

**Publication Date: 10 April 2018**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 107. Lessons from a strata owner turned strata manager**

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**Intro:** Welcome to Your Strata Property. The podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source. To access previous episodes and useful strata tips, go to [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au).

**Amanda Farmer:** Hello and welcome, I am Amanda Farmer and this is Your Strata Property.

Sean O'Dea's career spans a number of industries and settings. Throughout the variations runs a common theme and that is service. He has taught children of all ages, has wide career experience in adult education, in sales, in theatre, in IT production, project and vendor management and he is currently engaged as a strata manager.

Now Sean tells me that his passion for strata started when he became an owner in self-managed strata plan some 20 years ago. Terms such as common property, levies, unit entitlements were all new to him and were very much like trying to learn a second language. I am sure so many of our listeners can relate to that Sean.

He persevered and after a couple of years, a strata manager was appointed to his block and he was elected a member of the committee. Now he served as chairperson of that committee for over 18 years. Now last year, Sean decided to move to the other side, he attained his certificate of strata management and is now employed as a strata manager with GK Strata Management in Sydney. I am happy to say that Sean is also an active member of the Your Strata Property online community.

Today, I am delighted to welcome Sean O'Dea, welcome Sean.

**Sean O'Dea:** Hi Amanda, how are you going?

**Amanda Farmer:** I am doing very well thank you and thank you so much for giving up your time to come and have a chat with us today. I have known you for quite a few years now Sean and I thought you were in such a unique position having come from being a strata owner and a very experienced committee member and taking that leap this year to become a strata manager. And I thought, come on the show and let's have a chat about that experience.

**Sean O'Dea:** Yes thanks for inviting me.

**Amanda Farmer:** No problem at all, now I am going to start by asking your Sean to tell us a little bit about your journey from strata owner to strata manager and in particular, what was it that made you decide to take that leap to the other side?

**Sean O'Dea:** I guess the essential thing was I have always liked to work in an area where I have got an interest or a passion and that way it doesn't feel like you are really working.

**Amanda Farmer:** Very true.

**Sean O'Dea:** But in terms of the journey, I have always been interested in the concept of close living and strata living and it's like a little microcosm of society where people have different expectations and things like that and different perceptions. In fact, if I were a sociologist, I think it would be a fascinating sociological study, you know, just based on some of the strata committee meetings and AGMs and that sort of thing that I have been at.

I also have, through my career experience, liked to change careers every so often, probably 5 or 6 years is the amount of time, although my last employer I was with them for 18 years but in a number of different roles, so that was like a change of job and job focus and things like that.

So I have always enjoyed the aspect of strata, as a chairperson in the committee, we've had really good strata managers and so



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therefore, I have had very, very good mentoring and whenever anything came up, I was interested in the, okay so here is a problem, how do you solve it and here's a situation, what is the right way out of this? And so after talking with our strata managers at that time, and with our legal counsel at that time, they have pointed me in good directions where I have gone searching through the legislation. And that problem solving, I find interesting, it can be draining but it's interesting to me nonetheless.

**Amanda Farmer:** And now that you are in a position where you are solving problems for many, many other people on a day to day basis, as they often say to lawyers, I think it is similar to strata managers, nobody rings you up to say I am having a great day, how do you feel on the other side now? Is it what you expected? Is it a little bit different? How has your first 6 months as a strata manager been treating you?

**Sean O'Dea:** Well it's been treating me well because I've got great support and great mentors and that sort of thing. But I could, you can't really prepare what it's like once you get there because as a member of the committee, you have got another tier above you of assistance, right? As a strata manager, you are up one level and so there is a lot of responsibility there.

There's also a lot of different functions that I would never have thought that you would need to play, like the mediator, the conciliator, the counsellor, things like that, although they really shouldn't be part of your role, but they are. And people all have a different perception, the variety of perception of what a strata manager does I would not have been prepared for, I had read about it, but I would not have been prepared for until I actually do the role.

And the thing is, there are so many intricate parts of the act and interpretations, not only the Strata Schemes Management Act and Regulations but the other legislation surrounding that, that you can trip up on if you are not careful.

For instance, an election of a strata committee can be very straightforward as a show of hands but once you start getting accompanying nominees and things like that and a difficult committee thrown into the thing and difficult owners in a plan, it's a totally different ball game.

