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YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 130. How to deal with strata bullies

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Amanda Farmer: Hello, and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer, and this is Your Strata Property. I am very pleased today to say that I have my friend and colleague, Natalie Fitzgerald joining us. Hi, Natalie.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Hey, Amanda.

Amanda Farmer: How are you?

Natalie Fitzgerald: I'm feeling fantastic. How are you?

Amanda Farmer: Doing very well, thank you. And now, Natalie is becoming a little bit of a regular on the show. I think this is your third time chatting with us, Natalie. Way back in Episode 021, we talked about strata management contracts. And Episode 080 we had a chat with Reena about diversity on our strata committees. And we also had you join us as a panellist at YSP Live, our evening back in April 2018. Now, for those of you who may not be up to date on those episodes or have attended YSP Live, Natalie is a strategy manager and partner at Strata Sense in Sidney's Surrey Hills. And she has a wealth of experience managing some of Sydney's best known and complex strata buildings. And she has a particular expertise when it comes to conflict resolution.

Amanda Farmer: Now, Natalie and I often have a chat when we come across a particular experience, a situation with buildings that we're working with, and we wonder whether we can share those experiences with the audience here on the podcast. And something that Natalie was chatting to me about recently was an experience dealing with a strata committee bully, let's say. And it's something that comes up inside the member forum that we have inside YSP, and it seems to be an issue that committee members, owners, strata managers have to deal with every now and then, these difficult personalities, difficult people. And we thought we might jump on the podcast and have a chat about how we might identify those people, how we might deal with them in a productive, proactive way. And, Natalie being the people person that she is, and with her special skills in conflict resolution, is the perfect person to speak to about strata committee bullies.

So what do you think of all that, Nat? Where should we start?

Natalie Fitzgerald: Where should we start? I think that the first step is identifying do you have a bully or do you just have somebody who's particularly passionate about something and perhaps communicating that aggressively without meaning to? And there are 2 separate issues there. There's a personality issue, which you need to accept you're not going to change, but perhaps manage, versus an emotional reaction that may come across as bullying, but the intention to do so isn't necessarily there. And taking the time to work out which one of those 2 you're dealing with will change the way you manage it as well.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. I do find that when I'm working with lot owners, I'm often invited to attend meetings. And my client might prepare me before the meeting and say, "*Amanda, Jim Jones is going to be here. You have not met anyone quite like Jim. He is rough and tough. He is rude. He is arrogant. And just be prepared.*" I often say, "*Look, I do this every day. I'm used to difficult people. And what you might think is a person who is aggressive and a bully, I might just think it's a person who communicates in a different way.*" And we just have to, as you say, Natalie, just manage that in a way that makes everybody a little bit more comfortable, let's say, and helps to get the job done.

And that's often where I come in, sit down in the meeting, and say, "*Look. Let's set aside where we might have personality clashes. We might have some differences of opinion. We're here to act in the best interests of the building. Let's take a breath and work out how we can do that.*" And sometimes it does take a third party like a lawyer or a strata manager to remove that tension and to sort of point that out. Do you find that's your experience too?



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Natalie Fitzgerald: Yes. Absolutely. And sometimes it's recognising that what appears to be aggressive behaviour, it could be motivated by emotion. And it's not realistic to say to owners, *"Don't be emotional." They're dealing with their investments. They're dealing with their homes. It's a lot of money. I can think of a particular case where I sat in a meeting and went, "Wow. Where'd that come from?"* when an owner who had previously been level-headed was speaking over the top of people and, dare I say, attempting to gaslight even. And I was [crosstalk 00:05:08] going, *"Wow. I've not seen this behaviour before."* And, finally, it came out that his wife had an altercation with the other person in question. So, ultimately, it was coming from the place of emotion, not necessarily a place of intention to behave that way. So it's trying to dig down past what you're being presented with. To go, *"Okay. That's what happened. That's the motivator behind the behaviour. Now I can manage that."*

