

Publication Date: 17 March 2016
YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 002. Reena Van Aalst on working with your strata manager and getting the most out of your building

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Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome! I'm Amanda Farmer and this is Your Strata Property. Today, I'm very excited to introduce a special guest to you, Reena Van Aalst, the General Manager and Licensee-in-charge of the award winning strata management company Dynamic Property Services. Reena manages a team of twelve strata managers and twelve property assistants. Reena was awarded New South Wales Strata Manager of the Year in both 2011 and 2012. She's currently a board member and Vice President of SCA New South Wales. Reena also has a Masters in Professional Accounting from UTS and before life as a strata manager, she was a pharmacist.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Reena Van Aalst from Dynamic Property Services. Welcome Reena.

Reena Van Aalst: Thanks for having me Amanda.

Amanda Farmer: My pleasure. Reena we are here today to talk about strata managers. Can I start by asking you to tell us a bit about why you think good strata management is so critical for strata buildings and owners?

Reena Van Aalst: Strata managers look after people's most important asset, be it their home or financial investment. And when it's their home, there is a higher level of care and trust that's needed and therefore it's important that the strata managers, they're the first port of call for advice and that's why it's so critical in terms of looking after strata buildings as you're, in a sense, the first person that they'll need to call if they have a problem.

Amanda Farmer: And what do you think makes a great strata manager?

Reena Van Aalst: First of all, having effective communication skills, particularly body language. I think that I have found in my experience when you are in a meeting how you portray yourself in terms of how you sitting, whether you've got your arms crossed, how you're looking at people, it's very very important to show that your body language reflects professionalism.

Second thing is knowledge of the various legislation, various acts, any by-laws, any community management statements or strata management statements, if that entity is part of a multi-faceted or multi-tiered development. So I think a level of accounting knowledge is really important. Obviously, we are dealing with trust accounts; millions of dollars are invested in strata companies.

And I think another important trait is integrity, empathy, discipline, and having a tough skin. In our job we're facing people of various backgrounds. People get quite emotional when it comes to their homes and therefore you have to be resilient and have a tough skin and not take things personally.

The last thing I would say which I think sort of captures everything in a sense and extends it to the office is basically being well-organized and being able to multitask. Because as a strata manager you may have a day planned, you know what you need to get out in terms of agendas or minutes then something could happen in one of your buildings that could totally throw your schedule out. So to be able to, in a sense, rearrange, react quickly, and to be able to think quickly on your feet is another important attribute if you want to be a good strata manager.

Amanda Farmer: Wow! It's a long list of skills. It's a tough gig this strata management.

Reena Van Aalst: Yes! It's not an easy job and that's why it's been hard for us to find good people. Many different facets and skills are involved in order to be a good strata manager.



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Amanda Farmer: Yes, and do you think owners realise that strata managers have all of that on their plate?

Reena Van Aalst: No, I don't think so. I think in a sense, the most that they see of our performance in terms of what we do is at a meeting, that's probably the main area, or through telephone and email communication. But behind the scenes there is so much more that has to happen and I don't think most people are aware of what really happens and how tough the job is.

Amanda Farmer: Reena, can I ask you to share a story about how you as a strata manager have helped a building with your skills in strata management?

Reena Van Aalst: In 2009, there was a gas explosion in a building that I still manage: Eastgate at Bondi Junction, and that building was uninhabitable for six months. So that basically consists of two towers and one of those towers is housing over one hundred and twenty apartments so at least double that in terms of occupants, and we had to basically negotiate with the insurer, the assessor, the various entities. We had weekly meetings for twelve months trying to negotiate the best outcome with the insurer and their assessors. As you can imagine insurers are always trying to minimize any payouts, so there's a lot of sort of argy-bargy negotiation. But fortunately, with a good team of committee members and experts that we engage, we are able to provide them with a good outcome.

Another very small, little thing that – perhaps maybe not so small in terms of quantum – but another building that I'm now managing, we just were awarded recently, it's part of a two member BMC and when I was asked questions at the interview stage of the appointment, one of the things that they asked me was how would we deal with a BMC and I said to them you know, even though we are not being asked to manage that, I advised them to look at all their invoices to make sure that they were allocated to the right expense codes – because each entity has to pay a certain percentage – and they've found since doing that exercise that they've actually had a hundred thousand dollars of expenses that had been actually miscoded and misallocated, so yeah not an easy thing!

