



YS UP GOVERNANCE AND BOARDS PODCAST

Episode 28 – Building a Resilient Culture and Award Winning Brand with Theodore Vairaktaris, Usher Group

Transcript

Intro:

Welcome to YS Up Governance and Boards podcast brought to you by 3YS Owls Governance Consultants. Covering hot topics in governance, risk, latest regulatory changes and issues keeping directors and executives awake at night. Here are your hosts Ainslie Cunningham and Deb Anderson.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Welcome to another episode YS UP. Today we're joined by Theodore Vairaktaris. Theodore is the founder and sole owner of the Taris Property Group and The Usher Group. The Usher Group started out as a humble small painting business on the Gold Coast. Almost two decades on, The Usher Group is recognised as one of the construction and trade industries most recognisable businesses. Painting is still at the heart of what The Usher Group does, yet today the company works across nine different service areas, including solid plastering, signage, property maintenance, swinging stage, and mast climber access solutions, electrical, refrigeration, and mechanical landscaping and labour-hire.

Ainslie Cunningham:

With such an expensive collection of services at Usher Group, their strongest belief is that they establish themselves as their client's project partner, reflecting the quality of service that they strive to sustain and deliver. As a family-owned company, Theodore Vairaktaris is most proud of The Usher Group family. Their 500 plus strong team of exceptionally highly skilled individuals, specially selected for their passion, work ethic, and shared commitment to delivering a high standard of work for their clients. The Usher Group has been recognised over years with countless awards for business, training and innovation, and was last year named Gold Coast 2019 supreme winner business of the year at the Gold Coast Business Excellence Awards. Usher Group have also recently won the monthly award for October 2020. Well done, Theo. Welcome

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Cheers. Thanks for having me. Wow. After hearing that, it just gets me a bit emotional. Wow. Yeah, it's really good to sometimes-

Deb Anderson:

An amazing journey.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, tell us a little bit about Theo, and the journey that's taken you to get here.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Okay. The journey, how far back are we going?

Ainslie Cunningham:

Start back at one.

Deb Anderson:

Architecture.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

When I studied architecture and did my one year in a firm. And then found myself not enjoying the day-to-day in an office. And then yeah, went out there and started a business. Yeah, that was pretty cool. But yeah, so going way back I've, like you said, Ainslie, I've got humble beginnings. And I grew up in a housing commission upbringing. So that was the environment I believe that built my passion and purpose in a really young and early age. So, a lot of people talk about entrepreneurship, and how that's developed, and whether you're born with it or whether anyone can have it. I find that there's so many different definitions of it, but I found that it was my environment that actually got me super excited and super passionate to succeed in just anything that I put my mind to.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So yeah, I actually vowed that I was never going to be a painter. My father was a painter, and I used to see him come home from work, being a tradie, and paint on him, and working hard and whatnot. And trying to do the best he could for us, and with mum as well. Working AGC, and she ended up working at Movie World cash office for 10 years. So, I vowed I wasn't going to be a painter, and I went and studied. So, I studied architecture. Didn't really like that environment where I was just working in an office. There was no real platform for me to use any artistic flair, felt like you really had to be the grey-haired army before you could use any artistic flare in an office like that.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, then I deferred to a Bachelor of Business. And I did that for six months. And then I deferred again, and I haven't been back since. So yeah. And then I started the painting business. And yeah, it's been an awesome journey, up, down, sideways, rollercoaster ride. But it's definitely shaped me to the person I am today. I'm so grateful for the journey, and I absolutely love it. I love what I do. I love Usher. I love how we operate in the community. I love how we present ourselves in the construction industry, and it's just really cool.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, tell us a little bit about The Usher Group. Obviously, it's a unique value proposition that wasn't really around pre what you were doing, in terms of sort of a collaborative platform.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. We were painters, and as we were growing through the different industries, the construction, repaint industry, the small sort of light commercialisation shop fit-out industry, we just had a different approach, where we built that brand promise, where it was basically your project partner. I found that during our journey, it's not really that hard to do the right thing, and it's not really that hard to really enjoy what you do. And for me, I really love painting as I was just saying to Deb before, I still paint now. I really love it. And I believe it was the passion and the purpose in me that really helped me deliver an awesome product.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

