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YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 041. What Makes A Great Strata Committee – with
committee member Steven King (all jurisdictions)

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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.

Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer and this is Your Strata Property. Steven King is a resident owner in a Sydney strata scheme. Steven's building is in Bondi Junction, New South Wales and I have invited him on the show today so that he can share with all of you what he's learned serving as a committee member for his strata scheme for more than 15 years.

Steven has lived in his building for 25 years, he teaches academic writing at the University of Sydney and he is currently completing a 3rd degree in Psychology. Steven is also a member of the YSP online membership community. Today I am delighted to welcome Steven King. Welcome, Steven.

Steven King: Thank you very much, Amanda. It's a pleasure to be on your show.

Amanda Farmer: I have to start by saying Steven, I'm looking at you because we are filming this over Skype and I'm looking at your very impressive Rode podcaster mic, which is identical to mine, and you've just been telling me how you deliver some of your university lectures online and hence you are the proud owner of a Rode podcaster and I have to say you're my first guest on this podcast to have a podcasting mic on the other side.

Steven King: Well, great minds think alike [laughter].

Amanda Farmer: Now I've had the privilege of working with you and your committee for many years now and when it came to me to deliver an episode for the podcast on strata committees and what makes a great strata committee, your committee was certainly at the top of my list because I have seen you guys work so well over the years and you have achieved so much and I think we have a lot of value to give our listeners today getting stuck into what makes a great strata committee.

So Steven, I'm going to start by asking you to tell us why is a great strata committee so critical to the effective day-to-day operation of a strata community?

Steven King: You know, I had a little bit of a think about this question and actually the answer is quite the exact opposite. It's when you don't have an effective committee, everything seems to go wrong: you get disasters everywhere, people are unhappy. The problem with an ineffective committee is that the problems become un-resolvable. You've got to remember that a strata scheme is where you live, if things go badly wrong I mean where do you actually go? I mean what do you do? Sell up every time something goes wrong? I mean it's a major problem to have committees which can't look after their own buildings and you've got to remember committees are like a board of directors operating a business and the strata is like a small town with the corridors effectively being the streets, and the thing that people tend not to realise is that a building is a huge machine which needs constant attention and people forget that their neighbours are only 15 centimetres across the wall.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. I think it's a really great analogy and it's one that I've used before where you say a strata committee is like a board of directors managing a company, and for some buildings the committee is managing a budget that can be multiple millions of dollars, so these people have a very important role to play, just as board of directors for large companies have to play, and I think sometimes, whether by other owners or the committee members themselves, this can be overlooked and perhaps the attention that's required to be paid to the role or the understanding of the duties of the role simply aren't there.

Steven King: That's exactly right. One of the things that a lot of buildings don't seem to have is effective budgets and effective financing, there's not much of a look into the future.



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I think one of the advantages that we've got over here is that most of the people in the committee, well in fact all of the committee except for one, have been residents of the building for more than 10 years, so you've got that long term picture, and that's a really important perspective to take because you're no longer thinking about what's going to happen in 6 months' time or what's going to happen in 12 months' time but you're actually thinking 10 years ahead. For instance, one of the things we started to look at is the question of electric cars and we know that this is going to take some development of our electrical system to be able to cope with the extra demands, fortunately the entire complex is undergoing an electrical upgrade and we've included that as part of the scope of work that need to be dealt with.

Amanda Farmer: And you're bearing in mind that electric cars are going to have a role to play there in the future?

Steven King: Yes. Absolutely!

Amanda Farmer: Yes. It's a good point that you make there and Gordon Streight who's another very experienced committee member whom I know you are familiar with, who was on the show a couple of episodes ago, he made the same point about longevity of committee members and I think you're very lucky there where you are that you have had resident owners on the committee and not only have they been living in the building for a long time but they do have that interest in ensuring the smooth day-to-day running of the building because they actually live there and are experiencing the results of their decision making first-hand.

Steven King: That's exactly right. You're quite right about Gordon, in fact, I plagiarised some of Gordon's best ideas.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent.