Amanda Farmer: That's some strata management at its best there! I think that that would've been a happy building that you found that money for them.

Reena Van Aalst: Definitely!

Amanda Farmer: And do you think in your example where you had an emergency situation, you were having to deal with the insurers, you were having to deal with a whole different range of people, do you think a building that didn't have a strata manager would have been able to manage that effectively?

Reena Van Aalst: No, definitely not. I mean honestly, at Dynamic we have a great team of people: we have our finance people involved, our data people involved, our insurance people involved, and having that wealth of knowledge, as well as having people to be able to communicate to the various residents because of course we don't have a database of all tenants and they were affected. So I think in terms of trying to manage such a process, it would have been probably impossible for any entity who didn't have a strata manager because in a sense we were working sort of twenty four seven at the beginning, then obviously being able to dedicate a lot of time after that process to ensure that people were housed. I mean, when you think about it, people were not allowed to take any furniture with them or anything, just a few personal belongings that could fit in a suitcase is all they were allowed to take. So when you think about yourself in that situation, then you need someone who is a professional expert to be able to manage such a difficult process.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, and also that professional and that expert knows and has contacts with the other experts who can be brought in to provide specialist advice, and you were talking about insurers and no doubt you are dealing with brokers, and you are dealing with...

Reena Van Aalst: Lawyers.



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Amanda Farmer: Valuers and lawyers and...

Reena Van Aalst: Engineers. Definitely yes! We have a multitude of experts that we had to use. And again, that strata manager would have access to various professionals they have used in the past, so in a sense, when there's an emergency you can sort of call on someone and say 'we need your help very quickly', something that no doubt an individual Owners Corporation could never really do on their own.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, certainly not effectively. Okay, great. I'm going to ask you now about some challenges. What are the most common challenges you've noticed owners or buildings face when it comes to dealing with their strata manager, and what do you think works best in terms of overcoming those challenges?

Reena Van Aalst: The most common challenges that I've come across for owners is basically their manager not having proper knowledge of the various legislation. The second thing is lack of communication; one of the biggest complaints you know we get even my own team at times, which is very rare but it does happen, or when we are getting asked to tender for any work, is when the strata manager or their assistants don't return calls or don't communicate in a timely manner. And the other thing I think that comes to mind, is a lack of understanding of what owners are really needing and asking for in a sense. I think as managers, being very procedural, very busy, and then on the administrative side of their role, they don't really understand where that person is coming from and therefore may not be really addressing their needs in a way that they want to be addressed.

Amanda Farmer: That's really a good point because you mentioned earlier when we were talking about what makes a good strata manager, and something that some of our listeners might have been surprised about, you talked about those personal skills like empathy and...

Reena Van Aalst: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: And now you are saying that some of the challenges that owners are facing is that their strata managers just aren't listening to them.

Reena Van Aalst: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: They just aren't listening to what the problem is, and that's sound to me like a lack of empathy.

Reena Van Aalst: Yes, that's right. Well I mean, I think the first thing one should do is, when you are listening to a problem that someone has, you should put yourselves in that person's shoes and think well 'if that was me and I had three emails or I've asked for this and I still haven't got it, how would I react under a similar situation?' I think another thing trying to overcome issues, is for a strata manager to know when they should engage contractors, or other experts, and in a sense sometimes we don't have a skill level that's needed for the problem and we need to be able to advise our clients accordingly. The other thing I think that's important is being able to delegate, I think strata managers sometimes try and be all things to all people, and that could be internally in their own office or you know with the clients, in a sense sometimes you need to call on other parts of your company or other people who will help you to address the needs, you yourself may not be able to do it all on your own.

Amanda Farmer: Gosh. Thinking about the long list of skills that a strata manager needs, and the burdens that you have each day, I don't think there's any strata manager out there that could do it on their own.

Reena Van Aalst: No definitely not, I think it's a tough gig as you said, and because there's so many different areas of legislation – WHS, legal stuff, strata stuff – it's such a quagmire of different elements that I think you need various experts to help you along on that journey.

Amanda Farmer: Okay, great stuff. Now Reena, some of our listeners are perhaps in a building that doesn't have a strata manager or maybe they are not happy with their strata manager and they might be looking for a new one, what actions can our



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listeners take to get started with either engaging a strata manager for the first time, or working better with their current strata manager?

