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YSP Podcast Transcript: 375. How to Speak with Confidence in Strata - with Cat Matson

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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 to this week's podcast episode. I'm your host, strata lawyer, Amanda Farmer, and my guest this week is Cat Matson.

Cat is the CEO and lead facilitator of Impactful Presenters, empowering business owners and community leaders to speak with confidence, authority, authenticity and impact. An in-demand and accomplished speaker, MC and moderator. Cat is known for her straight-talking, her realness, and her ability to extract juice from her clients.

Cat describes herself as a mistress of all trades, having worked in both the private and public sectors, in small and large businesses, and in virtually every industry. She has advised mayors and CEOs, developed city-shaping strategies, and interviewed extraordinary industry leaders from social enterprise to deep tech. and everything in between and helped small business owners understand how to capitalize on the trends of digital transformation and innovation.

She is the host of The Speaking with Confidence podcast. Cat brings to this chat her very actionable strategies for those who find themselves in situations where clear communication is essential. And let's face it, that's most of us living and working in strata, our strata managers in particular, find themselves having to communicate complex information often in high-conflict situations. Our strata managers, you'll get a lot of juice out of this conversation.

I'll take you right on over now to my chat with Cat Matson.

Cat Matson, welcome to the show

Cat Matson: Thank you so much, Amanda, it's awesome to be here.

Amanda Farmer: It's awesome to have you here with us. Tell us a bit about you, Cat, your background, if you like. Why are you passionate about what you do?

Cat Matson: It's a ripper of a question and you know, it's always tempting when somebody says, tell us about your background. You know, I kind of want to say I was born at a very young age, but I'm not going to do that.

Instead, why I'm passionate about what I do is because I have spent my entire career straddling both small business, corporate, as well as the public sector. And I've been lucky enough that a big part of my career has involved public speaking. I was on stages. I was introducing lord mayors and politicians.

I'd forgotten that I was taught how to do that very early on in my career. But because I was taught how to do it very early on in my career, I guess to me, it feels like it's a really natural skill. And it wasn't until I got into the public sector that I realized it's actually not a natural skill. It's a learned skill, and I was watching people not be heard. I was watching very smart, intelligent people in the room not be heard, myself included sometimes, and I was like this is nuts. So I do get pretty hot and bothered these days around ensuring that smart, intelligent, knowledgeable, insightful people not only can be heard, they are heard and they are confident enough to speak whenever they're given the opportunity so that they can make their dents in the universe.

Amanda Farmer: I love that. And do you have any experience I'll say, Cat, anything that pops up for you when you start thinking about this world of strata, body corporate, have you ever lived in strata, do you have any familiarity with our world?

Cat Matson: I don't know that I do, not directly, not indirectly. I've certainly watched and in particular, actually when I was Brisbane's Chief Digital Officer, one of my tasks, one of my remits was to drive innovation across all sectors of the economy.

And Brisbane of course has a massive building and construction and in particular, student accommodation industry.

And one of the things that we were working on was how do we make that industry greener, more sustainable? You know, many people would be aware of the fact that the construction industry is a massive contributor to waste because when we pull down a building, it just goes to landfill.

And so all of that exposure to that part of the industry had me have a much bigger understanding of what goes on both sides of the fence. I'm a renter. So I know what it feels like to have to argue with a property manager, not necessarily in strata, but in the same thing, but I've also been a property owner and that notion of "no, no, no, but I don't want to invest. I don't want to have to upgrade a property." And so working as CDO with this industry and watching the conflict that happens, not through anyone's fault, but just because of the motivations and the needs and the wants and the desires and the priorities. Don't align. They don't mix, a bit like most industries really. Both sides of the marketplace have different priorities.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, indeed. And I think you really have without necessarily having first-hand experience of our world, you have articulated that really well. We do have competing interests. We do have owner residents versus owner investors. And we add to that a diversity of backgrounds. People who are living in strata apartments for different reasons, for different lengths of time, with different families, and all of that puts us and our strata managers in particular in positions where hard decisions have to be made, complex information has to be communicated.

