

Transcription - Rodney Watson Part 3

We're continuing our discussion with Rodney Watson and we are going to now move on to talking about being on boards because in the break while we moved venues we actually started that discussion so we better have it while it's being recorded rather than just between us.

The issue I guess for those that are listening is the consideration of whether they should think about putting themselves up for being on board and where to start and what is the progression once they have started that process.

I think there are two issues to seriously consider. First of all whether you think it would be good to be on a board just because it will progress your career going from a volunteer board to a paid role on a board or whether or not you are genuinely interested in assisting in the development and the strategic growth of an organisation and that's whether it's a sporting organisation, or any of the volunteer, not pre-profit sector boards. And every one of those not for profit sector boards has its own niche which it can offer you something but more importantly what you can give to it.

One of the things that I find that being on the Netball NSW board, because it's associated with sport and that's my bent, is that it gives me the opportunity to contribute to, in a strategic sense, to the growth of sport and sport, I see, as being absolutely critical to the health of the nation in terms of healthy lifestyles. It's a part in the government's overall sphere of combating obesity and all of those other things that we've spoken about earlier in terms of development of youth or in people and generally. So I think if you consider that and then say, look I want to contribute, there's two ways to start. You see that wherever you're involved in a sport is probably through a club level to begin with. Find out from your club, even if you do 12 months or so volunteering on a club there is always a role for you in some form or another in your club where you probably know that sport more intimately than just picking a sport, drawing one out of the hat and so I'll have a go there, that doesn't work because when people are elected to board itself it's the membership that elects those people to the board and they're pretty savvy. They understand and they know full well whether the person has got the appropriate skills and background to contribute or whether they are there for themselves.

There's two roles. Are you going to be there for the sport or for the business? Are you going to be there just to progress yourself? If you're going to be there for the latter, just to progress yourself, don't bother because you won't get elected anyway. One of the greatest things about being on a board is the opportunity to influence change. It's the opportunity to contribute and the satisfaction of knowing that our sport is in good hands. That comes about usually through a health report from either the Australian Sports Commission or the Office of Sport New South Wales in my case. Obviously with other not-for-profit sector boards you can find out a lot of those either through the website, dealing with all of that or else go to your local council and find out because many of those are run through local government etc. And that's quite important.

Governance is absolutely paramount wherever you come from and wherever you sit. You must have an effective constitution. It must be easy to read. It must be easy to understand. It must be in plain English. It must be relevant and contemporary. The most important part of all of this, is having that governance, that constitution and your rules. You must widely publish them. And this is all the role of the board. The board is there to set the strategic direction. They set the policy. They set the rules. They approve the budget. But then the implementation of all of that is done by your organisation. And there must be a clear separation. It's there for voluntary organisations, quite important, that the CEO or general manager is not a member of the board. They attend the board meetings and give it information when requested but must not be a member of the board because then you have blurred lines of responsibility.

In more recent years the Australian Sports Commission has taken a very, very strong role in terms of governance of our sports. And they look at every sport regularly to see whether or not they are complying and meeting all of those governance roles. They have put out seven major principles and I would encourage anyone who is interested in sitting on a board to have a look at that from the Australian Sports Commission website. In doing so, those principles apply to any board, not for profit and to a lesser extent, to those that are for profit because it's very clear any board must have an independence of judgement. You must be fully aware of all of the facts. You must see all of the information. And if a CEO does not want to give you any information, then you insist to get it because every board director is entitled to see any document and look at any document on a confidential basis, that goes to your decision making.

One of the other things that I've done in terms of maintaining relevance on the board so that we can come back to making strategic decisions, is maintaining a connection with the grassroots of the sport. It's those people that are down at the grassroots level who play every Saturday, who go to the training every week, who also play other sports, who can turn around and let you know what works and what doesn't work at a far better level. And if you're at a far more intimate level then if you just sit in your board room and try and work out or think about what might be good or not be good. It's a bit like the person who is pursuing information. If information is coming from the playing group or the coaching group or the managing group at that club level and it's passed up through all those levels before it gets to the board at a state wide level, how much of the information is filtered out before you actually get to see it? So you really do need to be aware of the situation.