Of course, on the other spectrum, sometimes you just have people who haven't been taught to communicate well or are completely unaware that the way that they're communicating is not conducive or sits to having a good meeting or of getting people on side or trying to get someone to understand their opinion. And sometimes that could be a matter of taking that person aside and saying, *"Okay. Let me understand what message you're trying to get across, and maybe I can help you achieve that,"* and almost being their advocate, in a way, which may sound a bit strange going to advocate for the bully. But if they know someone's on their side, they're less likely to be or feel the need to be aggressive. Which, again, is going to change that communication that happens at the meeting. So, again, it's about working out which personality or what issue you're dealing with and then applying the right strategy.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. A couple of things then that I want to touch on. Exercising empathy, even with someone who is being difficult, I find is really effective. And even agreeing. Finding a part of the dispute that you can actually agree on can be a perfect way of diffusing the tension. I often say you can't fight with someone who agrees with you. So when I'm dealing with difficult people, I use words like, *"Yes, I've heard you. Yes. I understand. Yes, I agree. That is a very difficult situation. Yes, yes, yes."* And you sense that the person you're then speaking to, they're immediately becoming calmer. They're nodding along with you. And they're thinking, *"Oh, okay. Hey, there's some reasonableness there."* So I definitely am on the same page there, that when it comes to dealing with these difficult people, trying to put your own guard down and approach the situation without that conflict can be very helpful.

Amanda Farmer: Tracking back, Nat, you also mentioned the term gaslighting. Can you explain to our listeners who might not have come across that term before what gaslighting is?

Natalie Fitzgerald: Yes. So gaslighting is a behaviour issue where we see somebody try and convince you that you're wrong when you're absolutely correct on something. It happens in strata a lot, I feel, particularly if you have an introvert or introverted personalities on a committee. They're absolutely as valuable as the person with the loud voice. If they disagree with the person with the loud voice, that's where you tend to find this gaslighting happening where that person will take advantage of their own confidence, to basically tell the other person that they're wrong, and convince them in themselves until they retract their own opinion and belief, and basically agree with what, shall we say the bully is saying. And I think what me contacting you was I witnessed this happen at a meeting of mine. And I kind of sat back and went, *"What can I do here to let these,"* and in this case it was some women, *"have a voice because their opinion is absolute, obviously, it's valid as the men."* And we had a situation where the room had split itself into gender on the table.

Amanda Farmer: Oh, gosh.

Natalie Fitzgerald: It's just going, *"Wow. This is not the way we're going to resolve these issues. So it became a matter of me letting our loud personality have their say, and letting them be supported by their mates, and "Yes, this is what we need to do,"* and acknowledging not everything they had to say was wrong. Absolutely, there are some good strategies of the issue we needed to deal with. And tell them that and, *"Thank you very much for your contribution. You're absolutely correct. That's one way we could resolve it. By the way, Jane, over here, had a really valid point. Why don't we let her tell us what she was thinking might be a solution or so?"* So you're not disregarding the other opinion, but you're, at the same time, allowing everybody to have their say. It's so important when you have a controversial issue that everyone around the table feels heard. Otherwise, you end up with disenfranchised committee members who don't put their hand up the following year. And it could be that they were so important to the dynamic of what you were achieving in that building.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. And how important is the strata manager or the chair person's role in that situation, to make sure that people who want to be heard, who need to be heard, are actually heard? I don't know that every building would be so lucky to have someone like you at the table, Natalie, who would pick up on that, be attuned to that, and provide that opportunity. How do owners attending meetings or committee members in committee meetings who find it difficult to get their voices heard over some louder, bigger, more forceful personalities? How do they get their opportunity to speak when they may not have an advocate like you at the table?

Natalie Fitzgerald: I think finding an advocate or an ally who you can speak to before the meeting, be really honest, and say, *"This is really important to me, and I want to say this, but I'm a bit nervous,"* whatever the case may be. It's okay as adults to acknowledge that situations make us nervous and anxious. That doesn't disappear with adulthood, particularly if it's a situation where you may not consider yourself an expert. I have people all the time say, *"I can't be on the committee. I don't know about strata."* And I have to assure them it's my job to know about strata. It's their job to care about their building and know what they want.

So maybe one strategy for those people would be to find an advocate or somebody else on the committee who could stand beside them. Or they can implement those same strategies we were talking about: acknowledging the louder voice, saying, *"Yes, I understand. Yes, that could be a great idea. By the way, I thought, X, Y, and Z. What do you think?"* That, again, as we said, can disarm somebody when they're not expecting you to agree with them. They're suddenly like, *"Okay, what do I? I have to listen because I can't argue because they've agreed with me."* And almost forcing that listening can change the dynamic quite a lot.

