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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.

Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome. I'm your podcast host, Amanda Farmer. And my guest this week is Louisa Herbert. Louisa is the Managing Director of MBCM Strata Specialists in Box Hill and Hawthorn, Victoria. Now in her 12th year of owners corporation management, Louisa previously worked in the government sector, for 10 years in a range of roles, both state and federal. Well, that's what Louisa's bio says, but as you will hear in this chat, Louisa actually worked in a very unique government role, which I believe prepared her exceptionally well for a career in strata management.

In addition to surprisingly, me with that bit of background, Louisa also shares with me what it is that still surprises her about the strata sector, even after her many years in it, and the effective way that she's training her new staff. I'll take you over now to my chat with Louisa Herbert. Louisa Herbert, welcome to the show.

Louisa Herbert: Thank you, Amanda. Thanks for having me.

Amanda Farmer: Pleasure to have you here with us. Now, Louisa, you are an owners corporation manager, as we call you in Victoria. Similar to our strata managers in New South Wales, our body corporate managers in Queensland, and I'm really thrilled to have you here because I haven't chatted to too many Victorian, owners corporation managers. Let's start with your background. How did you get started in strata?

Louisa Herbert: Sure. So my parents, actually, owned the business before I did. So they originally purchased one of the first MBCM franchises back in 1997. Mom bought the first franchise, then dad bought the year after and they had that until retired in 2014. I bought in in 2011 and then dad and I were fighting too much, so I made them retire in 2014. No, just kidding. It was time for him to retire. He wanted to play golf. So that's why they retired in 2014.

Amanda Farmer: Lovely. That's nice to know, a family business and still in the family. Did you start off in strata? Was that all that you've ever known or were you doing something else before you joined the business?

Louisa Herbert: Yes. So I was in the government for 10 years before that, actually, both state and federal. Started off in our Department of Justice, in a few interesting roles there and then moved on to Centrelink and then onto Comcare as a worker's comp insurer for the government. So, lots of varied roles before coming in here. Justice was the most interesting, I have to say.

Amanda Farmer: Justice was the most interesting? What made that so interesting to you?

Louisa Herbert: I was a parole officer.

Amanda Farmer: Wow.

Louisa Herbert: Yes. So lots of stories, and lots of growing up done really quickly in the 3 and a 1/2 years that I was there. So that was my first job, not supermarket job, if that makes sense. So it was quite crazy. So after that, everything's been pretty good since, in terms of dealing with people because yes, it was nuts.

Amanda Farmer: Parole officer turned strata manager. I love this. Oh, wow. I want to dig deeper there. There has to be so many skills that you developed as a parole officer that you are now implementing to be a successful owners corporation manager. Can you please, tell me some of your strengths that you know you've gained from your past experience?

Louisa Herbert: You have to be able to talk to everybody of all different nationalities, circumstances, everything under the sun.

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Obviously, you're dealing with the court system, the parole system, so you have to be able to present to the parole board, which I had to do a couple of times in person for a few interesting people. Doing assessments at the psych prison, so you have to be able to obviously talk to the psychologists and the doctors and the psychs when you get there, but also then deal with the patient/parolee as well. So very wide range of skills and being able to deal with everybody and also being able to write reports after that and communicate with people. Yes. It was certainly an interesting job.

Amanda Farmer: I think that is so fascinating. And I really can see the link there between the skills you develop working with all walks of life and being the facilitator, not necessarily the decision-maker, which is something that I certainly teach strata managers when we're talking about their role in working with an owners corporation. You advise and your guide, you don't decide. So you've definitely got that one worked out.

Louisa Herbert: Absolutely. Yes. Look, sometimes you'd love to say, *"Please do this,"* but it's not your money. And the old Commonwealth Government Bank ad from million years ago, *"It's not your money, Ralph."* So you have to let them make the decision but give them as much information as you possibly can from the knowledge that you have in the job. So there's so many things to know as a strata manager and you deal with so many different little bits of life with the building and with people. So you just need to put the right people in touch with each other and then you're good to go.

Amanda Farmer: After so many years as an owners corporation manager and seeing this world that is strata and owners corporations unfold and grow, and change. Is there anything that still surprises you about this world?