That's exactly right. I'm probably taking it one step further, whether any information gets filtered up or whether it's kept out at that level because it's not those open lines of communication for people to find out just exactly how something works. You're not as proud of your strategic direction, decide to implement a new policy or a new area of work. I need to find out after three months that it's a dud. Now unless you're down at the grassroots level also, you won't know that. You won't know why. You won't know why and people will say, "Oh no, it's fine because they're not doing it right." But clearly you've got to get down, you've got to get your hands dirty and find out. But you also must be very, very appropriately informed to make sure that you also separate what you get from the grassroot roots, in terms of strategic thinking and in terms of development, and not day-to-day management issues.

So for people who are thinking about putting themselves up for boards whether it's voluntary

or otherwise, do they do an analysis of their skills and decide these are the skills that I've got to offer in the organisation but then match it up with what they think the organisation needs? Or do they just go ahead and say, "Here I am. I'm very good at numbers. I'm very good at writing policy. You need me". How do they go about actually matching what they see their skills and what they want to contribute from their skillset to an organisation that might or might not necessarily need them?

There's two or three aspects to that. The first one is quite clearly, yes they need to research the organisation, look at it and say, "Well, what's my skillset?" This is what their basic role is. I would then contact a board director sitting on that board and have a chat with them. President or the chairperson, preferably. I'm actually sitting on a nominations panel, as one of my subsidiary levels. When we're time for election for vacancies, we call for nominations but we also put out a skills matrix, in terms of what skills we believe need to be come onto the board, what we are lacking or what we've got. Obviously, at the time that positions are advertised and that's always practically only by website, you pick that up. You need to be good to know in looking at websites, etc. of your various areas that you're interested in. But certainly when that nominations panel puts out its notice of election, it will let you know what type of skills are required. I guess that in terms of the other, if you just want to make a general inquiry, have a bit of a research through, do some internet research, etc. from time to time also, some boards have what they call Associate Directors and you could send in something, because Associate Director is where the board will say, "Look, we've got succession planning for some vacancies coming up in the next turn of time, because most boards now there is a limit on the number of years you can serve on the board, we have two directors or three directors retiring in the next 12 months. This person has expressed an interest in coming onto our board and has this skill set. We can appoint them as an Associate Director. They can come to the board meetings as an observer for the next six months or nine months and see whether they like it and whether the board themselves thinks that person will make an effective contribution."

And I think that that's a great way forward because how often do we find people? We don't get lots of people applying for volunteer board director positions because it costs you money to be on them. You don't get paid, so they've got to know that they are making a volunteer contribution and that's must happen.

This is really useful because I get a lot of inquiries or a lot of people in very senior positions who had a great corporate life and they're transitioning to retirement, but they want to contribute as a volunteer, on a volunteer basis, to continue to be connected, adding value and using their brains. And to me, this is a great way to describe the options of how to look at it, how to come to it and I think it's going to help a lot of people.

I can't say strongly enough that if you want to be on a sport board, you really do need to understand the grassroots and the structure underneath the board and how that feeds in. Because quite clearly on our netball board, New South Wales board, we have a mix of skills and we have two appointed directors who really have no netball grassroots experiences, but the rest of the board do. I think that in any sport board, for it to be effective, you've got to have that background in that sport. The majority of the board needs to have that background in that sport.

I think there's also very much a role for appointed directors, whereby they may bring incredible expertise, in terms of digital media or other expertise, and the current board may be lacking, for example, audit and risk background and that would be for your corporate person and ideal for a chief operating officer in an organisation. There's all those things because all of those skills, that skillset across that wide range matrix is now required on every board. But also even like things that we don't think about, you've got a marketing background, for example, and the passion for that particular sport and you've followed it as a person of interest with it, whether it's your child or you've got little athletics or whatever right the way through.

Marketing is a classic example. We have within New South Wales, the two Suncorp SuperNetball teams, the New South Wales Swifts and Giants Network. Marketing for them, and that's done by our organisation, is beautiful. And to have a board director who has those immense skills would be a wonderful thing to have because they consider it as a strategic direction in marketing. They know that outside market place, and that is so important with how we operate, at that higher level these days, you have to operate in corporate Australia. And that means sponsorship, marketing of the product, marketing of the game, and game fans, and all of that. So it's increases the interest in the sport and get people young, like you do in your organisation. We just try to get new blood and show them interest.

