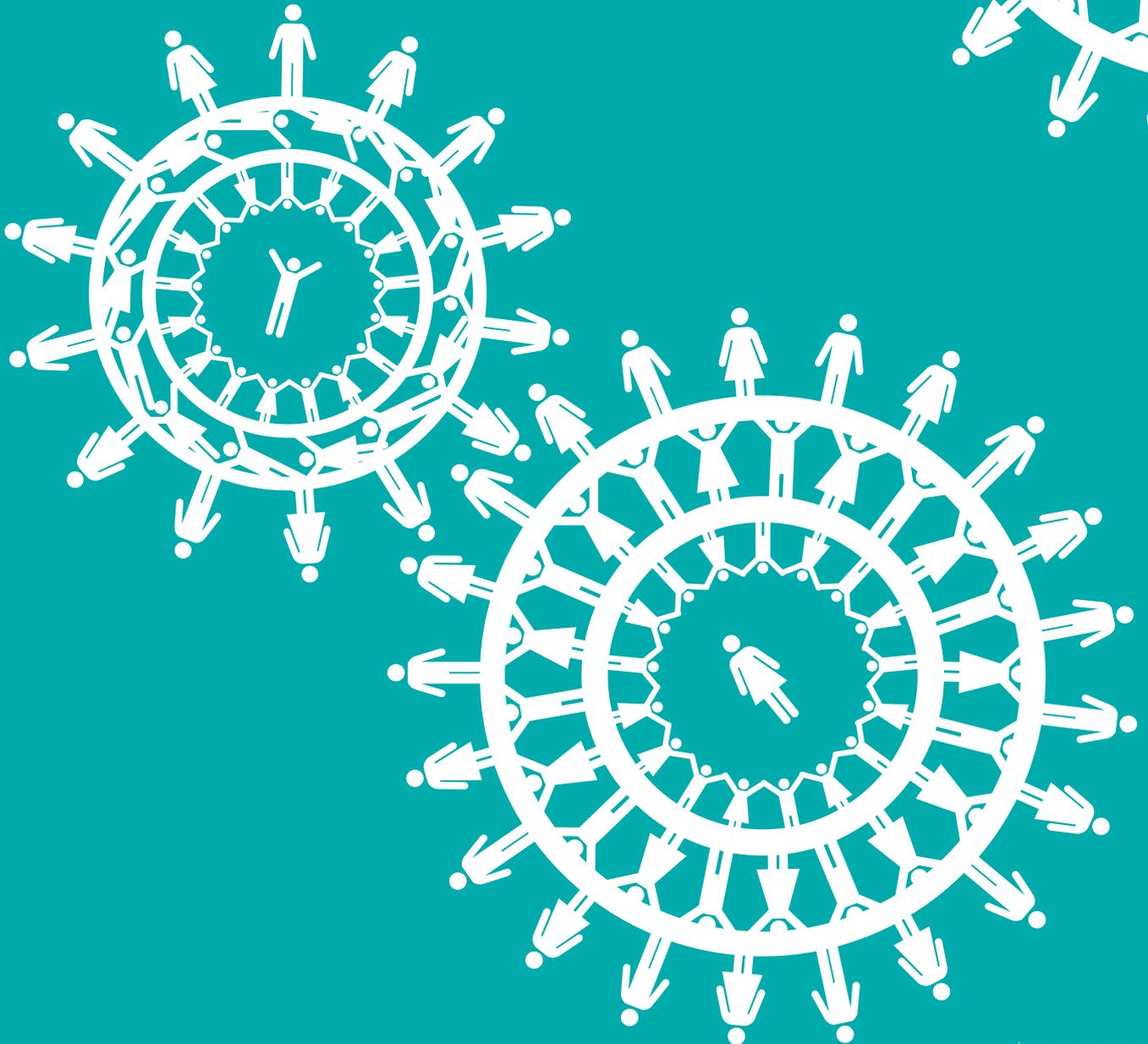


PLAYING NICELY

DO YOU TOUGH IT OUT OR DO YOU
TAKE THEM ON? **JACKIE CAMERON**
GETS EXPERT ADVICE ON DEALING
WITH DIFFICULT COLLEAGUES



You thought that you had left behind the playground bully years ago, but here he is again, in the boardroom. He is digging right into your most vulnerable spots and holding them up for others to examine. Respond the wrong way and you'll sound defensive, as if he's got a point. So you stew. Maybe you plot your revenge. Either way, you know you've got to play this one just right, because there's a lot at stake – not least of all your dignity and general happiness at work.