Steven King: Gordon is a really wide thinking person. He's got a tremendous scope in the way that he tries to tackle problems with and of course he's a great person to talk to.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Okay. Well, I think you have given me a segue there into my next question, Steven. I want to ask what does a great strata committee look like – and we've covered off having longevity of members and potentially resident owners on the committee. What else makes up a great strata committee?

Steven King: I think probably the most important thing is attitude. I mean if you don't get an attitude that's cooperative, that disharmony can be so taxing in terms of energy and time that committees tend to fall apart. Again we're somewhat lucky here because we've got a really high level of cooperation, one of the things we do here is the office holders' roles aren't compartmentalised. We have a very transparent scheme and if the secretary sends an email to the strata manager I always include the treasurer and the chairman and of course vice versa if something happens with the treasurer we always adjust as well.

And that's really important because what it means is that practically all of us can step into each other's shoes and the other thing is because there is no siloing effect, everyone knows what's going on and we've maintained that 'no private conversations' rule for about 10 years.

And we've really impressed that on our building manager and our strata manager who have been very cooperative and when they talk to us, they talk to all 3 of us.

So that everyone's got a very good idea about what everyone else is doing.

Amanda Farmer: You used a really important word there I think, 'transparency', and I very often work with committees or members of committees that just aren't functioning effectively and 9 times out of 10 it comes down to transparency and not only the committee members themselves but the owners and the strata manager having access to information, having minutes of meetings that reflect the actual decisions that have been made, having notices of meetings that show what it is the committee is about to consider, so detailed agendas for meetings, and having those open lines of communication, like you say, copying people in on

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emails and not having those private conversations or those off-the-record informal meetings.

The number of times I come across lot owners who are frustrated by their committees' informal meetings, I just find that there's no reason for that and if there is transparency then we do see our communities operating that much more smoothly.

Steven King: That's exactly right. I think that the best type of transparency is between committee members, particularly the office holders, and the other thing about transparency that actually works very well is that it increases the level of trust amongst people.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Steven King: You don't feel like that there's something going on that you don't know about or you suddenly don't discover something that you should have known about that you didn't know about and one of the most damaging aspects of a committee is when trust dissipates and you just don't trust the other people around you and that creates a level of disharmony that actually explodes committees and I've been a member of OCN for a number of years, the owners corporation network who are some of the people you've had on your show, and I get to meet a lot of people in other strata committees, other secretaries, chairmen and I could tell you it's an absolute disaster when you hear these stories about disharmony that could get very, very nasty.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, for sure and I agree with you 100% when it comes to your committee that's something that really stands out, your ability to work together to often make those hard decisions, those quick decisions, moving quickly particularly when lawyers are involved – and of course this is the side of things that I often see – it's important to make quick decisions and you can't do that if you don't trust each other, if you don't trust your office bearers, if you're not being guided by your secretary for example, and I think that also feeds into the longevity of your committee members.

If there are people representing the building who not only lot owners trust but they trust each other, then your owners' going to be happy to have those committee members continue in their office's year after year and get the big important jobs done.

Steven King: That's exactly right and of course it's one of the advantages, just getting onto the track of committee members who have been living in the building for quite a while, they tend to develop their own friends within the building, so information actually spreads out very, very rapidly. If something goes wrong in the building I hear about it very, very quickly or the building manager hears about it very, very quickly.

It's not often that things happen you just don't know about. I mean if there's a problem, it sort of comes to you one way or another and that's because of the development of what you can almost call a 'neural network' where people are so in harmony with each other that the information moves very, very rapidly to the right spots.

Amanda Farmer: Okay Steven, let's talk about some problems when it comes to strata committees. Can you identify for us some common problems in your experience and I guess more importantly how do you solve or how do you avoid these problems?

Steven King: I think the most common problems that strata committees have are personality problems.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Steven King: People who've got personal agendas, that's something that we really push back hard on, it's an absolute disaster, we've had the experience here in the past of people who have had personal agendas and they are damaging: they distort or they bias the thinking of the committee. There are also people who don't have time to commit for instance.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Steven King: That's a really big problem, they want to get on the committee, they think there's a bit of kudos there and they just don't have the time to actually do anything. We've got different levels, we've got 9 people in our committee and different people do

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different things, so not everyone's strong in a particular area but everyone's got some strength somewhere and where those people have got strength we sort of let them go and do what they need to do.