Louisa Herbert: I think it's that people still have no idea what strata is. So if you say you're a strata manager, they'll look at you like you've got three heads. And then they say, *"Oh, so you are a real estate agent?"* *"No. No, that's not my role."* *"Oh."* And then you give the little spiel. Your little 3 second intro that everybody has. *"Oh, you know the common property of apartments?"* *"Oh yes."* *"Yes. We manage that."* *"Oh."* And then they either know something or then they look at you again with a question mark, like, *"What are you talking about?"* And then you do the rest of your speech, your 30-second speech. And they're like, *"Oh yes, I know that. Oh."*

Amanda Farmer: That person.

Louisa Herbert: And then it clicks. But it still fascinates me that people have got no idea. And also when they buy into a property, no idea what they are buying into. A lawyer that I spoke to once said, *"I think my clients spent more time trying on jeans than they did looking at this property and the legalities behind it."* Because there was so many defects and issues going on that they had to rectify and he was shocked that they bought it. Yes.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. That's definitely something that I am still surprised by, and I agree with you. It is still a mystery to so many people what strata is and how it works. Notwithstanding, we have such a high proportion now of dwellings, our strata and community titled dwelling, so many more people living in high-rise. But that role of the strata manager, still behind the scenes a lot. No one really thinks about, well, where do the levy notices come from? Who manages the books and records? Who calls the trades to get the leak fixed? *"Oh, there's a person."*

Louisa Herbert: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: There's a person who does that. I know talking to my family and friends about what I do as a strata lawyer, sometimes I get that look and then go on to explain the vast, complex, beautiful world that is strata.

Louisa Herbert: Very complex and so many different moving parts in a role that is challenging and rewarding at the same time. Sometimes more days are challenging than others, obviously. But in Melbourne, we've certainly learned to execute our flex in dealing with difficult situations, being locked down for the longest amount of time. So I think we're all pretty good with normally rolling with the punches anyway, as a strata manager. I think you've got to learn to just think, *"Okay, you're having a bad day. It's not about me. Let's move on."* Calm.

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Amanda Farmer: Nice approach. I'm sure, rolling with those punches, I'm sure there were a few punches that came your way, metaphorical, hopefully, punches that came your way during your long lockdown last year. Do you have any stories that you can share with us where you really have had to draw on those skills as a parole officer?

Louisa Herbert: I think it's just learning to deal with people's frustrations about the process of, they want things done and then we've had a lockdown and then we had another lockdown and it just keeps going on and on and on. So people who've been wanting to get jobs done for a while, then it's stopped and there's nothing we can do about it. It's not like a, *"Oh, yes. I'll just get the painter over to your house. Everyone will be fine with that."* It's like, *"No, no. That's not happening."*

So I think it's really, a lot of communication, understanding that people are frustrated, and within our team, just having a giggle, having a laugh about things that happen because you've got to be able to have a laugh because otherwise you'd cry. So you've got to just be like, "Okay, I understand that person's not happy, but what can we do to see if we can make it a better experience for them?" So do we ask the painter, if they have an idea of where they are in their schedule, for example. Can we do some other things to make them happy? But sometimes people are just not going to be happy and you've got to just accept that as well. Yes.

Amanda Farmer: And accept that, that's not about you.

Louisa Herbert: That's right. Exactly. Exactly. Yes.

Amanda Farmer: Now, speaking of your team and how you work through difficult situations, I understand that MBCM has developed a unique learning management system that you're using to help to train your new staff. Now, training and the desperate need for strata managers, owner's corporation managers in our space is something we talk about a bit on the podcast. So when I heard about this, I thought I'll ask you about it, and maybe you can fill us in on the novel things that are happening there at MBCM.

Louisa Herbert: Sure. So, that was actually developed by me. I developed it myself in the pandemic because we were all obviously working from home, and I had fairly new team members who had only been in the office with us for maybe four months, I think, face to face. And then I thought, "Oh God, how do we keep the training up?" You can check emails and things like that, send and receive box. You can see complaints, you can understand all that, but how do we get ahead of it and make sure that people's knowledge is kept up to date. But also with the changes in the legislation that were coming, I thought we need to get ahead of it. So how do we do that? So it's a platform, which is called LMS, which is the learning management system. It's an online platform and it gives you the ability to basically have an interactive training program with the trainee.

