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An Essential Service

With a sustainable and service-oriented approach, Queensland Urban Utilities provides reliable and clean drinking water to more than one million residents across South-East Queensland.

Images courtesy of Queensland Urban Utilities

Queensland Urban Utilities delivers drinking water, recycled water, and sewerage services to 1.3 million residents across South-East Queensland. Formed in July 2010 and owned by Brisbane, Ipswich, Lockyer Valley, Scenic Rim, and Somerset Councils, Queensland Urban Utilities has transformed the way water is managed and delivered across these five local government areas.

The CEO Magazine recently sat down with Queensland Urban Utilities' CEO Louise Dudley to discuss the challenges of running one of the largest water distributor-retailers in Australia.

***The CEO Magazine:* You have been part of Queensland Urban Utilities since its establishment in 2010. How have you helped the organisation grow and develop?**

Louise: I started at Brisbane City Council as executive manager of the Brisbane retail water business. It was during this time that I played a key role in helping to facilitate Australia's largest water sector transition and merger transaction. This resulted in the formation of Queensland Urban

Utilities and I took on the role of CFO.

As CFO, my achievements included establishing the capital structure and funding facilities, as well as successfully lodging the first QCA regulatory submission.

In July 2012, Queensland Urban Utilities' [QUU] previous CEO decided to pursue an opportunity with the state government, so I put myself forward and was selected by the board to assume the role of CEO. During my time as CEO, I have led the organisation to become less reactive and more proactive, refreshed our vision, and introduced strategic pillars to support and reinforce our strategic vision.

How have you shaped and influenced the management and culture of the team at QUU?

One of the most important building blocks for a successful organisation is its culture. The challenge is that culture can't simply be imposed from the top down; it's an organic process that relies on and comes from the whole organisation.

As CEO, creating and encouraging the right organisational culture has

been, and will continue to be, one of the most important tasks for me and my leadership team to address.

I believe that providing clear vision and direction is key—giving people context for what they are doing and why they are doing it. This is something we've focused on during the past 12 months via internal communication channels and face-to-face discussions.

Another important factor in culture enhancement is acknowledging staff for a job well done. We have a number of recognition processes in place that I think reinforce our corporate values and promote a constructive and performance-oriented culture.

What have been your greatest achievements at QUU?

During the past 15 months, I've been proud to lead QUU to realise a number of achievements.

A particular highlight for me was successfully establishing QUU as an entity in 2010 and maintaining continuity of service. It was a \$4.3-billion transaction that merged five water and sewerage businesses into Australia's fourth-largest distributor-retailer. It's not often you get the opportunity to get in at >

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the ground floor and grow with an organisation, so it's been a real privilege.

Another highlight also happened to be the greatest challenge of my career, which was acting as CEO through South-East Queensland's devastating floods in 2011.

With 1.3 million customers, 1,300 staff, and \$4.5 billion worth of assets, we had a lot on the line. On top of that, we had a number of team members dealing with the heartbreak of seeing their homes destroyed, so the situation required a very delicate balance of management.

Thanks to the round-the-clock work of our emergency and crisis-management teams, we succeeded in keeping the taps running in virtually all areas apart from the Lockyer Valley. We coordinated the delivery of more than 14 helicopter loads as well as countless tankers of bottled water to communities in the Lockyer.

Acting as CEO during that time taught me more about myself as a

person and as a leader than I ever could've learned during business-as-usual operations, so I'm thankful for the opportunity.

Finally, I'm really proud of transitioning QUU from its tactical and short-term mindset to one more strategic and long term. One of my greatest achievements has been delivering clarity and alignment of QUU's vision. In March 2013, I travelled throughout our entire service area and hosted 12 CEO roadshows where I engaged with staff to ensure they understood our purpose and vision.

What directorships do you hold?

I'm a director on a few boards, including LG Super and the Water Services Association of Australia, which allows me to learn from other organisations and bring that knowledge back to QUU.

I'm also a board member of Horizon Foundation Inc., a respected not-for-profit organisation with a focus on delivering opportunities for people with disabilities. It recently ranked

in *BRW*'s 50 Best Places to Work, which was a coup for us. I am so proud of this organisation and all it does for the community. To be associated with it is an honour and a very rewarding experience.

How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to ensure the best service for your clients?

With 95 per cent of our capital program delivery outsourced to suppliers, the success of our business heavily relies on our rigorous and competitive supplier-selection process.

Last financial year, our top two vendors accounted for 25 per cent of our \$416 million spend, while our top 50 vendors accounted for 75 per cent of the spend. It's particularly important that our top suppliers have organisational values aligned to our own, especially in relation to delivering quality customer service.

With more than 2,000 vendors, it's important for us to build collaborative relationships with each of them to ensure timely delivery of

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quality goods and services, which is ultimately for the benefit of our customers and the community.

How do you ensure exceptional customer service across the organisation?