When someone loves what they do, when they're really passionate about their trade, when they can see that possibly the trade was perceived as, oh, the painters, sort of like chippies, builders, I should've said carpenters, electricians and plumbers. They sort of perceived as really a little bit... I [YS Up - Governance and Boards Podcast Transcript – Episode 28 – Building a Resilient Culture and Award Winning Brand with Theodore Vairaktaris, Usher Group](#)

don't know how to put the right wording. But they look a little bit higher than a painter, and I found that upsetting, so I really sort of embarked on trying to help professionalise our industry as much

as I could, and just starting from the ground up. So just all the little things about teaching our trades and our apprentices coming up through the ranks, of putting my passion and my beliefs and instilling those core values and agreed behaviours into my team, really propelled us, ready for the next stage, which was dealing with people and culture.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, tell us a little bit about the people and culture side of the business. Obviously, it was going really well. And now, with COVID, has that kind of changed the dynamics slightly?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

If we didn't have those core values and agreed behaviours, which pretty much set the base for our culture, we would not have navigated through COVID the way we have. And I'm so proud of the team, and they've all rallying behind our brand, our group, rallying behind our people in Melbourne, that are doing it real tough. I'm super impressed, and I'm so grateful for those people down there. They've just been absolute amazing humans, and what they're dealing with, and how they're keeping positive in this environment. And just the collaboration between all the offices of Usher, and how they're coming together to really grow out of this the right way. But it was the culture.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

And I found that without the right culture, I would not have been able to be a business that employed the right people. Or I should say, possibly, attracted the right people. So, we have lots of fun at Usher, probably a little bit too much. But we're a big beehive of passionate people. Anyone in our business could pretty much take their Usher badge off, and they could go outside of Usher, and they're a weapon in their own right. They're an expert in their own field, in their own right. But together, building those people together and wearing that Usher brand, we're something greater than we can all be individually.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So how it really got us through those times of COVID, was when we got to really fall back. We all couldn't say, "Oh yeah, we've got core values, they're up on the screen, or in the office wall somewhere." And "Yeah, we've got our agreed behaviours, because we want to be ethical and transparent," and all these other really good, positive traits that we should all encourage each other to do and evolve into. But it was those core values and agreed behaviours that really, we got to fall back on in times of adversity. Who are we? What do we agree we're going to do? How are we going to operate in this environment, with our colleagues, our peers, our clients, our customers?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. And it was that base that really propelled us and kept the vibe high and kept everyone watching each other's back. And we've got people there that the department they work in, our customers, well, they're not working either. So, they don't really have a dialogue to talk to their customers. They can call them and go, "How you going? What's happening?" But there's no real work to be engaged in. So, a colleague seeing another colleague like that, and then basically saying, "Hey, I know you don't have much to do, let's repurpose our staff. Let's find other areas of the business where they can work."

Theodore Vairaktaris:

And it wasn't just about, "Oh, look, we're just employing our people, we're not going to get rid of them." It was about still having them motivated, having some job satisfaction. They want to come to work, we want them to enjoy themselves at work. Not wake up in the morning and go, "Oh yeah, I'm going to go there. What am I going to do? I'm going to paper shuffle." It wasn't about that. It was actually making sure our people were still mentally happy and mentally positive. So, it was those core values that really bounded everyone together.

Deb Anderson:

And has your culture been the same since the beginning through to now where you've got 500 plus employees? Or have you had to sort of-

Theodore Vairaktaris:

No, we've definitely had to wing it along the way. And I believe it's forever evolving. What is culture? For me, it's what we agree is the behaviour, and what the group does that build success, and then people want to join those groups. So, if we, as humans, want to be in a group, we adapt to that group. And what's that behaviour mean? And then really guides what your day-to-day looks like. And so, when we do that, we then become part of a unit. And when we do that, I find that we really succeed better. And yeah, so to answer your question, it's always evolving, and we're always learning.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, we find ourselves in this ever-changing market where things will occur, and then we'll have to discuss it, and openly decide how we're going to navigate that. And what's the right way? So I believe transparency's a huge, massive core value of ours because our people having the confidence to be able to say, "Hey, look, there's some spilt milk here," or, "I don't think I handled that correctly," or, "What do you think about this?" Because they're not really liking how we're responding in this manner. If you don't have that core value, we're never really going to evolve our culture and really learn from the day-to-day experiences that we're up against.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So I know we've chatted briefly in the past about the culture that you've kind of built in the office, in terms of where you position people and kind of really helping draw out that cultivated environment, and making sure that people are bouncing the right ideas off people. So how have you positioned that, and how have you gone about that?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Well, I think our focus was more on the wellbeing. We've got core values, agreed behaviours, team building exercises, camps, retreats, whatnot. But I found that when we really harness the power of wellbeing, it really then engages people to want to build on the culture. So-

Ainslie Cunningham:

Dealing with personality types, for instance, different ages, different genders, different extroverts, introverts.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Oh yeah. We're all different.

Ainslie Cunningham:

How do you navigate that?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. That's a really good question. I don't know. Do you know the answer to that one?