Amanda Farmer: Something that I have seen done very effectively by an owner at a general meeting, whom I know was very nervous to put her view forward and speak to a particular issue, she actually wrote down what she wanted to say well before the meeting. And she'd done it on her computer and she'd printed it out. And when it came time to speak to the motion, all the louder, more confident personalities said their bit, and then, she stood up and said, *"There's something I'd like to say."* And she actually read it out. She held her piece of paper, she stood up, and she read it out. She read it slowly. She read it clearly. And everybody was quiet. Everybody listened. They recognised that she was a little bit nervous about speaking, and she doesn't usually speak at meetings. But they were very respectful of her. And she was able to get her message across by confidently reading from what she had prepared. And if she hadn't had that sheet in front of her and hadn't prepared beforehand, she probably wouldn't have felt that she was able to do that and would have sat there quietly.

So from my experience, that's a bit of a practical tip and a tool that I've seen used effectively for people who are quite nervous speaking in front of others. And it can be a meeting with many, many people in the room, and there's been a lot of discussion amongst the neighbours beforehand about a hot topic. Don't be afraid to write it out, stand up, and read it. You will be heard, and those around you will recognise that you're making that special effort, and they will respect that.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Absolutely. It's a strategy I've seen owners use in mediation when they feel nervous that they're entering into waters the first step of the potential legal battle and they're not sure what they're facing. And it's easy to forget when you're in these situations, often, as a strata manager, I just get frustrated that I need to go to Parramatta, frankly, to mediate. It's no blip on my radar, whereas, for an owner, it's a big deal for them. And I've seen that strategy used as well. They write down what they need to say. And they've got their timelines. And it just gives them the confidence that it's a medium they're allowed to be in, it's a medium they're supported to be in, and they certainly will be heard. And using that same strategy in a meeting's certainly going to help.

Amanda Farmer: And finding, as you said, Natalie, finding yourself an advocate, a friend, someone who shares your view who can stand with you and present that view to the meeting. I've seen that used quite effectively where perhaps the committee, the incumbent committee members pushing their own agenda, let's say, and others who might want to be on the committee or might want to have their view heard at a general meeting feel that they're not giving the opportunity. If you're feeling that way, 99%, almost guaranteed, there are others in the building who are feeling that way too. But the key is finding those other people in your building. So even if it's a door knock or a letterbox drop to say, *"Look, this is where I stand on these issues. If this is something that you are interested in as well and perhaps share this view, feel free to reach out. Give me a call. Here's my email address. Let's have a chat about it."*

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Amanda Farmer: And talk to those people before the meeting so that you've got a bit of strategy together. What will we say at the meeting? How will we bring this to the attention of the chair? How will we vote in relation to this particular motion to make sure we're all acting in the best interest of the owners corporation? And it is in that way that we have power in numbers. And it might come to the election of the strata committee and those who are there supporting you might nominate you might vote for you. You might nominate them, might vote for them. And all of a sudden we've got real change and we've got a more representative strata committee who is looking out for the building as a whole. But you can only do that if you have connected with, communicated with others in the building who share your view.

So, too often I think we sit inside our units and forget that we have neighbours who are there to assist us and who care about the building the same way that we do. Don't forget to reach out and find those people.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Yes. That's such a good tip. And I love that quote that 99%, there's probably someone else, at least one other person who's feeling the same way as you. And you can even take that down to a committee level. The loudest voice isn't necessarily the supported voice. It's simply the person who's been given the platform because they've forced themselves onto it. Likewise, there's an opportunity for anyone to do the same thing. It's just a matter of having the confidence and the belief. And that may mean speaking to your other committee members and going, *"Wow. I'm not the only person thinking this."* And if you are the only person thinking it, it still doesn't mean that you're wrong. That's the whole point of having a strata committee so that you can get all those different opinions on the table and consider what's best for everyone.

And, of course, we know now, we've always known, but we know for sure now, under the new legislation, that committee members are obligated to act on behalf of all owners. And sometimes it's necessary as a strata manager, hopefully, have a good chair to remind everybody that while they may be passionate about a particular issue or it has an impact on them personally, that they are obligated to put that aside and consider what's best for everybody.

Amanda Farmer: I've had, in recent times, Natalie, a few owners approach me where they've been frustrated because they do want to make a change in their building, and they feel like they have a strata committee who is not necessarily acting everybody's best interests. And they feel like the strata manager is supporting that kind of behaviour and is not giving room for others to speak. The strata manager is chairing the meeting under the instructions of the strata committee, is putting motions very quickly, not allowing very much discussion, and is in that position of authority in saying, *"Well, this is how it's done. And this is how it's going to continue to be done."* How would you suggest owners who are frustrated with that kind of situation deal with their strata manager? Is there a way to talk to the strata manager about that kind of behaviour?