When I commenced as CEO, one of my priorities was for QUU to become customer focused in every part of the organisation. During the past 15 months, I'm pleased to say, we've moved closer to realising this goal.

Delivering an exemplary level of customer service comes down to focusing on quality in all that we do, from answering our phones and responding to customer inquiries to upgrading our sewerage network and replacing water mains.

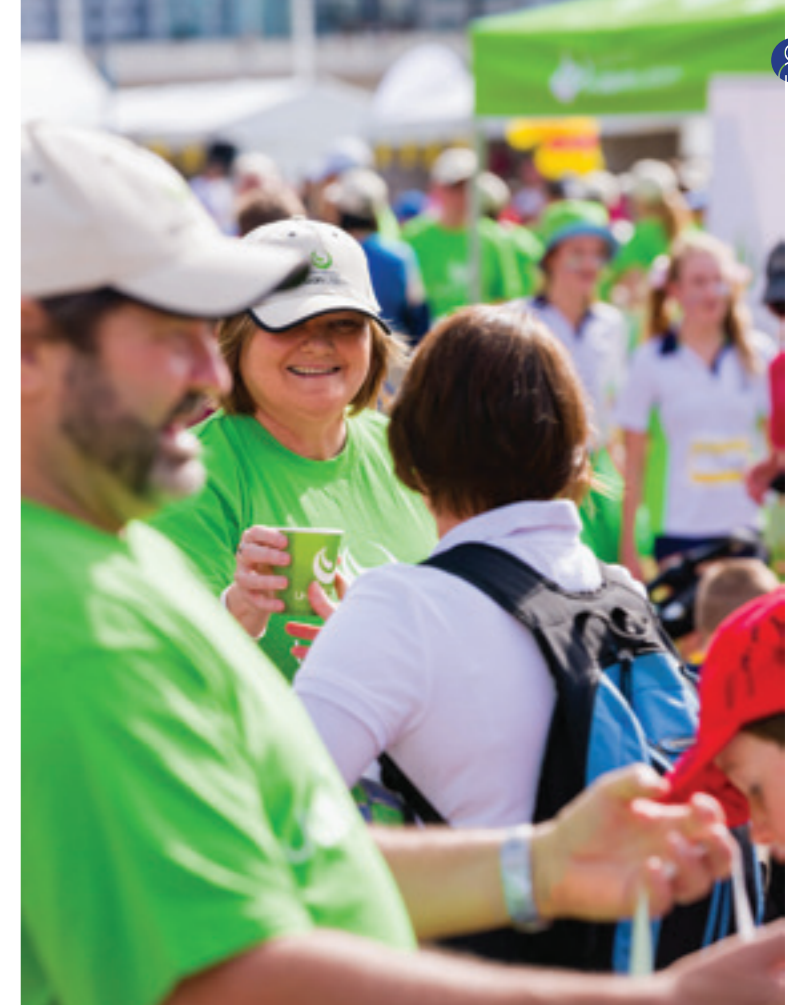
I've challenged my leadership team to embrace quality and embed it into the business, and have extended the same opportunity to staff. In doing so, it's resulted in better outcomes for our customers and the community.

With the floods across Queensland, how have you altered your infrastructure and systems to prepare for future disasters?

During the 2011 floods, more than two-thirds of our sewerage infrastructure assets went under water or were damaged. Our insights from that event helped us to avoid potentially costly damage to our assets during the 2013 flood event.

When we were first warned of the severe weather, we used flood-risk mapping and, in doing so, were able to relocate equipment from 64 sewage pump stations and relocate and install 81 emergency generators before water levels rose.

As an essential service provider, we will continue to improve our risk-assessment capabilities. We constantly monitor threats to the organisation and have a heightened focus on early-warning systems. This financial



year, we expect to spend around \$15.6 million to improve our flood resilience.

How will environmental concerns and issues impact your business in years to come?

We're very mindful of being an active corporate citizen and giving back to the environment, especially in areas in proximity to our capital-works sites.

Since late 2010, we've been in partnership with the Bulimba Creek Catchment Coordinating Committee, which is a not-for-profit landcare group that has helped us to plant almost 10,000 trees to revegetate areas impacted during our works to upgrade the Bulimba Creek Trunk Sewer.

We also recently signed a contract to partner with SEQ Catchments, which is a not-for-profit organisation that supports projects that address land erosion, waterway health, mangrove protection, and weed management.

As a leader, what is your vision for Queensland Urban Utilities?

Our vision is to be recognised for our excellence in water and sewerage services that meet the evolving needs of our customers and enhance our communities. It's important that all staff, myself included, have a united vision for the organisation.

To achieve this vision, the organisation needs to have a constructive culture, making it a great place to work; it needs to be resilient, prepared and able to respond, customer oriented, and able to harness innovation.

When I say we're working towards a 'constructive culture', it means a positive working environment where QUU employees are encouraged and empowered to learn, grow, and develop to their full potential, are supportive of others, encouraged to think for themselves, and recognised for their achievements. ●