Reena Van Aalst: Yes, I always think the first thing to do is work with the incumbent manager that you have and see if you can actually resolve the issue. Now that may be a change in personnel, there might be a bit of a personality issue or that person that's been appointed as your manager is not the right fit, so perhaps speak to the management of that company and seek an alternative manager. Sometimes it's important to put your expectations and KPI's in place so that the actual managing agent knows exactly what you expect of them, so at least there's a common ground to measure the performance of the strata manager and perhaps the expectations of the Executive Committee. I think the other thing is perhaps having regular EC meetings, regular informal catch ups with your EC.

Amanda Farmer: And the EC being the Executive Committee, just for those listeners who might not be familiar with that.

Reena Van Aalst: I'm still using acronyms, it's funny I was speaking just today...and they go 'what does this mean? What does UE mean?'

Amanda Farmer: So true! Strata has its own lingo, that's for sure. That's part of what we are hoping to do here, is to demystify the strata lingo.

Reena Van Aalst: Exactly, so I won't use anymore acronyms. I think in a sense, having the right people, making sure perhaps you interview the manager that they are going to put forward, if it's a new company you are going to perhaps ask to meet the new strata manager that's going to be your manager and perhaps ask them questions as well.

Amanda Farmer: It's so simple but so many buildings just don't do that.

Reena Van Aalst: Yes, unfortunately. Sometimes I think when you are not well-versed in terms of what to ask, then you only find out after the event that perhaps it's not the right company or not the right fit, so I think perhaps putting a list of expectations, KPIs, and meeting the management that's going to be ultimately looking after, I think are important things to ensure that the relationship starts off on a good start.

Amanda Farmer: Great tips. Okay, thanks for that Reena, that's all really valuable stuff. We are going to wrap up soon but before we do, I want to ask you a personal question: what books have had the greatest impact on you and why?

Reena Van Aalst: There are three books I think that come to mind. The first one is "Why is it all about you?", which is the seven deadly sins of narcissism by Sandy Hotchkiss, and I think that was a book in a sense opened my eyes to people that sort of displayed very self-centered behaviour, and that sort of applies whether it's you know, lot owners or staff or even in your own personal life, it sort of gave me a bit of an eye opening. I have met many people that were like that and now I could actually label them with something.

Second is Winning by Jack Welch. So, Jack Welch was the CEO of GE for I think fifteen years and basically took it from a very small market capitalization to a huge one, and he talks about various different things that he did and perhaps for anyone looking to lead a strata management company or be in a management position, just some tips and things to do and not to do.

The last one I think that has a great impact on me is the Third Space by Dr. Adam Fraser. In a sense this book talks about work, life, balance and trying to sort of find that space, so that when you turn up to work or turn up to a meeting, how you present yourself and in a sense perhaps taking out some time to do some relaxation; whatever it takes to get rid of the stress that we are all plagued with due to our busy lives and then how we turn up and how others see us in that light. I actually got to meet him because he did a presentation at one of my CEO institute meetings, so that was quite helpful.

Amanda Farmer: Wow fantastic! Okay, well thank you so much for your time today Reena and I'm sure our listeners have got a lot



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out of all of that. How do listeners find out more about you, and is there anything else that you want to add before we say goodbye?

Reena Van Aalst: Contact me on my email address which is reenav@dynamicproperty.com.au, also through my LinkedIn profile. I just want to sort of finish off by saying that strata management needs to become a profession in order to meet the increasing needs and demands of the buildings that we're managing at the moment.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Reena Van Aalst: This means that the educational requirements that are needed for a person to practice to become a strata manager have to be increased and improved. There are several bodies and entities such as SCA which are trying to do that, but we all need to, in a sense, increase the bar so that strata management is seen as a profession and we are able to attract talented people that want to work in the industry rather than people who just sort of stepped into it or fall into it just by chance or accident.

Amanda Farmer: The education of strata managers and those working in strata management and improving the image of strata management is a topic for a whole nother episode, let me tell you. So thank you so much for your time today Reena and I'm sure we will have you back on the show in the very near future, you've got a lot to offer in this sector, that's for sure.

Reena Van Aalst: Thank you very much Amanda. I appreciate you having me as the first guest on your podcast.

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