You've said that Cat, part of your passion and what drives you is that you see intelligent people with something to say, something important to say without the skills necessary to say that effectively and to get their message across. And that's a big reason why I wanted to bring you on the show today because I know that's what you do so well, is teach these skills and empower these people. And I see almost every day strata owners who are frustrated by the lack of clear communication, the lack of understandable explanation from their strata manager often about important issues that are impacting these owners in the most important place in their lives, in their homes.

So having worked with people who have struggled to communicate, can you give us any insight into where our strata managers might be going wrong here? What might be getting in the way of them communicating well?

Cat Matson: I'm going to hazard a guess that strata managers, because of the nature of the role, are heavily focused on the technical elements of any conversation. Whether it's the legal, whether it's the implications, whether it's the possible outcomes or the possible consequences. And all of that then comes back into often a heavily detailed, complex technical conversation. And so when the strata manager finds themselves in a high-pressure conversation, the tendency is to lean on all that technical aspect.

Amanda Farmer: Can I add strata lawyer in there as well? Because you're definitely articulating some areas where strata lawyers might go wrong.

Cat Matson: Well, this is one of my, I guess, experience sets really any professional. We all lean on our technical expertise because that's what gives us not just our credibility, but that's our knowledge, right? That's what you've brought us into the conversation for, our technical knowledge.

But the problem is your audience in this case, an owner, they don't have that technical expertise. They don't want that technical expertise. They just want the solution to the problem.

I used to work with a gentleman who would always say to me, Cat, just give it to me in Sesame Street terms. And what he meant by that was "Explain it to me as simply as a character would on Sesame Street."

And that's really true today. It's not about explaining all of the ins and outs of the technicalities. It's around explaining what needs to happen in the simplest of terms, catering to or understanding where the audience is coming from. And then and then only when asked to go deeper might you want to get into all of the technical detail.

But you know, if I'm talking to you as a lawyer if I'm talking to you as a strata manager, I don't need to understand the technicalities, I just need you to tell me what to do.

Amanda Farmer: Do you think sometimes professionals might fall back on that technical stuff and their expertise and their knowledge because it is a difficult conversation or it is a situation of conflict? They may feel themselves intimidated by or concerned about how this person is communicating with them and they have something to prove. Is that where we fall into this trap of over-explaining?

Cat Matson: I think there are two things. First of all, when we feel like we're under attack or when we feel like we need to prove our worth to the conversation, absolutely. We will fall back to our unique skillset in this conversation. We'll fall back to the technical expertise that we lean on. The other reason why we do it is that's what's in our head as being important to the conversation. But what we haven't taken the time to do is to ask ourselves what's in it for the other person, what's in it for me, W double IFM what's in it for me, but I don't mean "Me" me, I mean for the other person.

The role as I understand of a strata manager is to navigate, to interpret, to facilitate pathways forward. By very definition, that requires a knowledge of the technical expertise, but it also requires an understanding of how to communicate with all the different parties based on what they need to hear in this conversation.

So yes, to answer your question, it's when we're feeling under threat. It's when we're feeling defensive. It's when we're feeling that we need to justify our existence in the conversation. And my tip in those situations is instead of falling back there, it's to just quietly ask ourselves, what is required of me in this situation? What does this person need from me in this conversation?

And oftentimes, I guess too, when somebody's upset with us or it's a high conflict situation, they're asking for detail and so our tendency is to go back into further detail. Actually, they're not asking for detail. What they're really asking for is clarification, but how they ask for those questions is to dive into the details. So sometimes we actually just need to come up a couple of layers and say, so what I'm telling myself you're looking for is this. Let me explain how I think we can achieve this outcome.

Amanda Farmer: So noticing when you might be falling into those technical explanations, it's something that I've certainly had to learn to do as a lawyer. You had a mentor that said, Cat, tell it to me in Sesame Street terms. I had a mentor that said, "Amanda, it's too clever. It's too clever. They're not going to get it. You've just gone from step one to step five. And this would be an advice letter that I was writing in steps one to step five. You need to do steps one, two, three, four." And I know it was a backhanded compliment, but it absolutely taught me how to communicate more effectively.

