimble, because that's essentially what's required for the director of the future.

Jo Willoughby:

Having had longstanding careers is fantastic, but also being able to deal with ambiguity and change and things coming from left and right field that we're not necessarily prepared for. And being able to stand on your feet and be able to respond and provide a leadership position to support businesses is really, really important. I think we're in very interesting times right now and staying abreast of that is a challenge for not only me, but for other directors generally, I think.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Absolutely. And do you think that those... how do you think the business will face those challenges as well? So with the directors really trying to lead the way for them, how do you think the business will fare through that?

Jo Willoughby:

Well, I'm thinking about my governance role in particular. I'm really fortunate, I sit on a board of a family organisation it's been around for 50 years and the board... I'm an independent director. There's other independents that sit on that board and we have a really great board composition. The dynamic of the board is fantastic, and I'm really fortunate in that regard. We have robust discussion, we have respectful discussion and we all operate in the interest of the organisation.

Jo Willoughby:

So the organisation, I'm confident we will fare well. There will certainly be some dents to performance. There's no doubt about that in relation to particularly the industry that we're in. There's no doubt about that. However, we've got a really solid proposition. It's a very healthy business, it's got great management team and a great board supporting it. And so for us, it's around, and for me in particular, it's being alive to the situations as they occur today, but also keeping a level of an awareness and keeping abreast of future trends and so forth, but also supporting that business through mentorship with various members of the ELT [Executive Leadership Team] and so forth.

Jo Willoughby:

So I'm confident to be honest with you because it's an established business, as I said, it's got great captains running that business, and we've got a great board.

Deb Anderson:

What's one of the biggest challenges you've faced in your career, and how have you overcome it?

Jo Willoughby:

One of the biggest challenges for me, I guess, has been... I've had a couple of key challenges in my career to be honest with you and their challenges where my own values have been tested, and my ethics have been tested. Not so much tested because my ethics and my values are my values and the way that I've performed, but certainly being in environments where that hasn't necessarily been a great fit. So that has actually been a test for me.

Jo Willoughby:

It's not been so much more of a professional test around my ability to lead or to manage, but certainly how to lead myself and how to manage myself in those situations. So I guess work experience provides all sorts of different arrays of learning and development. Most of us think it's around technical skills. For me, that certainly has been the case, but a big part of the challenges that I've had to actually rise through, have been the challenges where I haven't necessarily felt well supported or my values have been tested, or I've been asked to compromise on things that for me are non-negotiable.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Very much an EQ meets IQ type scenario, isn't it?

Jo Willoughby:

Absolutely.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah. In one of your videos, Jo, you previously quoted that based on statistics from Deloitte that one in 10 businesses are future ready. Do you think that statistic has changed given the current climate?

Jo Willoughby:

That statistic was from a couple of years ago and I would imagine that there'd be some certainly organisations that are pushing the envelope, pardon the pun, in that regard. I think the current environment probably is testing a lot of organisations because just by way of where priorities currently are and scrambling to immediate needs. I think if anything, the current environment perhaps is creating a spotlight on some opportunities in organisations to progress in ways that perhaps we thought were some years off. So if I take, for example, the future of work, this week in particular, here in Australia, we've been asked by a lot of organisations, if I say, employees to work from home.

Jo Willoughby:

So that's a whole new paradigm for a lot of organisations whereby that was perhaps seen as a luxury or something like that certainly wasn't within how they operate from a business model perspective, it's come as a need. That perhaps is challenging how they work as a team, the technology that supports them, their operating rhythms and cadence and so forth. I think it's a work in progress. I really do. I think organisations right now had they been progressing down particular paths to transform their organisation, hopefully continue to do that, but perhaps their energy and resource right now is just trying to keep the business together and people motivated and focused on the task at hand in a new paradigm of a different way of working with each other and with suppliers and their customers.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah, absolutely. And you're seeing the dynamic shift in their strategic direction, given that some people will have no route to market without that foot traffic coming through the pubs, the clubs, the restaurants, all those cafes, all the small to medium business owners are really going to feel the pinch of the back of this.