**Amanda Farmer:** And I know that is something Sean, that we have had some discussions about in the forum inside the, Your Strata Property online community and I have been able to provide some direction to you and to other members in that forum and also Reena and I discussing that topic on the podcast before and it is something that I do want to come back to in some more detail, the election of strata committees because it does seem to trip up highly experienced players and lawyers as well when we are attending meetings going through that process and some lawyers who are present, not necessarily being familiar with those complex rules, so it is definitely something we need to keep coming back to.

**Sean O'Dea:** It is, and I have found the forums in the, Your Strata Property website very, very useful.

**Amanda Farmer:** Great.

**Sean O'Dea:** For putting things down and saying, what about this? What about this? It's not always easy to locate the actual section in the Act, which pertains to something and it's also interesting when members of other committees even add comments and feedback too, so that's been very useful.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes excellent, that's great to hear. Now I want to come back to the role of the strata manager, but before I do that, let's go back in time, what do you think makes a good strata owner?

**Sean O'Dea:** Okay, so I am going to come back with a question, what makes a good citizen?

You know, you see the whole process in my view that I went through and as I look back in time and analyse it, I really do think it is a very interesting concept of buying a property. So if I buy a house, that is my kingdom and I have got full say, if I buy a strata flat, or apartment, that is my kingdom, but I don't have full say.



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**Amanda Farmer:** Yes.

**Sean O'Dea:** And I really do think there is a huge responsibility on the people that perform the conveyancer role to check that out because people come into strata flats as we all know, they think oh great, I'm going to renovate but they have got no idea of the requirements and the limitations and the regulations that they are under.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes absolutely.

**Sean O'Dea:** So that's what I think, someone who is informed is a good owner but more than that, I think someone who is prepared to ask and someone who is prepared and got some level of social consciousness and respect for the people around them.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes I think definitely education at the point of sale is key to a smooth induction I suppose into strata living and into making, not only your neighbours and your committee members lives a bit easier but your strata manager's life a bit easier.

So no doubt you are now seeing on the other side Sean, new owners ringing and saying well hang on, didn't I pay my levies on settlement? Why am I getting a bill for more levies? And you having to go, oh wow, where do we start with that kind of basic information that just hasn't been communicated to that person by their conveyancer, by their lawyer at the point of sale or they have been led to believe one thing by a real estate agent and it turns out to be another and unfortunately you guys, as the strata managers, are left picking up the pieces and are often then put in the bad guy camp because you are more often than not saying, no you can't or you have to jump through this hoop to be able to do that and that is the first that these new owners are hearing.

**Sean O'Dea:** Yes and see taking that point of paying levies all right? It's very unusual in any other aspect of life to have to pay a bill if you don't get the bill. Whereas the expectation in strata is, even if there is no strata notice comes to you, your levies are still due and payable.

**Amanda Farmer:** Very good point.

**Sean O'Dea:** Then, that flows onto the AGM and so right, you are in financial, well, I haven't been told.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. And thank you for raising that, that is actually on my list to have a chat with Reena about in an upcoming episode because I have recently given some advice on that very point where an owner said, well we haven't received levy notices and I have said no, the Act, the Strata Scheme's Management Act here in New South Wales, specifically provides that even that if the notice is not issued, the levies have been struck at a meeting and they are due and payable.

And that is really important to know that because as you said, Sean, you can turn up at a meeting saying, well I didn't have to pay my levies, never got a notice, I can now vote and you are told by the chair or your strata manager, sorry mate, no right to vote, you are financial, and that can be a shock to many people.

**Sean O'Dea:** Yes it is, yes.

**Amanda Farmer:** All right now let's flick over to strata management, what makes a good strata manager Sean?

**Sean O'Dea:** I think someone who can listen, someone, who can position themselves as a trusted advisor to the people they deal with. I also think that, and this is one thing that I am learning very quickly is control of your own emotion in times of conflict because people are motivated by their perception and even though their perception may be their reality, their reality may not be real.

And so, that makes it difficult so trying to, and I have asked that very question to my colleagues and the number of people who have come back with terms like empathy, understanding, willingness to serve, you know, the service aspect and things like that, but there also needs to be, I think, a quality of a good strata manager is one that has a clear outline of boundaries, this is one



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that I am trying to achieve.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes.