Netball has grown a lot. I mean, women in sport, that was new. You talked about hockey during the introduction, tell me more about how you actually contribute to that. Not many people can say that, and to us a lot of the time, we think, I wish they would do this or that, but never looked at it to say how can I contribute, and you've done it, and this is really interesting for us. But that leads me into the next little bit that I wanted to talk about, because what we didn't get to in the awards that Rodney has received, is that Rodney was awarded the Order of Australia. So he's our first guest with an OAM, so we have to make a big fuss about it. But what I want to ask, and obviously as you rolled them through, it is just recognition for all of the work that he has put in over the many years to sport, from the grassroots level all the way to the senior management of sport. But what I want to ask is more on a personal level, did you have any inkling that you had been submitted, your name had been submitted? And what did you think when the letter arrived?

Firstly, I had no idea that anything, that I had ever been nominated for this award, and that's obviously nominated by your peers from whatever community you're in. When I got the letter from the Prime Minister's Department, or the Secretary of the Governor General, which said, "You have been nominated to receive this award, but before we go further, we want to know if you will accept it." And of course, in saying this, the words "confidential" were everywhere. So you couldn't discuss it even with your wife, your partner, whatever. Yeah, it was in October, early October, in 2015, and it was announced for the Australia Day Honours 2016. So for three months or more, you have to respond within the appropriate period of time, and then you just sort of sit back and twiddle your thumbs until the announcement happens in 2016. My award was for my contribution to Netball in an administrative role. As I say, this comes back, I suppose, to what's been my focus is in the governance of netball administration, not withstanding that I still do go out and umpire. I think it's important too, that if you can, keep a position in any way at that local grassroots level, it just means you have a greater connection, you're meant to make that connection.

As a result of receiving that award, have you seen, has there been some sort of follow-on in terms of the organisation? Have you seen, has there been a reaction to that recognition?

I guess that, yeah, there was a reaction towards me by hundreds of people in congratulating me on the receipt of the award. It's quite humbling and quite incredible because you don't go into these...

Well, you all want to be a person with someone famous.

We don't go into those roles with the view of getting an award. And so when something like this happens, it is quite humbling and it's a wonderful recognition. But in terms of, do you think it's brought more people to contribute? Probably not, because overall, you get an award for what you personally have put in without going out and saying to someone, look, if you come on and do all of this volunteer work, you get an award. You might get an award. We don't operate like that. We have to want to volunteer.

But to me, that award is an appreciation for people, like yourself, who actually put that time in. And I think we should do that, because sometimes we forget to thank people.

Absolutely right. We have a series in Netball New South Wales of thanking people. Quite a bit by a certificate level, etc. and that sort of thing. But what we do for people who have served in a volunteer capacity, in their clubs throughout the entire state of New South Wales, for 20 years, 25 years, 30 years, 35 years, they get awards. And then there's those who have done 40 years and more, and they remain in particular in country areas, etc, they are nominated and get an award from the state government, or the state government awards, not sports awards. The culmination, obviously, was in my OAM. But it's something that you do without consideration of recognition. You do something you do because you love being involved with the sport. And you get out of the sport, yourself personally, all of those things along the way. I was saying, "Oh, I was involved in that decision making." And I guess a classic example is when I did get my OAM, I got a message from a former player who played for Penrith in state league and also represented New South Wales at the National Championships and played for the Sydney Swifts. And at the time, she sent me a message of congratulations. And I sent back a message saying, "Thank you very much, but I really didn't expect to receive such a thing from you" and she said, "Well, you were important to me." When I was a player and I didn't get selected in my first state team, you sat with me there and encouraged me to keep going." And so they remember that. Yeah, that made a big difference to her career and life and passion. And there is no price for that. Well, I felt good that she got in and she went on to be a great representative. That was my reward and satisfaction for me just to see that happen. And each time when I spoke to various players and athletes, to see them progress, that was a great reward. And then when they came back and said that to me afterwards, that's even greater.

We're going to call a halt now so that we can go and enjoy some lunch. So we do thank Rodney for spending the time with us and sharing so much of his experience and his expertise with us. For now, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn, we've been talking to Rodney Watson OAM and this is Inside Exec.