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*The CEO Magazine*  
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# CREATING Something Special

Servicing more than 750,000 residential and business customers across the Moreton Bay and Sunshine Coast regions, Unitywater aims to have a positive and sustainable impact on its local communities.

Images by Fullframe

Being proud of your work is a critical component for any happy and fulfilled employee. For senior executives and leaders, motivating and inspiring a team is impossible without passion and pride in the work you do.

CEO of Unitywater George Theo realises the importance of this emotional connection, and says he tries to foster positivity throughout the organisation. “Within the business, we often talk about creating something amazing that we can all be proud of,” George says. “When people retire or leave Unitywater, I want them to be able to look back at their time here and say to themselves that they were part of something special, and that working here is something that they can be proud of.

“We’re spending a lot of time and effort in making sure everyone within the business understands their role, plays their role, and understands our corporate strategic direction and how they

fit into that. At the end of the day, it’s all about making sure our customers get the services they value. That’s very important to us.”

These services are vitally important to the residential and business customers of Moreton Bay and the Sunshine Coast, with Unitywater providing essential water supply and sewerage services to more than 750,000 customers 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with an asset base of \$2.9 billion. There is enough pipe under the ground to travel clockwise from Brisbane hugging the coastline all the way to Darwin.

Established by the Queensland Government in July 2010, Unitywater was a crucial cog in the Queensland Government water reform program. Since its formation, Unitywater has distributed and sold water supplied from the South-East Queensland Water Grid, which was created to secure and efficiently manage South-East Queensland’s water supplies.

Unitywater’s mission is to provide its customers with a high-quality, safe, and reliable water supply and sewerage service that is economically and environmentally sustainable. To lead this vital operation and vision, George was appointed to the role of CEO.

With a wealth of experience and knowledge across the water industry and former senior roles at City West Water, GHD, and Brisbane Water, George says he is passionate about the industry. “I’ve been involved in the water industry for around 27 years.

“A long time ago, I learned that if you want to transform a business and bring about positive and sustainable change and therefore make a difference, you need to be in the role of CEO. I’ve always aspired to make a difference in the business that I work in and to seize opportunities as they have presented themselves over the years. I’ve been very fortunate to have worked in a range of roles over that period. Prior to my appointment as CEO, I was the COO of Unitywater. >





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"Being the CEO, however, is not enough; you need to have a board that is supportive and focused on positive outcomes."

- George Theo

"Being the CEO, however, is not enough; you need to have a board that is supportive and focused on positive outcomes. I consider myself very fortunate to have a chairman who is hands-on and available to discuss matters of concern, and a board that is constantly looking for ways to improve the business. At every board meeting, I learn something new that helps drive further improvements into the business."

To inspire change across Unitywater and the water industry, George states, he led by example. "I'm really big on having adult conversations and making sure that everybody understands what we're trying to achieve in the organisation. I've been able to connect the dots for people and paint a picture of the future."

"Clarity of strategy is critical for me, and making sure that we spend enough time and effort to ensure that all of our people, whether they work in the office or

out in the paddock, understand how they personally add value to the business in what they do and what the organisation is trying to achieve in the long run."

According to George, this clarity of vision and purpose has been a notable point of difference and achievement for Unitywater. "We're very clear on operational excellence and growing non-regulated profits. Everything we do in the organisation and every investment we make has to underpin a lowering of cost. Our customers should be the beneficiaries of the investments we make."

"Over the next few years, our sole focus is on reducing our operational costs. The reason for that is that we're the amalgamation of six other water businesses. Being an amalgamation of six businesses means that there's plenty of opportunity to look at rationalising and streamlining business processes."

We have a strong focus on operational excellence."

In a young business with heavy responsibilities, cohesiveness and clear communication is vital. George says he's utilised the lessons and insights he's learned over his 27 years in the water industry to ensure his management style is inclusive yet decisive. "Over the years, I've learned to become more and more approachable. Anyone in the organisation knows that they can email or ring me with any question and I'm more than happy to answer it."

"I think one of the other things that I put quite a lot of effort into is my CEO roadshows. I do them on a biannual basis and I talk to the entire workplace about the immediate and future challenges within our organisation. I talk to the workforce about what's been done well and remind them about our challenges that we need to be able to deal with. >





“Apart from my biannual roadshows, I send out a monthly email informing all staff of our progress against our plans, and have embedded quarterly leadership forums where we get together with the leaders within the business to discuss the company’s organisational issues and how we position ourselves to deal with those issues.”

One of these major issues is Unitywater’s fight to keep water prices affordable for its customers while providing a fair return to participant councils. “Utility prices are becoming more and more expensive, whether it’s water, electricity, or gas, so one of the things we work very hard at is doing everything within our own power to look at opportunities to keep water prices as low as possible. I am proud of the fact that we have worked very hard to keep our average price rise at a low 1.6

per cent per annum, excluding the price of bulk water, which is outside of our control,” George says.

“Another key success factor has been that we’ve been able to take more than \$100 million out of the capital-works program on an annual basis. In the past 12 months, we’ve been able to take another \$10 million out of our operating costs, a total of \$35 million over the past three years. That’s really important for us because we’re always looking to lower our costs for our customers’ benefit.”

This focus on customers and their needs has held Unitywater in good stead as the company continues to develop its service offering. “The other area of success for us is the fact that we keep reinforcing the message that we are in the services business,” states George.

“Yes, we are a water company, and we employ engineers and technicians, and we manage water and sewerage infrastructure; but we’re not an engineering or construction organisation, even though we employ those skilled people. We are in the services business. That fundamental shift in mindset means that our people focus on the end customer.”