**Sean O'Dea:** Just what is normal, what is appropriate and that is something no one can teach you, it is something that you learn from experience and then luckily the staff here and my colleagues here are extremely supportive as is our management. So I am in a very, very fortunate position through PICA and GK Strata at that level.

**Amanda Farmer:** I want to come back to that idea of controlling your own emotion Sean, have you got any tips for how strata managers might do that? How do you do that when you are dealing with a difficult owner or maybe even a tenant or another supplier, maybe some lawyers on the phone to you and you feel that temper rising and think, oh gosh. Do you take a breath? Do you take a walk? What would your tip be for strata managers feeling that same level of emotion and knowing that the best option is try and control that?

**Sean O'Dea:** I try to debrief as soon as possible. I am not a person who handles unfinished business really easily so I like to at least get advice or debrief, run it by another person to see well, how would you have managed this? What would you have done if I had managed this in this way for you? What would your reaction be? And to try and put it all in perspective because when it's in my own head, you know, it's my universe at that point in time and trying to get qualified opinion and that sort of thing to put it into perspective for me so I can file it away and say right, I will deal with that tomorrow.

I'll never forget once, years ago, I was working in sales training actually and there was one of these motivation speakers talking and he said, if you find yourself in a position where you are panicking, you should take yourself in a room and you should say, I am going to panic for 10 minutes right, and you sit there and go, panic, panic, panic and just repeat that word.

**Amanda Farmer:** Get it out.

**Sean O'Dea:** And get it out and get over it, so I have tried that, but it doesn't really work for me, I really need the input from the other person.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes I kind of understand that concept because they talk about that if ever you are doing some training on public speaking or having to present in large events and even the most accomplished and experienced of speakers will tell you that they do get nervous and they do feel sort of that fear coming up and that one strategy is simply to acknowledge that and to say, I know fear that you are here, I know that my knees are shaking, I know that I am sweaty and I want to vomit but it's okay, I'm going to do this anyway and I don't need you here right now. You can step aside and I will move onto that stage and be in my full glory and fun and experience and I think that is quite a useful tool, just the acknowledging of how you feel.

Coming back to the controlling of emotion, perhaps one suggestion for our listeners is to say yes, I am feeling angry, I am feeling stressed, I am feeling frustrated, acknowledging that, that exists instead of pretending perhaps that it doesn't or that you shouldn't be feeling that way. It's a hard job that you have a lot of cope with every day, taking that step back and saying, not feeling great at the moment, let's go and have a chat to someone who I know I can share this experience with. And, it sounds like that's what you do Sean to great effect, so thanks for sharing that.

Now I am going to ask you Sean, if you can, to share a story, perhaps something drawn from your long experience as an owner and a committee member, is there something that has placed you in good stead in your position now as a strata manager? Some experience that you might have had in the past?

**Sean O'Dea:** Well there is a number of events and going back to 1 years and years and years ago, was where a member of a committee, who the day after an AGM where there was a by-law made by the owners corporation for installation of air conditioners installed a non-compliant one. So that lead to a series of events over a number of years including getting legal counsel and legal advice preceding through CTTT at the time and that kind of thing. And then, based on one word, which was may rather than

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must, losing the whole issue.

So it was just getting an understanding of what can happen. That is one event but there has really been a number Amanda, sometimes events from my past as a teacher where I have been in teaching and things like that and how to try and read people, different ways that people learn and understand, things like that. It's a very, very complex and difficult role and I think whatever you can draw on to put into place to make your relationship with the people that you deal with, if that works, I think it is great.

I think my experience in project management, interesting experiences in IT, vendor management where you get engineers and people like that speaking to you as if it was in a totally foreign language and you know, these are people who are talking about outlaying millions of dollars and you have to give the sign off for that and you don't understand it so you say to the people, break it down so I can understand and things like that.

So, being in the position where you want people to break it down, you must also learn to break the information, as you say in the promos for your podcast, bite-sized chunks.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes really great skills to have and you are reminding me there Sean of the absolute patchwork of backgrounds that we have amongst our strata managers and that you come from all different experiences and professions and how complimentary that is to the practice of strata management because you are wearing so many different hats and being called upon every day to deal with sometimes technical things, we might be talking about NBN installations and land access activity notices and you probably have some bells ringing there from your IT days and then also having to hold the hand of new owners who are coming in learning the basics and being able to teach complex concepts to them in a basic entry level way so that they can have a smooth experience of strata living.