They get certificates at the end of it to say that they've done the particular course. So it was just on real life events. So the theoretical training is fantastic, but you need to actually see how does it work with our system? If someone calls, what are the next steps you do? How do you record that information? Where do you save it? What does an email template look like? What do you send to them? Where do you keep that? Who do you call? Just all of the actual steps that happen. For example, an insurance claim, as we know, they're all very different, but most of them start off pretty similar. So here's the process for this and this is the step you take. Here's some videos, here's an assignment, here's a training thing. So they go through and look at that and then give their answers to that.

Same as plan of subdivision. They're all the same, in terms of what's in there. It's just how you read it. So here's a plan, here's the rules, here's a plan online. Tell me where the lift is? Why does plan two separate from plan one? And getting people to actually look at things that you're really actually going to need in your job every day. Because without it, you're in a lot of trouble, if you can't read a plan. That's a very basic, basic part of our job. But it's also, when you first start learning it, you're like "What? What's an interior, exterior? What's a vinculum? What..." So it's trying to just break that down and make it a bit more user friendly with real life examples of, here's a plan, tell me is this in a plan? How many lifts are there in a plan? Where are the car stackers? There's probably no car stackers, but you're just trying to get people to actually read it, to understand it. So practical and mixed in with a bit of theory as well.

Yes. Really just trying to make it so people are self guiding them through the training. And then there's parts in the training where it says stop and talk to your manager or trainee about this. So then they'll come back and have a conversation with their manager or

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whoever's training them and then be able to go back on and do the learning themselves. Also great for new people with hiring because obviously in our 2 years, we still needed to hire people and training was really difficult because we couldn't be in the office together. So how do you make sure people know what they're doing? So that was where this platform's been fantastic.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. My mind is just buzzing with the potential that this kind of system would have. Is this something that's now used across all the MBCM franchises?

Louisa Herbert: It's not at the moment. It's going to be. We're still just fine-tuning a few things about it. Obviously, as you can imagine, it started off being just for myself and my team, so it was very much my franchises focused. Talk to Louisa about this. Well, that doesn't work for the group. So had to make a few modifications about that.

Amanda Farmer: Got it.

Louisa Herbert: But overall the process is the same in the, majority of officers, the process of how we deal with things on our bespoke platform is exactly the same. It's just that you might have a different way that you pay an account, for example, back to the business, might be slightly different, but the process overall is exactly the same. Yes. It just helps for consistency as well. And people learning can be like, "Okay, I think I know that." And then it's been great for me with my team. So whenever I get a question, I just say, "Check this. Go to that video. Watch that video." And they're like, "Oh, yes." So it's good for me because my biggest issue is everybody comes to me for questions, which is fine. That's what I'm here for. But a lot of the time I have meetings and I have other things on and emails to respond to, and things like that. And I'm like, "No, no. You've already got that info. It's in there. Go and read it. You'll be fine."

Amanda Farmer: And the power of technology now to be able to be doing a task, a job, an exercise, and to record yourself doing that. Screen recording is something I do a lot for my team as well, and over the years we've built up a big video library of how to. And being able to talk through with someone on a video is so helpful and so powerful. When I first started working in a legal office, we had what we called our office manual, which was a book that was printed out and there was a Word document that was saved, and every task would have a step by step written process and you'd have to update that if that process changed and then you'd print out another version of the office manual.

So when you had new staff, you'd pull on that down on their desk and follow that. And now we'd have this online electronic version. So much more user friendly and so powerful to be able to then share that with other offices, other businesses. And I can imagine our listeners here, owners, committee members thinking, "Hey, that kind of thing would be really great for us too, to be able to tap into that and understand how to read a plan and understand how an insurance claim works." I know I'll get those questions. "Amanda, is this kind of system available for us?" Just planning the seed there, Louisa. Got to think big here.

Louisa Herbert: Thank you. Yes. As I said, it really just started it out for myself, but I think there's so many different opportunities available because of the fact that it's the process. So you contact your insurer or your broker, and the process is you send a proforma and it looks like A, B, C, D. That's the same for every company across the country, probably, actually, across the world. Because we did, MBCM did do a study tour to America in 2019, which was fantastic to see how they operate strata over there and same issues, same drama, same everything, just a different way that they run their businesses. Yes. It's universal, which was interesting. Yes.