Ainslie Cunningham:

No, but I think you guys do it well.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. I think first of all, is understanding who we all are. So, understanding and not being afraid of profiling, going through DiSC profiles, or all the other different types of profiling that are out there. I think we understand it, and then we actually get people, even the introverts will be like, "Hey, we already knew this, but yeah, I'm an introvert." And we've got a couple there, and sometimes I

really love them in the office because there's sometimes like, "Yep, I've had enough of humans for the day. I'm going to go and just get my work done."

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, I can really see what type of people we have, and our people know more about each other. So, when we go through that profiling, and we do it together as a team, and then we have to then talk about what we think each other are as well. So, that breeds so much cool stuff. Because then so many times you have, say an operations department and a sales department conflicting. Do you want to be a person that... I call them the block layers? Are you building a wall between the department, or you're the person that's engaging the other side?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

And by understanding what they do in the business, what type of person they are, then it helps build respect for each other, helps build more comradery, and that you understand what the person does and how they operate. So, then you can really engage with them the right way, and you know how to engage with them. Some people sit at their keyboard and thrash out emails. Some people don't like that at all, and don't respond to them. So, there's all these different types of things. But yeah, I think to answer your question, it would be purely by understanding more about us as individuals, because we're all different, and we're all unique.

Ainslie Cunningham:

And so how do you say help the sales team know what the operations team do? Do you have training days for them? Or do you do job swap?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

We throw them in a room, close the door, and go, "Knock yourself out."

Deb Anderson:

Yeah, job swap.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah, we do encourage the collaborative environment. So even though they might be sales, or operations, or administration, or our cross services. So, we'll encourage them to form little teams within themselves. So, if the sales department's representing one segment of our business, we'll highly encourage them, we'll pretty much throw them in a room and get together. But basically, so whoever's in the sales team and whoever's then delivering what they've sold, we highly encourage that collaborative environment. Because that helps the old story about whether anyone in the business touches a client or customer, they're actually a salesperson.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, we don't really want to just say sales and operations, because every person in that business, whether they're an age receivable person, or age payable. If they're interacting with anyone out there in the community or another business that we're engaging with, we want everyone in our business to breathe our brand promise, which is your project partner. So, that means then we need to have everyone together that's involved in that segment. So, say for scenario's sake, if it's the light commercial division, well, whoever's in that sales department will engage with the operations department, and also the administration department together.

Deb Anderson:

So, I was reading your profile on your website, Theo, and it talked about the nightmare zone. Tell us a little bit about that. Your nightmare zone.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

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Okay. I find that when you're growing a business, and you're highly passionate, and you've got your purpose and you've got your product, but you're wearing all these caps. And as a business owner, you're trying to do everything, and that's where we find a lot of companies, owners, in burnout. And my wife used to call me... I used to leave at dark and get home at dark. And I wasn't coping, and I found myself stagnant because I couldn't grow the business. What I realised was that I needed to attract the right people. I needed to get the right people doing the right jobs.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So that nightmare zone, sometimes I pin it to a turnover value, but it could be one million or five million. It could be any turnover value. It's just at that point where you're in the business and you're doing all the roles. And the only way to step out of that role is actually trusting people. And to do that, you've got to set the right culture up. So, then I embarked for those next, say, five years of my journey into people, culture, and brand. Those three things there built me a really, really strong brand. I needed to have the right culture, which attracted the right people. And we all have systems and processes, but they really just guide our people, they just give our people some rule sets to work within an organisation. It's the culture and the people that really grow the brand. The people represent our brand, and then they fall back on our culture, which is how to deliver that brand story.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, the only way to get out of that nightmare zone, which was really tough for me, because I was nervous about if someone makes a mistake, can I afford it? You need people to go through that learning experience to grow in your organisation. And I didn't know if I could afford anyone to make a mistake. We want to capitalise on opportunity and mitigate risk, but how do you do that without putting trust and empowering people? So that was probably really tough for me. I don't want to say I'm a micromanager, but it was just really tough for me. And yeah, I grew out of that. And I had the right mentors at the time, and I was always bouncing off experts in the field. And I was told a fair few times to get the right people in for the right job. And as soon as I did that, then they grew our business. They helped me grow on my systems and processes. They helped me develop them to an industry standard. They helped me...

Theodore Vairaktaris:

You can go through that whole thing about, oh, you grow a business, and it grows so fast. You got to come back, build the systems and processes for it, because I didn't build them before I grew. We grew and then had to come back a few notches, and then build a solid base. So yeah, the nightmare zone is tough. And I really feel for any young business owners or old business, it doesn't matter what age you are, anyone that's going through that stage in their life right now, reach out, get some help because, yeah, you're not going to get out of it thinking that you're going to do it all yourself.