Amanda Farmer: That's a good point and it's sort of going back to what makes a great committee, I think the committees that I've seen work very effectively are those where there are individuals with, as you say, particular strengths or skill sets, you might have the architect, the engineer, perhaps the banker on your committee and you can then tap into those skills, and I've seen committees do that really effectively, delegating to those people particular roles to deal with particular issues in the building and you're not then asking people to deal with everything, I suppose that goes to resolving this problem of making a commitment to serve the wider community, that commitment can be narrowed somewhat if you focus on what each person's particular strength is and just give them to do what they are best at doing.

Steven King: Well, that's absolutely right, Amanda. I think personal strengths are really important and it's a really good idea to get to know what people can and can't do. I'm a little bit sceptical about the type of professionalism like bankers, architects and people...

Amanda Farmer: And lawyers.

Steven King: Because what our experience has been with people that have a particular type of expertise, they are likely to use that in their own interest rather than the building's interest, they tend to use their own special level of expertise to push a particular type of agenda that suits them more than anybody else. The most important thing is that you've got people who are fairly conservative who've got common sense, and common sense is really there you know, it's an amorphous term but nevertheless it does capture something quite important.

Amanda Farmer: I just want to get stuck into that issue of personal agendas and difficult personalities because I think it's an important one and I think I see a lot of committees suffer I suppose when they don't get those things right.

Have you got any tips on how to deal with a difficult personality? How to perhaps get the right people on the committee? Is there anything that you guys are doing at a general meeting when nominations are open and elections are happening? How do you track down and sign up these ideal committee members?

Steven King: Well there's no formula for doing that. I guess when you're in a building long enough, you get to talk to a lot of people, you get to know what they're like, you have different conversations, some of your compatriots have conversations as well with those people, they'll tell you certain things about them, you'll learn things from other sources like from the building manager or the strata manager or someone like that, and gradually you bring people in slowly. I don't think that there is any formula that helps you makes your good decision about who is going to be effective and who isn't. It's a matter of sort of getting to know people and they gradually get more and more involved and as they get more and more involved and when you get a vacancy on the committee then they put their hand up.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, and I suppose what you are also doing in that process is you're developing a culture, the culture of not only what our building looks like but what our committee looks like and the type of people that serve on our committee, and I think that that goes a long way towards future-proofing your committee if you've got that culture in place, then you're probably only going to see the type of people putting up their hands who think "yes I like this culture and I want to be a part of it".

I suppose it happens but it might be a rarer case when someone says "I don't like it and I'm going to stand up and try and change it" especially a committee like yours that has had a very effective culture for a number of years, I certainly see that you have owners there who support you and have confidence in keeping that culture alive.

Steven King: We get a lot of the support through the building and I think that's one of the reasons that we are fairly effective, it doesn't mean that every proposition that we raise gets supported by everybody but it does mean that generally you tend to get that high level of confidence in the building in the way that we manage the building and that cuts down on a lot of the stress.

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Amanda Farmer: I'm sure we have many listeners listening in today Steven who are thinking "what is this golden committee? How do I get one or how do I create one?" What are some of the action steps that our listeners can take to get started with improving their own strata committee?

Steven King: I think probably the first rule that I'd put in is the no private conversations rule.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Steven King: You know, like the office holders have to know everything that goes on, no office holder has a private conversation with anybody, it's all open. I think that's probably one of the most important. I think the second most important thing is probably that long-term view, try and develop a perspective that sort of goes beyond the next 5 years that sort of goes into 10 years or what will the place look like in 15 or 20 years. You know that long-term view is really important.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, and I think an important point that has come out today Steven is keeping the lines of communication open, and I suppose more specifically getting involved in your community, if you are a resident owner, getting out there, whether you're a committee member or a lot owner, getting out there, getting to know those around you, getting to understand what's going on in the building and that can be quite detailed if it's a larger building, not only knowing your committee members, your fellow committee members if you are one, but being on the lookout for others who might be great committee members who might fit in that culture, so I think that's something that you've highlighted you are doing really well there, your committee's doing well there in your building is just keeping a hand in basically, talking to everybody, getting to know who the new owners are, getting to know who's leaving, who might be a good replacement for the committee and I think that's something that somebody could start straight away getting move involved, communicating with the strata manager, the building manager and the committee members.