Jo Willoughby:

Yeah. And on the, I guess the flip side... and that's true, I'm working with some small businesses that I do work with outside of... from an advisory capacity. There certainly are some definite challenges there. I also like to think that there's opportunity if you flip this around the other way, there are absolute opportunities. And sometimes it's today might not be the day to look at that because today might be too overwhelming, but tomorrow is a new day and tomorrow is an opportunity to have conversations that spark curiosity, curiosity in yourself and curiosity in your team around how you might be able to do things differently.

Jo Willoughby:

I think it's a well-worn quote, don't waste a crisis. There are opportunities here. It's just a matter of finding them, but you need to have the mindset to be able to be ready to find them and be open to finding them.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Absolutely. And it's really that whole trying to change mindsets as well. So it might not necessarily be the mindset that's currently adopted, but helping pave the way for others to change their mindset as well.

Jo Willoughby:

Yeah. And I think that's a real... that is probably going to be one of the biggest challenges because we as humans, we are creatures of habit, right? We don't necessarily like change, particularly change that is thrust upon us, as opposed to change that we feel that we're in control and we're navigating for ourselves. So from a mindset perspective, it will be, I think a challenge for leaders in organisations around working with their teams in particular, around changing mindset. Going from that fixed

mindset to more of a growth mindset needs to be accelerated, and supporting their people in these circumstances that we face. And then being receptive to change.

Jo Willoughby:

A lot of that, you mentioned before, Ainslie, around business models, business models are compromised, and once panic sets in, it's very hard to change a mindset when people are stuck on a particular... this is the only way we can do things. And so I think working with employees, and teams around mindset is going to be absolutely crucial going forward.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah, definitely. And sort of from a risk management perspective for me, I think it's fantastic for businesses because you really trying to bring to the forefront business continuity planning, crisis management, and really trying to get out of that reactive mode and try and be more proactive and have more lead indicators in your business instead of those lag indicators.

Deb Anderson:

It's a good test of people's business continuity, isn't it is?

Jo Willoughby:

It is, and I think that's something that this particular event is actually put on the spotlight because typically if I think from my own experience, a biomedical security threat wasn't necessarily something that was high on the agenda. And typically business continuity we think about IT systems, we think about managing that health, safety and environment of our employees and our customers and so forth, but not in the context of a biomedical threat, unless you're a hospital, for example, potentially.

Jo Willoughby:

So I think it's just opened a real scope of, okay, from a risk assessment perspective, just opening up the paradigm around what are the risks. And as you say, Deb, the continuity around how we manage that, the plans that we need to have in place, how we communicate with our people, how we communicate with our customers in those regards. And I think a lot of organisations this week and the government as well have been tested around, not necessarily having documents ready at the fore to go to in the top drawer, in these types of situations.

Deb Anderson:

It's an interesting social experiment, just going to the supermarket, isn't it?

Jo Willoughby:

It is a social experiment. It absolutely is.

Ainslie Cunningham:

The toilet paper is becoming a challenge, isn't it?

Jo Willoughby:

Yeah, it's interesting the psyche. Right? And I think that's why I mentioned about changing mindsets, particularly in this environment, because once that panic sets in, people want to try and create control. And so people hang on to what they know. So grabbing the toilet paper, the frozen food, the tin veggies and things like that, and bunkering down. When you think about that in business, and you're trying to change the dynamic, or certainly the mindset of teams, you can start to see even

through our own social experiment at the supermarket, you can start to see how some of those mindset limitations can start to play out in business and they're really hard... can be hard to change.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah, definitely. And I think too it's where leadership really comes into play. You've got well experienced directors in business at sort of the top end of town and how smaller businesses can really learn from them. Where these businesses have potentially gone through the GFC, potentially gone through all the natural catastrophe hazards through the sort of mid two thousands. And really when you're operating in that coal face, really drawing on that experience and utilising that in these sort of times.

Jo Willoughby:

Well, I think it's certainly great to have that experience. And from a director perspective you need to be able to work with the ELT and leadership teams to support them, not necessarily jump in and do their job for them, but certainly be there to support and sharing that knowledge, and that experience, I think is really crucial, because there is wisdom in having gone through some of this stuff before. Not necessarily in the same circumstance, not necessarily the same conditions, but certainly working through ambiguity and uncertainty and helping organisations survive through that. This is perhaps not necessarily a time for thriving. It's really organisations are focused on just surviving right now.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Absolutely.