Shaping their employees’ attitude and approach to customer services was a difficult task for Unitywater’s leaders. “We are an amalgamation of six different water businesses with six different cultures, so developing the one team and the Unitywater culture and approach to doing business has been something that has taken up a lot of time and effort over the past three years.

To mould this still-developing culture, George says, he and his team worked on the values and



core strategies of Unitywater. “It started at the grassroots level with us realising that we needed to make some strategic choices. What are we here for? What do we need to do? What do our customers want? What are our customers saying to us? Experience has taught us that we don’t want to be a mediocre business by trying to be everything to everyone. Focus on what is important and what our customers want.

“Making strategic choices was really important in having that clarity of vision and strategy that I spoke about earlier. The strategic choices we made, which were underpinned by our values, are all about doing what we say we’re going to do, being reliable, being innovative in the way we approach things, and looking for opportunities to reduce our costs for our customers by taking inefficient and ineffective processes out of our business practice.” >

## Suncoast Pipelines Contracting Pty. Ltd

Suncoast Pipelines Contracting appreciates the opportunity to recognise Unitywater P/L for its professionalism and management skills. They always demonstrate an easy-to-approach attitude with a commitment for resolution and cooperation. Unitywater is innovative in developing and introducing best practice safety methods within their organisation. Our association over the years has been one of mutual respect, which has resulted in the completion of quality contracts. We look forward to continuing to work with Unitywater on many projects to come.

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## THROUGH COLLABORATION, SUCCESS FLOWS

“Collaboration is the key to our success”, says Unitywater CEO George Theo, and at Serviceworks, we agree 100 per cent!

In 2010, when Unitywater urgently needed help to establish their critical billing and revenue management operations, Serviceworks quickly responded with the necessary expertise and support. Within hours of receiving their request for assistance, Serviceworks was on the ground with a team of experts who worked closely with Unitywater’s people to successfully build and resource their revenue management operations within a few weeks.

Since 1999, Serviceworks has partnered with some of Australia’s leading energy and water utilities, and now provides a full range of outsourced customer management services, consulting, technology and billing solutions, and multi-channel customer services.

Serviceworks is a Computershare company and we leverage much of our parent’s global scale, service expertise and transactional capability to provide clients such as Unitywater with market-leading and cost-effective customer service solutions.

If you’re a CEO like George Theo, you can have confidence that when you have a service delivery challenge, big or small, Serviceworks will work closely with your people to help you deliver an effective solution.

For more detail about the tailored solutions that Serviceworks offers, please call Lindsay Woodland on 03 9862 8651.

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management





These strategies were then communicated to staff at all levels of the organisation. “We embedded the conversation among our workforce and we embarked upon a socialisation, or induction, of our corporate strategy.

“As well as the corporate strategy being developed from top to bottom, we took a fair bit of time and effort to socialise that strategy with our people. We wanted to clearly articulate how everyone in the organisation in the short term is helping to deliver that corporate strategy. We wanted to help everyone in the organisation understand what we were doing in the next 12 months and over the next five years to help achieve that strategic goal.”

According to George, clear and consistent communication is just one component of a successful leader. “I think you need to be very honest. Sometimes, people do not like what they hear, but I have a responsibility to ensure people



“Honesty and integrity are critical. You need to be consistent, and people need to be able to hear a message and understand it effectively.”  
- George Theo

know where they stand and how the business is travelling. Honesty and integrity are critical. You need to be consistent, and people need to be able to hear a message and understand it effectively.

“Leaders who sway from message to message, day to day, just confuse the workplace with conflicting messages. Being consistent in your messaging, being able to connect the dots with people, and showing employees how you’re going to achieve the vision are vitally important.”

George also brings Unitywater’s suppliers and strategic partners into this discussion to ensure they understand the strategies and vision of Unitywater. “One of the things that we’re doing with our suppliers is working with them as early as we possibly can in the process and having what we call pre-market discussions, where we sit down with our suppliers and ask how we can help them reduce their costs in servicing Unitywater.

“Having those very early conversations with the marketplace to see if there’s something that we can do to help the market reduce its costs helps us understand their business and helps them understand ours. We focus on how we can collaborate to ensure that the community gets the lowest-possible cost.

“Working with our suppliers is really critical to us, and we need to be doing more and more of that. We also have a responsibility to create market competition for the services we buy in. In the past three years, we have done an enormous amount of work to have the bulk of our spend under management and to have supply and service contracts in place with a variety of different organisations that help us run our business, from upgrading treatment plants and carrying out daily maintenance on our network, to sending out accounts.”

This firm foundation will support Unitywater as it strives to achieve



its strategic goals and vision in coming years. “Our vision is all about being a leader in the water industry,” George says. “We want to be easy to deal with, and we want our customers and participant councils to be our advocates. We want our customers and the regulators we work with to trust us; and we’ll earn that trust through our actions day by day, week by week, and year by year. That is something that we want to make sure happens as a consequence of our behaviour and actions and the way we interact with our stakeholders.

“Many of us are customers of utilities ourselves, so it’s about

determining how we wish to be treated when we speak to utilities. I think it comes down to our values. Our values are around reliability, safety, honesty and integrity, efficiency, one team, and innovation. For us, it’s about living and breathing our values. In everything that we do, it goes back to our value proposition and examining whether we’re living our values in each interaction. We’re constantly reminding ourselves what we’re here to do.”

With a focus on lowering costs for customers and delivering exceptional service, Unitywater will set new benchmarks in the water industry. •



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