If you sometimes feel you are waging a lonely battle, take heart: you're not alone. Executive coaching experts and labour lawyers cite interpersonal conflict as an issue they commonly encounter in South Africa's corporate echelons. Workplace tensions range from all-out war between an organisation's most powerful players – a situation that inevitably ends in costly court wrangles – to persistent personality clashes that keep dark clouds of gloom hanging over the entire office. As the Swahili proverb goes: 'When elephants fight, the grass suffers'.

Tackling problems head-on as early as possible is the best approach

DEGREES OF DIFFICULTY

Ilene Power, a Cape Town-based advocate who specialises in labour issues, says there are many categories of 'difficult colleague'. They range from the person who simply doesn't get along socially with others or who has unpleasant habits, to individuals behaving strangely to cover up incompetence or illicit deeds. Greed and ambition are in evidence, too: there are those who are ruthless in their race to reach the top, as well as those who feel compelled to protect their turf.

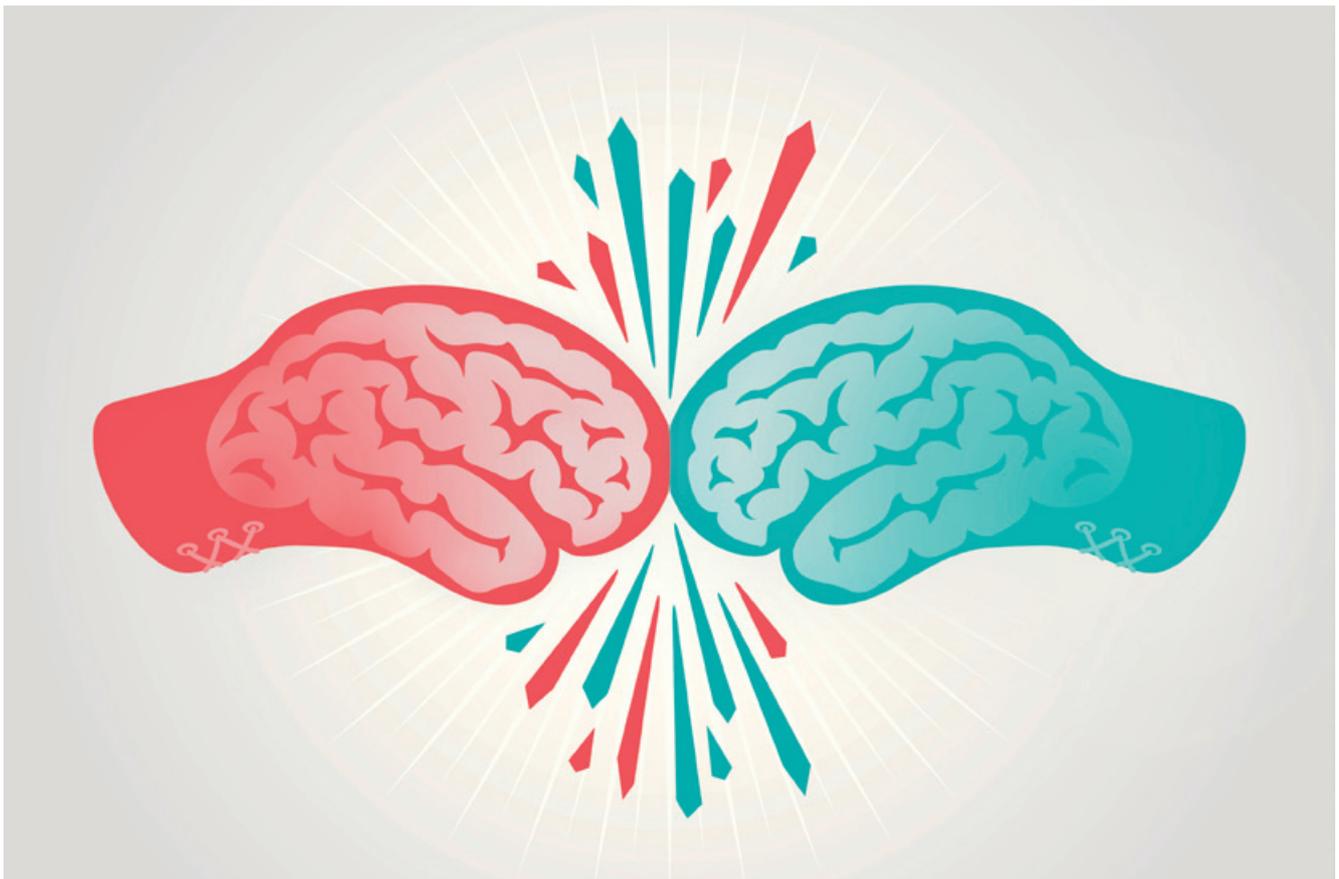
And 'there is always power play. There tend to be groups of people who get on and are part of an inner circle, and others who are not so "in". The person with less power is usually picked on,' says Power.