So I often say how much I admire the work that strata managers do, it's a bloody hard job and thanks for that summary reminding us how it is that you guys can do that so well.

**Sean O'Dea:** And just going on from that, whilst it is hard and mentioning the variety of people that you come across, one of the things that I find wonderful about the role is the number of interesting and amazing people that you come across. Like when you go to conferences and the SCA days and owners days for the SCA, the people that you meet are really interesting. It gives a balance to the stressful side of the job, some of the committees that I work with, I am really blessed to work with them I think because the conversation, the discussion is interesting, they are involved, they have got a real connection with the building that they live in our own and they think about the sense of community for the whole owners corporation, that's really invigorating when I come across that.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes it is absolutely and I know those buildings and those committees that you are talking about. When I am working with them as well, it's very fulfilling work.

Now, Sean, I think it might have even been you, when I first started this podcast, I had a listener who said to me, Amanda, there are so many difficulties in the strata space and we are often dealing with problems and we are dealing with challenges but I really like how on the podcast, you focus a lot on the positive and how we might solve those challenges. So every time I get to this question of my guests, I often think of you and the question is this, what are some of the challenges that you have faced in your first few months as a strata manager and more importantly, how have you overcome those challenges?

**Sean O'Dea:** I think I alluded to this before, it's the perception of people having the role of a strata manager, what does a strata manager do? So what I try to do is I try to really understand the question and the reason for the person asking the question. So I always alert back to, and this is advice I was given by a colleague was that your role is essentially to manage the common property and the buildings of the owners corporation under instructions from the committee.

So it's getting those parts working together and getting the people to understand that. People will come to you and I try to avoid this, the minute someone starts mentioning people in a personal derogatory way, I end the conversation. But yet, people feel the need to dump that on you when you are new to the block, they give you the scandal of every single owner, you know? If I were

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writing novels or shows, it would probably be interesting but not for me, I don't want to know, and it's not my role.

There have been a couple of difficult AGMs and that sort of thing so how I get over that is I talk with my colleagues and say so with this motion and that sort of thing, or I have phoned people in my network to get advice on those, getting back to how you sort of debrief from stress type thing. Yes, so it's basically that and understanding what you can do with the legislation.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, you did mention earlier Sean, you talked about setting boundaries and I think that links in here to what you are saying in terms of people knowing what it is that you do and not asking you or expecting you I suppose to go beyond that scope of your professional service. And there is a big role I think, for strata managers to play there in actually setting that expectation and making sure that they do communicate to owners, I am a strata manager, this is what I am here to do and you have got a good grasp on that Sean.

And the document that really backs you up there is your Agency Agreement. So your contract with the owners corporation, that is the document that is going to set out exactly what it is that you are there to do and it is there I often say to strata managers, it's there to help you, if you are being asked to do something that you think oh, I'm a bit uncomfortable about that, there is something in my stomach that is telling me this is not right. 9 times out of 10, you will go back to your agency agreement and say, wow, what I am being asked to do is so far outside the scope of what my agency agreement allows for, no wonder I feel uncomfortable. And then it is very easy for you to go back and say, look, sorry, pursuant to clause whatever it is in the agency agreement, that's not something that I am able to do for you and that's an expectation set and a problem easily solved.

And I think, in my experience, a few strata managers forget that, that agreement exists and that it is there to use as a guide.

**Sean O'Dea:** It's a good point and in addition to that, I think we need a clearer agency agreement across the industry because it's not always that easy to understand and I have found that I am getting more familiar with the actual form of the document but to someone that is not in it all of the time, and just wants to know the answer like that, it's not really accessible, or easily accessible.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, fair point and that is something that is important, that we talk about that and it is only through sharing our experience of using these kinds of industry accepted forms and documents that these things change. So thanks for sharing that on the ground experience Sean.

Now, Sean, we might have some listeners who want to find out more about the strata management profession, maybe they even want to become managers, they want to follow in your footsteps, they have been owners for many years, they think they know their stuff and they are ready to become a manager. What steps do you suggest they take to get started on that path?