Cat Matson: Well, I talk about the lily pad framework. We often, you know, if you're standing on one side of a beautiful lake and you wanna take your listener to the other side of the lake, and let's say your problem that you're currently dealing with is here and the ideal outcome is on the other side, what we often wanna do is we wanna jump them across the entire lake in one fell swoop. But they're standing here going, "No, I don't understand. I just need to take the next step onto the next lily pad."

And the reason I talk about lily pads is because they're kind of delicate, right? If you step too heavily on them, you'll sink. So I've got this kind of visual that says you just gently walk across one lily pad at a time. And as a communicator, what that means is rather than trying to figure out how to get them the whole way, sometimes we just need to get them the next step. And then the step after that, rather than trying to give them all of the things, all at once so we can wrap all of this up and never have to have the conversation again.

Amanda Farmer: So we've got strata managers who are dealing with hundreds of emails per day where they're being asked questions, they're being asked to solve problems. They're picking up the phone and they're communicating by phone with angry, upset, confused and frustrated owners. Taking our owners step by step through the solution to a problem is a great tip. Any other tips for these kinds of situations and we will get into meetings which is a big part of what our strata managers do as well, but communicating by email, communicating by phone. Have you got any other tips that you do want to share today for managers who are struggling with that?

Cat Matson: My kind of general framework is always first of all, what's my end outcome here? Like what's the, I don't wanna say call to action, but what do I want to leave this person feeling, knowing, thinking that they didn't know at the start of this conversation? And then... What are the three key messages and only three? There are never any more than three key messages in a communication. And if you are needing to drop into more than three key messages, then you're overloading it. You're giving too much. And so if your email, for example, is paragraphs long, then you probably, you've probably overcomplicated it.

So yes, my tip is to get really clear on what's your outcome. What do you want the recipient of your communication to feel, to do, to think, to know differently than they didn't know at the start? And what are the three key messages that you can very simply and clearly lay out so that they can get to that outcome?

Amanda Farmer: I think our Strata managers can have a call to action when you put it that way, what is it that we want our own clients to be feeling, thinking, after they've communicated with us and I would say that is to be valuing you as a professional, to feel that you are, I often use these words on the podcast, a trusted professional advisor, you're not just Google or Amanda's member forum where we can type in a question and we get an answer. It's not that, it's about leaving that client, that owner, that committee member, that resident with the feeling that oh hey that's what my strata manager is here for and that's really helpful. I couldn't have got that information from anywhere else and I really value that.

Cat Matson: You've just reminded me of a conversation that I had last week in one of my coaching, my group coaching calls as part of the Impactful Presenters Program. One of my participants was saying that she's been applying for some roles in the public sector and she's not doing very well in them. So we did a mock interview.

Now she's applying for senior roles. but she was interviewing with all of the technical expertise. So I was asking, you know, I asked her a question around, tell me about a time where you've done this, this and this, how would you deal with the stakeholders in this situation? And the answer leaned really heavily on what she would do as the technical expert.

As distinct to exactly what you've just described there, Amanda, our strata managers are professional advisors, our professional experts. And when I'm coming to you, I want you to show me how to navigate the scenario, not tell me all of the detail. And if you tell me about all of the detail, then you're actually under-positioning yourself, if you like, you're underselling yourself. So if you bring it up a couple of levels and actually chunk up your information rather than dropping into the detail, you will present yourself as a far more valuable, trusted, professional, senior advisor.

Amanda Farmer: Especially in our modern world where it's so easy to access that technical information now, I find when I'm dealing with fellow professionals, including strata managers, when I'm when part of the answer to my question includes something along these lines, "Well, Amanda, I was in a meeting last week and an owner in exactly your position asked the same question. And this is how I was able to resolve it for them."

If I've got a manager saying to my committee, "Yes, we need to find a waterproofing contractor. I appreciate you've tried to get those three quotes and you haven't. I've got someone down the road at a building very similar to you. Who's done X, Y, and Z work? Can I give you their information?" Fabulous! To me, that's the trusted professional advisor.

I'm not getting any technical info about why we must repair and maintain the common property, why we have to do it immediately, and how much it's going to cost. I'm getting that insider helpful guidance that I'm looking for.

Cat Matson: Insight, not information.

Amanda Farmer: Insight, not information, I like it.