Deb Anderson:

And it can be quite challenging for family businesses in particular, can't it? Because you've got the family dynamics, you're wanting to grow. So that can be quite challenging in itself.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Yep, Mum was our first office employee when she finished up at Movie World, she came over and worked in our office, and helped me organise myself in my administration. At that time, I was actually living in my factory. I had a factory out at Southport, and my humble beginnings there was I actually slept on a mattress on my half pipe in the factory. And Mum would come into the office, and yeah, it was super cool. I really enjoyed those days, and how they brought me to where I am today.

Deb Anderson:

I think it just puts it in perspective too. When you do work so hard to build something of your own, and you do have to put in that blood, sweat, and tears, it actually does help cement that.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

It definitely gives me a lot of perspective of how grateful I am and live in the moment. We all have up and down days but enjoy them for what they are. We've got a saying that we say at Usher, it's the spilt milk. It's not about... People say, "Oh, you're learning." We call it all experiences. We need those experiences in our work life, in our home life, to make us better at what we do, help us be better versions of ourselves, and have fun while we're doing it. Because we can see through those experiences how that occurred and how it shouldn't happen again.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, you sort of briefly touched on before having mentors. So obviously as a CEO and a founder, it can be a lonely place at the top. How do you stay motivated and energised for your team? And how do you I guess, level up yourself and attract the right people around you to help you do your job, as opposed to the business?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. How do I motivate myself? I find that I'm just a really highly motivated person. I think it just comes back to like loving what you do. I really do love what we do, and I love The Usher Group. And coming home to my two amazing children, and my wife. I've really got a lot of gratitude, and I find that I'm a really highly energetic person. But it's managing that energy too, because there's lots of people that drain it, there's lots of people that expect me to give them that added energy. When I come to the office, sometimes they want to see me because whatever they're going through at home or whatever, and they want to feed off my energy. So, I typically always want to try and ensure that I'm managing my energy correctly. And knowing that I'm ready to serve my people and give them the energy that's required.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

And in the same sentence, I don't want to deplete myself because then I'm not helping my people, and I'm not doing the right thing, and I'm not fulfilling my role at Usher if I'm depleting myself. With what you were saying there about leadership, I just read this book by Peter Cox, and we've just engaged him. He's heard me say this, it's the first chapter is Being Led. I felt that term was a little bit odd for me, because I'm a bloke, and in the construction industry, and very passionate, and whatever you want to call it, entrepreneurial. And I'm out there charging away. But I read the chapter, and I had to contact him straight after it. I was like, "Wow, I've realised that I've actually been led my whole life." Whether that's at work, in my sports that I love, whether it's my home life, whether it's growing my children. Being led, I used to call it being mentored, or having mentors, or having experts that helped me with whatever challenging task I was facing at that time, whether in my career or anything that I'm up against.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

But the fact is, is that we are all led. We all lean on our friends, our family, we lean on experts out there in the industry, we lean on professional people to help us and guide us. And I feel, like you said, that showing that to our people and having our people understand to look for external people outside of Usher for mentorship, look for someone that you can collaborate with that's going through something that they're going through, that's possibly out there in the industry, that's in a different organisation, however, going through the same struggles or tasks that we're going through. And so now, like I was saying, we've just engaged a new leadership program, so we want to bring our whole executive leadership team up to that next level. So, we all can't grow unless everyone's growing together.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, it's a new platform, I'm really excited about it and I'm going to undertake it as well. And I believe that we never stop learning. So when you encourage that type of culture, I believe it uplifts our people, because they know that they're in an environment that they're going to grow, an environment that they're going to constantly learn and be challenged, and an environment where they get to actually have a voice too, because through any type of leadership platform we're actually going to have feedback. It's a complete feedback loop. We're going to see what they're

struggling with, we're going to understand what they're actually going through. So, I'm super excited about it. And I 100% encourage all businesses to, it's investing in your team.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

During that COVID, our last executive team meeting was when I announced that we're going to heavily invest in our people, because I want to come out of this the right way, and I want to... So, we put it forward, and obviously it got approved because it was such an amazing platform to be embarking on. But I felt like it's exactly the right thing to do, which is really going to propel Usher to where... In line with our strategic plan. Pre-COVID, we had a strategic growth plan. We tried to stay true to it during COVID, but now we need to come out of there ready to rock and roll.