**Sean O'Dea:** Okay, so there is some very good information on the PICA Group website, [www.PICAGroup.com.au](http://www.PICAGroup.com.au).

**Amanda Farmer:** And that is P.I.C.A.?

**Sean O'Dea:** PICAGroup.com.au.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes.

**Sean O'Dea:** There are many strata forums like strata life, strata man, things like that and [yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://yourstrataproperty.com.au).

**Amanda Farmer:** Thank you.

**Sean O'Dea:** So basically Google, go through the net and see what is there. I would also recommend that if a person was interested in the role or in a career change or taking up a career as a strata manager, to contact PICA and see, can they do ride alongs? Can they come and visit or contact other strata companies that they may be with to actually go and observe the role in



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play in the flesh, live.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes really good advice. I think too often we forget that there are almost always people out there doing what we want to do, whether it something we want to do tomorrow or something we want to do in 10 years' time and you can really fast track your way to your dreams by searching out those people and talking to them and experiencing first-hand what it is to live that dream.

**Sean O'Dea:** Yes, LinkedIn is good too, there are some interesting articles that appear in LinkedIn and on all sorts of things and I have read good ones about strata and strata managers and things like that. You'll find it interesting being on LinkedIn, many, many people that are building their network sort of thing that I have never met and you get these contact requests and wonder, you know, should I or shouldn't I? It's a difficult question.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes.

**Sean O'Dea:** Social media has exploded as we all know.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes definitely, it's a tough part of the world to navigate these days. All right now Sean, the question you have been waiting for as a long time listener, what books have had the greatest impact on you and why?

**Sean O'Dea:** This is a really hard question Amanda because I am not a reader. I like to read textbook or non-fiction sorts of things but if I go back in time, and I think about the book that really impressed me and motivated me and shocked me, it would have to be Lord of the Flies by Golding.

**Amanda Farmer:** Oh yes.

**Sean O'Dea:** And just again, it was a whole sort of society in play and a society that had gone crazy. Perhaps they needed a strata manager of sorts to sort it out.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes.

**Sean O'Dea:** The second one that I continually return to, to read sections is The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran, that is in small sections and I find it motivating and uplifting and interesting. Tim Jarvis wrote Shackleton's Epic Journey, at the SCA conference last year, he was a guest speaker and I just found that astonishing.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes so did I, he was fabulous.

**Sean O'Dea:** So I had to buy the book.

**Amanda Farmer:** Good on you.

**Sean O'Dea:** And flick through the photos that he showed at that conference were incredible and just the way he spoke about building the team, that was really fascinating.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes it was.

**Sean O'Dea:** And, last but not least, the Strata Legislation Handbook from Alex Ilkin.

**Amanda Farmer:** Good on you, good old Alex, yes, yes, excellent. I know I have got Gary Bugden's book on my shelf and I am really excited to be welcoming him to our event on the 17th of April, yes, YSPlive.com if you haven't already secured your spot, we will hear from Gary. But Alex has a very similar book and I know Reena and I, if anyone listened to our episode 100, you would have heard the outtakes of Reena and I talking about Bugden and Ilkin and how we rely on their textbooks. So.



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thanks for bringing that one up and I will make sure there is a link to that in the show notes so any of our listeners can head over and check out all of those books.

**Sean O'Dea:** I do have the electronic version of the Bugden book.

**Amanda Farmer:** Oh excellent, yes good idea.

All right, now Sean before we wrap up, let us know how our listeners can find out more about you and is there anything else you want to add?

**Sean O'Dea:** No that's been a good chat, thank you for that. But listeners can find out more about me if they go to [www.Gkstrata.com.au](http://www.Gkstrata.com.au).

**Amanda Farmer:** Excellent, thank you. And you mentioned there a couple of times Sean, the Your Strata Property online community and the value that you are getting there, so I do want to let our listeners know that if they want to check out that membership, it's [yourstrataproperty.com.au/membership](http://yourstrataproperty.com.au/membership) and you can join a number of managers and many, many owners who are enjoying that Q and A forum there and all the benefits that membership brings.

Thanks so much, Sean, I had a fabulous time chatting with you and I am looking forward to seeing you at the next conference, the next event and catching up as we do so well.

**Sean O'Dea:** Thanks Amanda.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast, which consistently delivers to property owners, reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au). You can also ask questions in the comments section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?