She says outside experts are usually called in when issues have been festering. 'In my experience, a problem person has

probably been a problem for quite some time. Typically, they are not consistent in terms of their behaviour; they've become aggressive or irrational.'

Says Michael Bagraim, of labour-law specialists Bagraims Attorneys in Cape Town, 'When we start investigating, we often find people have other issues, and the workplace acts as a catalyst.' Alcohol and drug addiction tend to be common denominators among those individuals pinpointed as being difficult colleagues, he says. These underlying problems often account for volatile, erratic behaviour and can be traced as the causes behind theft, absenteeism, inefficiency and fraud.

Allegations of substance abuse can be difficult to prove. However, if an employee admits to having a problem, the company is obliged to give them the opportunity to get clean (for example, by joining a ▶



rehabilitation programme). But 'a lot of people are recidivists. If they don't stick to their side of the bargain, they can be dismissed,' says Bagraim.

FOUL PLAY

The flip side of this scenario is that people may at times be branded as 'problematic' to get them out of the way. For example, during a merger, hostilities can escalate as deckchairs are shuffled to extract more from income statements and balance sheets. There will be more people than top positions and the difficult person is, in reality, only difficult because they are standing in the way of someone else keeping their job.

Power cites the recent example of a financial director who refused to accept a retrenchment package in a situation where there were three financial directors and only one job. He then found himself thrust into the midst of a forensic investigation during which everything was scrutinised, from his time-keeping to the minutiae of his payment-processing systems.

When working relationships sour, at senior-management level there is often the desire for one person to walk away without an argument. 'It is like a divorce: suddenly one person doesn't want to be in the relationship and wants an amicable resolution. But in life that doesn't usually happen and it is inevitable that the one who is asked to leave will feel rejected,' says Power.

Often, the person being targeted is best advised to simply leave, she reckons. It may seem unfair, but if they don't do so, chances are that they have a stressful road

ahead of them and relationships will only worsen. And lawyers can easily find excuses in the realm of the interpersonal to fire someone. It isn't that hard to get rid of an employee – there are always grounds for dismissal.

BEHAVING BADLY

The general rule at work (as in the rest of life) is to be as courteous as possible and to adhere to social norms. Although you can't be sacked for being unlikeable, you can be if you are incompatible with the organisation. As Power points out, many contracts include the stipulation that an employee must be able to build a rapport with clients and colleagues. Bagraim notes that there is also usually a probationary clause aimed at weeding out problematic individuals. 'It is always important to see if people fit in. If someone is making everyone around them feel uncomfortable, then they can be pushed out.'

The workplace context is also always a factor, says Bagraim. He has seen the situation where someone's uncontrollable burping – unintentional, but unpleasant for other staff and customers – lost them their job, while another person who swore aggressively at colleagues kept theirs. The belcher worked for a retail organisation; the foul-mouthed individual was employed by a security company.

'You can't expect a mechanic to say, 'Gosh, that was sore! Please don't do it again' after a car has been dropped on his toe, but you would expect only polite language in a church organisation,' Bagraim explains.

No wonder clashes occur. 'Employers don't put in enough effort to get to know new employees. It is amazing how little they know: they can't tell you if someone is married, what their interests are. There is a complete lack of trying to understand the person,' Power says.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

Power's advice is for organisations to establish a mediation mechanism as a system of resolving conflicts between individuals. Bringing in external consultants can also help, because they provide a neutral perspective and can highlight incorrect assumptions being made by those who are at war. Before it gets to this, though, she says it is important to stop ignoring the relatively small clashes, as they can suddenly escalate.

Michal Leon, executive and leadership coach at TML Coaching & Consulting and vice-president of Comensa (Coaches and Mentors of South Africa), agrees tackling problems head-on as early as possible is the best approach. 'A desensitisation happens when you see the conflict so often. You get used to it and then you don't deal with it, even though it affects others in the organisation,' she notes.

Some coaching experts believe there are three stages in any conflict, with a successful outcome most likely during the first, because the individuals involved are still empathetic at this point. 'It's more difficult to bring back people from stage two, when they don't care about the other person anymore,' says Leon. The third and final stage is when the individuals involved have moved to a point where they act to protect themselves at all costs and have lost sight of the other person as well as the initial problem.

Of course, not all disagreements are bad for business. 'We need to debate issues. We often define "conflict" as what happens when our self-worth is under attack. If we understand what threatens our self-worth, what the triggers are for conflict, we can handle ourselves much better in these situations,' says Leon.

Adds Lee Griessel, CEO of executive coaching agency Vyanzo Development in Johannesburg, 'People inherently want to feel valued, respected, and appreciated. Effective leaders acknowledge this, are aware of their own behaviour and realise that their task is to support people and make them feel important.' ■