Deb Anderson:

So in your experience, how are we progressing on diversity at a board level and the C-Suite level?

Jo Willoughby:

From a board perspective, for me, I'm again, very fortunate I work in... employed by an organisation in a very diverse board, not only by gender, but by experience and buying industry. And at that perhaps reflects my executive career as well. I've been very fortunate to work in organisations and environments where there has been a vast array of diversity. I talked earlier about my executive career and I don't necessarily fit into a particular box, but I've been very fortunate that people that have actually taken a bet on me have actually embraced diversity. Diversity of experience, diversity of thinking, diversity of gender contributions and so forth.

Jo Willoughby:

So my own personal experience is a positive experience. From a board perspective, it's well understood that there's not enough... there's not as many women on boards, I should say, as there are men. And there's perhaps lots of reasons for that. And supply of female candidates might be one issue. There might be a whole host of other issues. I think it's not only about gender, diversity for me is much, much broader. As I mentioned, it's around experience and thinking. One of the things that I really am enjoying being an observer of at the moment, Deb, is the changes that have been made in America and in California in particular around diversity of boards and a recognition that if you only ever want CEOs on your board, you're going to be limited because everybody else is queuing up for a CEO, but there's great experience to be had for people that have knocked off skin who have actually got their great experience beneath the C-Suite level, and in that next level under the CEO.

Jo Willoughby:

That have got great... is a great opportunity... they're prime candidates to be able to provide great support to organisations. And I guess I'm one of those people, right? So of course I've no doubt

there's some bias in there from my perspective, but diversity of experience is really key. Diversity of thinking, diversity of age, is another great opportunity as well. And I think we could be doing much more in that space, not only in the gender diversity space, but diversity in general.

Deb Anderson:

With your wealth of experience, of yourself as being your 20 year old self, what conversation would you have based on your experience?

Jo Willoughby:

You know what, she's a pretty headstrong stubborn 20 year old, and she's probably not much different now. I'm not sure she would have listened to me too much, Deb. And I think if anything, that's something that I think that my advice to her would be to embody that spirit, that individual spirit, I think that's really important to know who you are and certainly, and what you've got to offer. It doesn't need to look the same as everybody else. And in fact, I would discourage her from looking the same as everybody else.

Jo Willoughby:

And again that comment is perhaps biased on the fact that for me in my career, I've taken the past the path less traveled. And certainly I've taken some risks in that regard, but geez, I've had some fantastic payoffs and I'm looking forward to my future. So to her, I would say, keep going, be strong, stay resilient, keep your spirit and your spunk, and you'll make the right contribution to the organisations that are really looking to differentiate and to do things differently.

Deb Anderson:

Have you had any experience working overseas?

Jo Willoughby:

I haven't lived overseas and worked overseas. I've certainly had experience as a product manager sourcing product from overseas. So my time working from a global tech context is really limited around sourcing product and so forth. Not to the extent that perhaps others have.

Ainslie Cunningham:

How important do you think culture is right now?

Jo Willoughby:

Super important. I'm certainly by no means a cultural expert, but culture is one of those things that it's the glue that holds organisations together. And at this point in time, if we just think about the context of right here and right now with coronavirus and so forth, I think culture it's either going to be the glue that holds you together, or it's going to show the weaknesses and the flaws in an organisation. So I think it's really, really important for organisations that are focused on surviving, having everyone pulling in the same direction is important.

Jo Willoughby:

They don't need to be the same and act the same. That's not what I'm saying, but certainly having a culture of a cohesion is really, really important. I guess it goes to say outside of this environment, but I think culture is one of I guess, aspects of an organisation that really has a spotlight on it right now.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's sort of that ratio of a hundred percent input in opinion and thoughts and ideas, but as long as there's 70% agreement and we're all rowing in the same direction, it's-

Jo Willoughby:

Absolutely. And look, I'm an advocate for really demonstrating that at a board level as well. I mean that's where culture and strategy really comes from, is set from those governance environments. And again, if the board doesn't demonstrate a great culture, a great working culture, then you can't expect the rest of the organisation to also-

Ainslie Cunningham:

Follow suit, really.