Let's talk about meetings. Now, Cat, our strata managers are often, I'm going to say, often from my perspective as a strata lawyer who is attending high-conflict meetings.

There can be controversial items that are being discussed at our strata meetings. We have a mixture these days of meetings that are in person, and meetings that are held online by Zoom and other platforms. And our strata managers are generally the ones if they're there, they are chairing the meeting. So they're there to my words, keep everything under control. I know you do a lot of education around presence online presence in a room full of people, What can you share with our strata managers who are attending and sharing strata meetings?

Cat Matson:

It's a tough gig and you have my sympathies, is the first thing, and recognizing that sharing those kinds of meetings is tough. And the first thing I think is to acknowledge that in yourself and acknowledge that possibly what's happening every time you're sharing one of these challenging meetings, you're already walking in with a certain level of energy or a certain level of anticipation or a certain level of nerves, which isn't necessarily gonna help.

So the first thing is to get really focused and clear on your role, but also your mental and emotional state. What do you need to do to be okay, to professionally, and I would even say potently chair this meeting? That might be things like mapping out the agenda, looking at the agenda and going, "Yeah, okay, we're gonna have some hairy ones here. They're gonna take a lot longer than what we've allowed." Getting really clear on what then is going to fall off the agenda or bringing those curly ones to the top, however, that works.

I think the other thing to do is to get really clear on your role, it's to chair the meeting, and chairing the meeting is about holding space. It's not just about ticking things off the agenda. It's about commanding the room and commanding the room doesn't need to be that you take over, because a lot of people don't like that notion of, I don't want to take over, but you're in control. This is your room and it's your job in this meeting to give everybody fair airtime to have the conversations, to facilitate the conversations, and then to, if not get them to resolution, at least progress the conversation.

In terms of knowing that you've got potentially controversial or conflict conversations coming up, the other thing I recommend you do is you pace out those objections. So when you hit those items on the agenda, you start by saying, "I know this is a controversial item. I know we're about to have a robust conversation." And you would actually then step out the rules for engagement. You would actually say, "I'm gonna give everybody time to talk. I'm not gonna tolerate name-calling. I'm not gonna tolerate talking over. Everyone's gonna have their time. And if there is any of that bad behaviour, then we're gonna end the meeting." Whatever you need to do to set that up to say, I get it and this is how we're gonna run it.

Amanda Farmer: I love it.

Cat Matson: The other thing is that when you are pacing out objections as the strata manager, you're going to have an idea of where or how this issue is going to be resolved. Yes, you need to let everybody have their say, but you ultimately know where this is going to go. So you want to think carefully about whom you have to speak to first, whom you have to speak to last and what you need to say in the middle to facilitate an outcome. Be willing to strategically move the conversation from where it is now to where it needs to be as distinct to just letting it be a free for all.

And then finally, you mentioned, you know, how do you do that in an online environment? You make sure that you give extra time for people to contribute because it's really hard to use visual cues or eye signals or anything like that in an online environment. So you actually need to pause more often and say are there any questions? Are there any comments? Pop your comments into chat and just make sure that everybody gets the opportunity to feel heard.

Amanda Farmer: I do find that when attending online meetings, that sometimes the manager is running that meeting as if we were in person and it feels very fast and it feels like we're missing opportunities. So that's a really great tip.

Lots of amazing tips in there. The concept of coming into a meeting, already primed for the fight. And that is such an important one. I'm really glad that you identified that because not only are our managers who are chairing the meeting and yes, it's something that

I teach as well. Make sure you've looked at the agenda. You're prepared for what's coming up, but the entire room, those owners who are coming to the meeting, most of them are coming for a reason because they've got something to say, they've got something to argue about, they've got something they don't like, the ones who don't really care which way the motion rolls are probably not going to turn up.

So you can imagine, especially in this day and age where it takes a bit to get people to turn up in person, they are there because they're armed and ready. And the tension in that room, in that 20 minutes or so before the meeting actually starts is always palpable.