Steven King: Absolutely. I think you've hit it right on the head and like I said it's an attitude that has to develop, if you are acting in good faith and you are acting transparently that will sort of happen anyway.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Yes, you're right. Okay, the book question for you, Steven. What books have had the greatest impact on you and why?

Steven King: I've got probably 4...

Amanda Farmer: Go for it.

Steven King: But they more or less sort of cover the same area. I think Daniel Kahneman's book 'Thinking Fast and Slow' and that's a book that's about cognitive processing, I know it's something that I'm interested at the moment because I'm doing a study in the university as well as teaching, but there are a number of cognitive aspects which are applicable to strata committees actually, which sort of help people get along better, which stops people biasing judgments in committees so that's important. There's 'The Powerful of Mindful Learning' by Ellen Langer, I've read Langer's work before I actually read her books, and generally the scientific papers are actually better than the books I can tell you, they're shorter, they're more concise and there's a lot less nonsense in it. 'Mindful Learning is really an anti- multitasking book, it basically says that you need to have an awareness of what you're doing, that you need to focus on what you're doing and it's not a sophisticated idea but it is a well-developed idea now, there has been a lot of research.

Amanda Farmer: Well, multitasking is a dirty word now isn't it? Or at least fast-becoming?

Steven King: It is. And of course the other thing about Mindful Learning is that knowledge isn't fixed, things do change, it's not that you need to know everything but you need to focus on a particular thing. For instance yourself doing law, you focus on that, you get to know that particular domain intimately, so you develop a level of expertise that's just not available for normal people no matter how much they try to study it, you're involved in it constantly. So that's the power of Mindful Learning.

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Another book that is sort of related to that is a material by Carol Dweck and she wrote a book called 'Mindset' and the thesis of that – and again I read her papers prior to reading the book and again the scientific papers are much, much better than books I can tell you – , it's about the difference fixed and fluid mindsets and she's done quite a number of studies with colleagues that have shown that people who think about their own mental capacities as being fairly fixed or innate tend to perform worse than people who have a very fluid attitude that 'yes, I can make mistakes and I will make mistakes but I learn from them.'

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Steven King: Probably the worst thing you can say to your child is that 'my child is a genius, you're so good at this'.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Steven King: You know that sort of develops an expectation of a child, it doesn't allow them to experiment and try and make mistakes and learn from those mistakes and the last book is called 'The Person In The Situation' by a couple of authors called Ross and Nisbett, it's not a new book it's a fairly old one, and it's basically about situations, we tend to think we have control over our lives over the world, you know when we have an accident, if someone runs into us it's their fault.

First thing we don't consider is that "well maybe the red light failed or something else may have happened" but The Situation is about the way that the world sort of controls us rather than we control the world and we sort of live in it in a kind of illusion of control, cognitive process which is quite powerful.

Amanda Farmer: Interesting. I will make sure that each of those 4 books are listed in our show notes there Steven so that our listeners can get their hands on them. I love your breadth of knowledge, we always have interesting conversations when we meet, not just about strata but about psychology and many of those emerging branches I think and if anybody is interested in that Steven is your go-to guy I think.

Okay Steven is there anything that you'd like to add before we wrap up today?

Steven King: Probably no, other than what I already reiterated, being on a strata committee is an attitude you know, you have to bring a certain type of perspective to it, that's probably the most important things I can say and transparency. You've got to have that transparency and it's got to not be a pretend transparency it's got to be a real transparency that's effective so when I say that we use that 'no private conversations rule' we really do use it.

Amanda Farmer: I think they are 2 very important messages to leave off on today. Thank you so much for joining us on the show, Steven. I know you're about to jet overseas, you're a busy man, so thanks for taking the time and we'd love to have you back sometime to share your strata experiences.

Steven King: Thank you very much, Amanda. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Amanda Farmer: Thank you.

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