Deb Anderson:

So, you've got a foundation Usher Love.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. Yeah.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Tell us a little bit about that.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, we've been supporting community initiatives, and little sporting teams, and sponsoring people, and helping charities, whether it's through services, and community-based volunteer platforms, like the Marine Rescue Service. All these different types of platforms and people that we support and charities. But we found it got so crazy over the years, that no one actually knew what we did, I mean internally. Our own staff didn't even know the level of support that we actually do out there in the community, and all the charities that we actually support.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, we had to, not rein it in, but we had to rein it in into one platform, so then that's why we created Usher Love. So now we can actually clearly see and report on what we actually do out there, and report back to our own people. And we typically don't go out there and wave the big flag out there to the world. However, I think it's really important for our people and our culture, that our team knows the level of support that what The Usher Group actually does. And it's grown so much now, we actually invest a lot of money into the Usher Love platform.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

I can't tell you yet, but there's a couple really cool initiatives that are about to be launched, and we're super excited about it. And one of the really cool platforms that we have that was born through The Usher Love platform is called Usher Care. And it's based off 12 pillars. October's pillar is the month of kindness. So, we have a person that comes out there and presents each new pillar to the Usher team. So, we have a family barbecue, and represent the new pillar. And what that means and what that emotion or what that pillar does do for humans when we're doing that act of kindness to someone, and what it would cure. We're all going through different things in life. The construction industry has one of the highest tolls of many different things, like mental illness, and lots of different things out there that are really impacting the industry in a negative way. So those 12 pillars have been such a huge thing in Usher that I'm so proud of.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

And now, think about it today, all of October had, potentially, however many staff out there doing random acts of kindness. And the challenge was that we wanted them to do a random act of kindness, one per day, if they could, to someone that they didn't know. So we have this little nucleus here at Usher, and we're really proud of that. We have been having nominations from our team, and basically we don't know who's going to win it because there's all these amazing nominations of people dobbing in their colleagues, of everyone watching each other doing these random acts of kindness out there in the community. So, it's super cool.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

And we're about to launch something as well, that I'm a part of, that we're going to try and launch these 12 pillars on a global stage. So, look out for that. That's something that I'm super excited about. Yeah. I think it's been so huge that. And what it does for our culture is amazing. Our people all rally behind the Usher Love platform and are always putting their hand up about something they've heard out there in the community, that we could possibly help with, or a small charity that's struggling. So that doesn't mean just going and give them donations. It's actually helping them create awareness, and helping them be activated with the construction industry, which is then propelling them to where they need to be.

Deb Anderson:

There has been quite a bit of research in terms of people that do random acts of kindness and the dopamine hits that they get. They get so much pleasure out of just giving.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

Yeah. And seriously, you don't know what it does to someone. That random act of kindness might have given someone confidence to then talk to someone, because someone actually came out of their way and gave them an act of kindness. They might have been an introvert, that struggled with confrontation. There are all these different things out there that.. Love, happiness, kindness, gratitude. When you show these acts in physical form, what it actually does to a human it's... like you're saying, there's chemical research that proves that those type of random acts actually help people inside. And we won't actually truly know what it's actually helped them with, but you will see that they would have dealt with something inside, and it's an amazing thing.

Deb Anderson:

And hopefully they pay it forward to someone else.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

100%. That's what we encourage. Yeah.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, I think that's about all we have time for today, Theo. But before we wrap up, is there a top three things that you would share with other businesses out there to help them if they're stuck in a rut or anything like that at the moment? What's the top three things that you would tell them to focus on right now to push forward?

Theodore Vairaktaris:

I think if they're stuck in a rut, I think coming back to those just basic levels and understanding what's your purpose. I believe if you got your purpose clear, and you find your passion in that purpose, then you're going to deliver an awesome product. Those three things there for me was really, really clear in my journey that I was highly passionate, and I had a purpose, which helped me deliver an awesome product. And then the next three was obviously people, culture and brand.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

So, I think once your purpose is clear and you understand truly what you're focusing on, and you're really clear about that, then you can really find your... It really ignites you again. Sometimes we get a bit grey. We find ourselves in a, "What am I really doing? What's my real purpose? What am I selling?" Or, "What's my service?" Or, "What problem am I solving?" I think we got to be really clear about what's my goal here, what's my aim? I think if we can find and really define that, then we can be really clear with our people. We can be really clear about our strategic direction, and then we can really be clear about what results we want to achieve. So sometimes it's just coming back to those core basics. Yeah. Purpose and passion.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Fantastic. Thank you very much.

Theodore Vairaktaris:

No worries. Cheers.

Outro:

That's all for today. Until next time, happy podcasting. And remember if you're enjoying the show, check out our other episodes and all things governance at www.3ysowls.com.au.