Cat Matson: Yes. And get that one off the agenda. Like, do that one first. Honestly, don't let that simmer. Don't try to handle the mundane stuff first in the hope that that's going to cool everyone down. It won't. In fact, if anything, it will amplify things because the smallest of things, you know, who didn't clean up the barbecue area, will blow up because they're ready for the fight and they want to assert their authority. So yes, just. deal with it, own it and ask for everyone to be respectful and establish the rules of engagement.

Amanda Farmer: It's a good idea and legally, absolutely it's possible to bring motions up in the agenda order. If you think as a chair that it's going to be more effective and efficient to deal with that first, yes, get it out of the way.

And very often it is the practice that these more controversial motions are at the end because we have a set of legal motions we have to deal with. We have to elect the committee. We have to approve the insurance. We have to approve the minutes of the last meeting. That all happens first. So by the time we're getting to those controversial motions, we've maybe been there for an hour or two already. We've only got 20 minutes left before the venue is closing its doors and all of this gets rushed. So being on top of your agenda and what's coming up, what you think is going to be controversial, being aware of that ability to move things around is really important.

Cat Matson: Yes, totally. And giving space for the conversation. So I guess my final piece would know all of that, if you are in that position where you know that you're about to introduce a controversial item with insufficient time to discuss it, own that and say, "We are not likely to reach a resolution. So what we're going to do now is we're going to start the conversation. I want to hear from these four people." Well, however, that rolls out. But let's reassure people that this doesn't have to be dealt with as the venues being closed or as you're all going to stand in the lift, well, give people space and let them know how it's going to be managed.

Amanda Farmer: Online meetings, do you have any tips Cat for a chair, establishing their presence online and really sending that message that they're the ones who are in control? You know, in-person physical meeting, that's a little bit easier because you sort of set yourself up at the front of the room, you're at the desk or the lectern or whoever it's set up. Online can be a little trickier. What are your tips there?

Cat Matson: Yes, it's an interesting one because I see a lot of people rock up to online meetings almost apologetic. "Okay, thanks to everyone for showing up and now we're going to run through the agenda first item blah blah." No, no, no. So you don't actually do an introduction. I would actually recommend for all, for anyone sharing a meeting, you would start with a brief introduction. Even if the majority of the room knows you, you would start with, "Hey, I'm Cat and I'm chair and I'm your strata manager", et cetera, give a bit of information. Give an overview of the meeting. "This is what's on the agenda, I'm assuming you've all looked at it because this is an online meeting. Here's how I'd like you to interact."

Use the hand signal, give people an overview of the online platform, and don't assume that just because you're familiar with Zoom or Teams, everybody else is, so actually walk them through the housekeeping. How do you raise your hand? How do you mute your mic? How do you unmute your mic? How do you use the chat? All of those kind of things. And I'm assuming, I probably shouldn't, but I would just be assuming that you already have your camera on as the meeting chair.

Rule number one, you cannot share a meeting without your camera on. And invite everybody else to do the same. Invite everybody

else to do the same. And you can simply say, "This is a cameras-on meeting, unless you are in a situation where it is inappropriate or impossible for you to turn your camera on, please turn your camera on, because this is a meeting. This is a meeting, it's not a podcast."

My other one in terms of sharing and really establishing your presence, be extra big in your hand gestures. Be extra big in your facial expressions. If somebody is participating in the meeting on a phone screen or on a small laptop and they've got the tile view and you're just one of 15 people, you need ways to bring their attention back. And you need to overemphasize those natural elements of being human that we have when we're face to face, like a smile, like a wink, like a twinkle in your eye, like hand expressions, that all gets lost in an online meeting. So you actually need to be bigger with them. So you can engage with people.

Amanda Farmer: Which is exactly what Cat is doing right now. Those of you who are only listening, I am looking at Cat on video and she's giving some very good examples here of how to be big. If you are following us on our social channels on LinkedIn or on Facebook, I'll make sure that we cut a bit of this video to be able to share a firsthand example of how to be big on screen. Thank you, Cat. Great tips there.

Cat, you shared a story earlier about a client of yours whom you were coaching through your impactful presenters program, who got a little bit stuck in sharing the technical expertise rather than the meat of what she was able to offer. Have you got any other case studies or stories that you wanted to share?

