

Strata Community Awards for Excellence 2026

Essay Award

Tracey Payne

Changing the Narrative around Strata Management in the Public Eye

On 28 August 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King Jr stood before thousands and uttered four words that would echo through history:

“I have a dream”

My name is Tracey Payne and it's now 2026. My audience may be much smaller, but I'd still like to borrow those famous words.

I have a dream.

I dream of a world where strata management is valued for the profession it is. Every day, dedicated people quietly keep communities functioning, yet our work is too often invisible until something goes wrong.

I dream of a day when our news headlines aren't dominated by stories like “Strata Manager runs off with the trust money” or where our social media feeds aren't overflowing with misinformation, outrage and keyboard warriors who have half read articles, yet somehow become overnight experts.

I dream of a profession where industry veterans pass on more than technical knowledge. Instead they pass on kindness, patience and perspective, showing our future strata leaders that empathy is one of the greatest skills we can possess.

Why aren't we acknowledging that empathy matters just as much as technical expertise?

In a world of instant gratification, where Artificial Intelligence can summarise nearly anything in seconds, it's easy to forget that the best outcomes often come from taking the time to listen and build genuine relationships. We need to slow down, savour the process and remember that it's the relationships we build that make this profession so rewarding.

So, how do we get there?

The reality is, somewhere along the way, we forgot that strata management is, first and foremost, a people business. Sure we look after clients homes, their investments, their "castles", but essentially we're looking after people.

Covid 19 changed the way people communicate, the way people expected service and how they respond when things don't go their way. And to be fair, it changed all of us. Clients became accustomed to immediate responses. Emotions ran high. Patience became a scarce commodity, and somewhere along the way, genuine human connection took a back seat to inboxes, templates and portals.

At some point we have to stop blaming the pandemic and start adapting to the world we've inherited—without abandoning the old-fashioned values that made great service great in the first place. A warm smile. A friendly face. An inviting conversation.

Changing the narrative doesn't start with a new piece of legislation, another software platform or the latest AI tool. Changing the narrative is not Fair Trading's job, nor is it the media's.

It starts with us.

It starts with every phone call,

With every AGM,

With every difficult conversation.

We need to stop being the strata manager who avoids confrontation or won't answer the phone because it's easier to send another email.

We need to stop being defensive every time a client asks a difficult question. Stop being negative and instead look for opportunity to help. Instead, just listen, explain and have the conversation.

We need to remember that every interaction becomes someone else's story about strata management. Those stories are what shape public opinion far better than any media campaign. We need to get back to basics and focus on genuine human interactions that leave people feeling heard, respected and understood.

A few years ago, I managed a building undergoing a \$2 million dollar combustible cladding project and one owner lived alone and, as the special levies mounted, she lost her job, fell into levy arrears and her mental health deteriorated.

I could have focused on the debt. Instead, I focused on the person.

I gave her my mobile number, listened more than I spoke, and helped her navigate realistic payment plans.

It took years, not weeks.

That wasn't because I was a great strata manager.

It was because, for a little while, someone needed compassion more than they needed another reminder notice.

Some of my best outcomes didn't begin with a perfectly drafted email. They began with a five-minute conversation where someone simply felt heard. Because behind every lot number, strata plan or levy notice is a human being. Sometimes that person just wants to be heard.

The public doesn't judge us by our legislation, qualifications or CPD records. They judge us by the stories they hear from neighbours, family and friends. Every owner who hangs up the phone feeling respected becomes an ambassador for our profession. Every owner who feels dismissed becomes another negative story shared over coffee, at work or online.

That's how we change the narrative.

We slow down. We listen before responding.

We take Grandma's advice and ask ourselves "If I were in their shoes (ie the client), would I be happy with this?" and if the answer is no, then do better.

At its heart, strata management has never been about buildings.

It's about people.

And if you genuinely don't enjoy talking to people, solving problems and helping communities work better together, then perhaps the question isn't whether the industry has an image problem...

Perhaps you're simply in the wrong industry.

Maybe my dream isn't as historic as the one spoken at the Lincoln Memorial.

But every meaningful change begins with someone believing things can be better.

Because my dream isn't really about being recognised. It's about being worthy of recognition

So perhaps, one day, when we present an Agency Agreement at an AGM, we won't hear Darryl Kerrigan from *The Castle* mutter, "Tell 'im he's dreamin'."

Instead, he'll lean back in his chair, smile and quietly say...

"Tell 'em they're undercharging."

Because changing the narrative around strata management doesn't begin with the media.

It begins with the stories we create every single day.

And every interaction becomes someone else's story about strata management.

Let's make sure it's a good one.

References:

- King, M. L. Jr. (1963). *I Have a Dream*.
- *The Castle*. (1997). Working Dog Productions.
- Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
- 25+ years of lived experience
- 50+ years of storey telling