Amanda Farmer: Speaking of universality, do you have the same difficulties in Victoria that we have in New South Wales when it comes to attracting and retaining good owners corporation managers?

Louisa Herbert: Most certainly. It's really hard to get great people that are going to be the right fit for your team, as well, for your existing team and then also bringing in new people. And then also, do you want to hire someone who has experience already or are you looking for someone you want to mold to how you want them to work? Yes. It's a massive challenge for everybody. And then also looking then at, okay, what process can be more efficient in our business? So we are not recreating the wheel every time and we are not doing all these things that someone's actually written that out, let's just copy and paste. As I said, a lot of the stuff is very similar, but the manager's role is to be responding to their clients, not dealing with process stuff. So if there's a process, you

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can get an assistant or someone else in the business to help you with. But as the manager, you need to be dealing with the complex stuff.

So the starting of the process is usually the same, but the finishing of it or the, what we need the managers for is where the people that really comes into it and needing that experience. Yeah. That's hard to find and hard to keep, but it is a good industry. As I said, if you can talk to anybody, one of our most recent hires was a man who worked at a casino a while ago. He then had his own business after that. But in terms of being able to speak to anybody, that he can do that standing on his head. So I think sometimes you've just got to think a little bit outside the square of who you're going to pick and not judge their employment history because there's some absolute gold out there, if you're just sort of, I think, willing to look in a different direction. Yes. I've found that as long as you can talk to anybody, you are going to work in this industry.

Amanda Farmer: And we have a new gold mine to tap here of parole officers. I just think this is marvelous. Anybody looking for new managers? I know we're looking at customer service staff, hospitality staff. A few episodes ago, I was chatting to Steven Brell from Netstrata about how they hire and he's done really well hiring hospitality stuff. And Louisa, you've brought us the idea of parole officers. I think it's fabulous.

Louisa Herbert: Yes. Well, it's definitely, as I said, talk to anybody and you have to write a lot of reports and obviously make sure you're complying with the legislation or you definitely get a big smack. Yes. Have to have that legal ease behind you. Yes. It's definitely, if you have worked in that, you either stay forever or you leave after a very short time and I was one that left after a short time. Yes. It's a bit too crazy for my young self to be in that job at that time, so needed to get out.

Amanda Farmer: So strata's nothing, nothing compared to that?

Louisa Herbert: No. It's all good compared to that.

Amanda Farmer: Now, tell us this Louisa, what is in store for MBCM in the future? Have you got anything exciting on the horizon or just fine tuning that LMS? What's next?

Louisa Herbert: Yes. So fine tuning the LMS, definitely, for everybody to be able to use within their businesses across our franchise network. And then also MBCM are currently releasing our, bespoke software online, to an online platform. So that's currently underway at the moment, which is very exciting. And I think just continuing to work with the new legislation. That's been a massive change for us from the 1st December last year. I'm a massive process person, as you would have worked out already, but just refining our processes and making sure that we're not recreating the wheel. We are doing things that we can be done instantly rather than having to think about things. Yes. A couple of things on the go.

Amanda Farmer: Having been through a legislation change some 5 or 6 years ago and watching WA go through it, Queensland, go through it and now watching Victoria. It is tough and it is complicated, and confusing for a while, but it is such a great thing to go through because it does force you to review those templates, to review those processes, to make sure that you are doing everything as efficiently as you can. Whether you are a manager or you're a lawyer or another service provider, you have to go back and revisit documents and instructions and trainings that you may not have looked at for a while. So we always all have a bit of a freshen up when we've got new legislation

Louisa Herbert: Certainly do.

Amanda Farmer: Now Louisa, let our listeners know where they can go to find out more about you, connect with you and find out more about MBCM.

Louisa Herbert: Sure. No problem. So our website is www.mbcm.com.au. And my franchises are Box hill and Hawthorne. But our website links to all of our franchises as well as franchising opportunities that we have available and other things about our business, as well.

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Amanda Farmer: Fantastic. Well, thank you for sharing a little bit about what's going on in Victoria and with MBCM in particular, and giving us yet another angle on a day in the life of a strata manager.

Louisa Herbert: Thank you very much. Thanks, Amanda. Thanks for having me.

Amanda Farmer: Thanks for your time.

Louisa Herbert: Thanks.

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