Cat Matson: Delightful Phil has just popped into my head. Phil works in the sustainability arm of a regional council. And the reason he's just popped into my head is because there's a lot of similarities to sustainability in councils, to strata management. In that, there's a lot of technical detail, a lot of technical detail, a lot of governance and a lot of regulation.

And one of the things that Phil said to me was, "Cat, I know so much about this area and I am so passionate about teaching people how to be more sustainable." And every single opportunity I get when somebody says to me tell me what you do, he just drops all of the information, all of the data, and he says "And they start being really intrigued and engaged and curious and then about 30 seconds in I watched their eyes glaze over because I realise I've just drowned them in information but by then I'm so far deep into my story I can't pull myself back out."

Amanda Farmer: I can relate to Phil.

Cat Matson: I can relate to Phil too because we often think that we've only got this one moment, right? We've only got this one moment to share all of the things that we need to share in order to get this person onto our cause or into our agenda or whatever it is.

And so what I shared with Phil was, okay, go back to those lily pads. What would be the ideal next step? What's just the next lily pad that you can take this person to that leaves them wanting more? rather than feeling like they're drowning.

So I shared that with him and he had that notion of "Okay I'll just think about the next lily pad." And the next time I bumped into him I said "How are you going with the lily pads?" and he said "Oh my goodness Cat, it's so much better. I still have all the information in my head but I stop myself now. And I say this person's just asked me this question that tells me they're interested in this and so I just give them this chunk of the information." And yes, he said that he stopped getting that glazed over look from people.

Amanda Farmer: Lily pads, they're a fantastic strategy. I know as lawyers, we learn to become good at answering only the question that we've been asked because in a legal context, sometimes doing more than that can get you into trouble.

As a podcaster, and I know you too, Cat is an experienced podcaster, you'll learn how to do that as well to stop speaking so that your guest can speak and bring their value and then if you're the one being interviewed too often I'm just saying to myself, Amanda stop. Just stop. Close your mouth because there's another question coming or there's something else that needs to flow naturally rather than just rambling on.

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Cat Matson: I say speak to your full stops. If you're struggling to take a breath, then you're talking too much, right? So get to a full stop. And then when you get to the full stop, that's it, you don't say anything else. Speak to the full stops.

Amanda Farmer: And it feels so unnatural when you first start because you feel a bit like, you're a TV presenter with sound bites, but that's a great way to communicate.

Cat Matson: It is. We are confronted on a daily basis with so much information, so much information. And if all you're doing is adding to that fire hose of information, then it's going to do what all of the other information does. And it's just going to wash straight past your audience. But if you can speak to those full stops, if you can speak to those outcomes, if you can speak to the lily pads, then you will have taken your listener at least one step closer to where you want them to be. You don't need to get them to the end of the journey in today's conversation. You just need to get them one step closer.

Amanda Farmer: Love it. Cat, how do our listeners find out more about you, about your programs and connect with you so that they can continue along your lily pads?

Cat Matson: Well, the first lily pad would be to download the "How to stop rambling" ebook because that's exactly what I talk about, how to stop rambling. And so you can do that by going to impactfulpresenters.com. That's impactfulpresenters.com. If you're a podcast listener, fair chance that you are because you're listening to this, then you can search for [Speaking with Confidence with Cat Matson](#), because obviously, listening is a fantastic way to get more information. Short snappy episodes where I share all of my tips about how to speak with confidence and with impact.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. I will make sure that there are links to those resources and Cat's website in the show notes for this episode. And I know Cat, you do a lot of work with business owners and with corporates and those who are looking to really hone their skills or the skills of their teams when it comes to speaking and managing a room. So I'm sure there are many professionals out there who would love to check in with you and see how you can help them. So please don't hesitate to get in touch with Cat.

Cat Matson: Thanks, Amanda.

Amanda Farmer: It's been a pleasure having you here on the show Cat Matson. I'll look forward to catching up with you again sometime soon.

Cat Matson: Thank you, Amanda. I've thoroughly enjoyed the conversation and increasing my awareness of the land of a strata manager. It's a job that I have the highest admiration for because I can imagine that you're spending a lot of time in uncomfortable situations. So thank you for having me on.

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 yourstrataproperty.com.au.