Jo Willoughby:

Yeah, that's exactly right. So you need to be able to model that in the boardroom. And again, I'm fortunate that we've been able to... I'm in a company of fellow directors that are very attuned to that, which is fantastic.

Ainslie Cunningham:

That's great with that top down approach, isn't it? As a leader of transformational change, what would your top three tips be for businesses facing this unprecedented change right now?

Jo Willoughby:

I think there needs to be calm. There needs to be level heads. I think it's very easy right now to get caught up in the media. We all are, right? And even for myself, it's around self intervention of reading some of the media because it can easily, you just bunker into a hole. So I think there's a call for calm. Progress can be made with calm heads. From my perspective, employees, and teams, and customers are looking for leadership and to be effective in that regard it requires to have a calm mind, to be able to make the right decisions. So from my perspective, it really does require a calm head.

Jo Willoughby:

I think the second thing in relation to right now it is getting clarity on priorities. We talked earlier around organisations progressing in their advancements around transformation, and I'm sure for many organisations that's still a high priority, but for others that might just go on the back burner for the next week, two, month or so. So it's getting clear on those priorities, and I guess also working with your team and communication.

Jo Willoughby:

Again, coming from all great transformation start with very clear, calm leadership, competent leadership, and communication, and they're the things that are really required right now. So a calm head, clarity around priorities and communication with people, constant communication. The number one reason why transformations fail is because of the lack of communication and poor leadership. So now more than ever, people are looking to their leaders for certainty and we need to be able to provide it.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah. Absolutely. And it's really important to have that feedback loop in there as well, to just really be mindful of mental health as well, and ensuring that your teams and not feeling isolated, not heard, concerns are not being addressed quickly enough, that whole sort of feedback loop system really needs to come into the front.

Jo Willoughby:

Absolutely. And I think what we're seeing at the moment is for people in frontline positions, whether they're in the health industry or they're in retail supporting our people in that way is really, really important because these are unprecedented times. Our behavior can sometimes get a little bit erratic. We've seen that in the supermarkets, on the TV and so forth. We can go a little bit crazy. And so it's our people at the frontline that we really need to be protective of and supportive of, as you say, Ainslie, that's really crucial.

Deb Anderson:

I think it's also important to be protecting and supporting people who are isolated working from home that are used to working in offices all of a sudden isolated at home. That there's some support for them as well.

Jo Willoughby:

Yeah, that's true. We're all different, right? For those of us that don't mind a little bit of isolation, we're probably in a happy space, but for those that are a social mole, social creatures, and crave that connectivity, then that disruption is a whole other realm of getting used to. And as you say, Deb, an opportunity to provide support.

Deb Anderson:

And everybody be kind to each other kind.

Jo Willoughby:

Be kind, yeah.

Ainslie Cunningham:

And that sort of collaboration and support too, should really filter through to businesses where these small businesses that might be able to share the load and collaborate in some way to try and really weather the storm and have a bit of resilience here to survive and come out the other side.

Jo Willoughby:

I've seen, and perhaps you've seen this too, on social media whereby I think it was Eventbrite if I'm correct, launched something yesterday where you could pay in advance for a meal, maybe it wasn't Eventbrite, but for things that will actually help with cashflow for small business right now, which is being creative. And I know in the bushfires, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales, there was a site that was created very quickly. So out of adversity came some great innovative idea around paying forward for a coffee, paying it forward for a night's accommodation in establishments that had been burnt down, but people that still own these businesses, but it didn't have the vehicle or the facility to be able to trade and so things like that, I think if we-

Ainslie Cunningham:

Think outside the box.

Jo Willoughby:

Yeah. That's exactly right. And it's times like these, that yeah, sure. They're frightening and they're scary, but these are the times that I guess when we're a little bit pushed out of our comfort zone, that we start to think about things differently and what could be the opportunity. And that's what I was really trying to reinforce before. It's around being curious and thinking differently and exploring what might be possible right now.

Deb Anderson:

Thank you so much for your time today, Jo, and be safe.

Jo Willoughby:

You're welcome. And thank you for your time and stay safe too.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Thank you to all our listeners today for joining us and stay tuned for our next instalment of YS Up.

Outro:

That's all for today, until next time, happy podcasting. And remember if you're enjoying the show, check out our other episodes and all things governance at www.3ysowls.com.au.