Natalie Fitzgerald: Yes. Absolutely. It's important, I guess particular if you're new to strata. As a manager, often the person you have or the people you have the most contact with are the strata committee, the chairperson, they're the people who have been voted in, in theory, to represent all the owners. But I do feel you might end up supporting them, where, really, you're not there to have an opinion either way. You're there to provide advice. You're there to be the conduit of information. You're certainly going to support, but that's to support everybody not just your strata committee. So I think perhaps the manager could be unaware that they've put this bias in place. They may not even be conscious of it.

Certainly, you are wanting to maintain your relationships so you can maintain your appointment. And it may feel that the best way to do that is through the strata committee where in actual fact, you're doing yourself a disservice by not recognising the rest of the owners. So it's really important that the strata managers stay out of the politics. Be aware of the politics. Know what they are.

Be empathetic towards them. But don't have an opinion. My life as a strata manager changed when I stopped having an opinion with what was going on with the building. It's not my building.

Amanda Farmer: And it became easier, no doubt.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Absolutely. I don't live there. If somebody makes a decision that I feel is wrong, then I get emotionally involved in that. And now I don't have a right or wrong in my mind. I'm just there, unless, of course, it's something obviously against the

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legislation. But provided that there are no laws being broken, where it's easy to say, *"Well, okay. It's your building. If that's what you collectively believe is best,"* and I, in my heart, know that everyone had a chance to have a say, and everybody's had their opinions heard, and that's what the majority vote is, then that's what it is. Strata really is the fourth level of government.

Natalie Fitzgerald: It's no different to the national elections coming. And I'm an advocate for politics. And I'll be up there campaigning for my party. But if they don't get in, I need to accept that that's the way the majority vote fell. And sometimes it's also reminding people who may not like the outcome that, *"Yes, I know that's not what you wanted, but at the end of the day, most of your owners did make that decision, and we need to support that."* So it's also providing that post-decision support, I suppose, to both sides, and acknowledging that somebody, if it is a win/lose. My personal philosophy is to try to avoid the win lose and try and find a win/win situation. But sometimes you can't.

And if it is a win/lose, then you need to provide support to the people who haven't got what they needed or what they felt they needed or wanted across. And saying, *"I heard you. You had a great opinion. Here's some options for maybe considering again. Have you thought about changing the way you approach it? And maybe if we tweaked this idea just a little bit, it would be something that's more palatable."* And making sure you don't just walk away from them. So when your appointment comes up, you don't have a faction of people who lost something previously and thought you were supporting their committee, angry at you. You've done your job and you've supported and provided advice to everyone.

Amanda Farmer: Some very, very good tips there for strata managers. And maybe a tip for frustrated owners who are having trouble getting this message across to their strata managers. Share with them a copy of this episode.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Absolutely. And have the conversation. Your strata manager's human, after all. And if you're not getting what you need from them, then tell them. And if you're still not getting what you need, then speak to the principals of the companies and let them know that this is the situation you're dealing with. You don't have to deal with bad service. I feel that's a message I repeat all the time to strata owners. You don't need to deal with bad service. Certainly, escalate if you're not getting what you need.

Amanda Farmer: And, again, there will almost certainly be others in the building who are having those same feelings and maybe just aren't quite sure where to go or how to resolve them. So if you can be that person who starts that conversation and perhaps leads the charge with speaking to the manager or back to the difficult committee member, you'll find that there is a bit of an army there ready to stand up behind you and help you through that process.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Absolutely.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. Well, thank you so much for sharing many, many practical tips with us today not only on how to deal with difficult committee members and maybe even some difficult strata managers. Is there anything in particular that you wanted to leave our listeners with? Anything to add before we wrap up?

Natalie Fitzgerald: I think the most important message I can give is to know that your opinion is valid. It may not be the opinion of everybody else. It may be something that kind of seems completely left of centre that nobody's going to have any interest in. Even if they don't, that's okay. You're allowed. You're empowered to have an opinion and a thought in relationship to your own investment. So be confident in knowing that that's completely okay. And that, like we said, there is probably someone else, at least one other person, if not more, in the room who perhaps haven't thought of that but are certainly happy to support the concept.

Amanda Farmer: Absolutely. Lovely spot to leave us on. And the time we were recording this, we are just around the corner from the SCA Awards. And I believe Strata Sense is once again up for some awards. I'm wishing you all the best. You are an award-winning strata management company and providing fabulous service. And we're very lucky to have you.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Thanks, Amanda.

Amanda Farmer: Absolute pleasure. And look forward to the next chat.



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Natalie Fitzgerald: Fantastic. Thank you so much.

Amanda Farmer: Bye.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Bye.

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