

How to deal with toxic colleagues and finding your tribe

By  Juanita Pienaar

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Anelde Greeff, one of the directors of SheSays Cape Town welcomed the audience with a quote by Madeleine Albright, who once said, *"There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."*



Palesa Kgasane, former editor, *Between10and5*; Robyn Campbell, managing director at HelloFCB+; Emma King, founder and MD at The Friday Street Club; Lani Carstens, group managing and executive director at John Brown Media; Kay Orlandi, strategic partner at 3Verse and Anelde Greeff, one of the directors of SheSays Cape Town. Image credit: [SheSays](#).

Why do women drag other women down? How can we make it stop? How do you find your best-ever work wife (or husband)? SheSays Cape Town invited a panel of women to unpack the 'the pink elephant' in the room, moderated by Greeff on Thursday, 23 May.

The panel included: Kay Orlandi, strategic partner at 3Verse; Lani Carstens, group managing and executive director at John Brown Media; Emma King, founder and MD at The Friday Street Club; Robyn Campbell, MD at HelloFCB+; and Palesa Kgasane, former editor at *Between10and5*.

Carstens said that one of the things she has learnt over the years was that **you can't change people's behaviour, you can only work on your own**. She said bringing a lot of self-awareness into your life, understanding what your moral compass is, how that guides you and finding your value and your values is really the only way to do it.

She referenced Don Miguel Ruiz's book, *The Four Agreements*, which are:

- Be impeccable with your word
- Don't make assumptions
- Don't take anything for granted
- Always do your best

Carstens says the first is the most important one for her; speak your truth, don't promise people things that you know you can't deliver.

Toxic experiences

King opened up and told us about a toxic woman she worked with when she was about a few years into her career. She tried everything but eventually realised she couldn't change the situation and left the job after six months. She changed from being strong and confident to someone who believed they were rubbish at their job, and she vowed she would never put herself in such a situation again.



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Orlandi said her incident with a toxic person happened about 10 years ago and it went on to affect her for another 10 years. "I was at this very vulnerable point in my life where I had just had my first child and I was back at work and trying to navigate my way through balancing being a mom and my career. And then completely out of the blue, this woman just took me out."

Orlandi said, "What I wish I had done, was to be brave enough to stand up in that moment and say, 'You have no right to talk to me like this because you don't know me, you know nothing about my life.'"

Kgasane added that for her it was tough being a young, black woman, living in a capitalistic, patriarchal world where it was always certain people who were downtrodden.

"I wish I had told myself that you don't get brownie points for staying in a toxic environment, and the longer you stay, the more of yourself you lose. And in any situation, you just need to know that you are capable and you should be there as much as any other person. Don't stick around if you don't feel like you're growing and when you feel downtrodden."



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When is it time to leave?

Greeff agreed and asked the panel when the situation is too toxic and when you should leave. Carstens said that she thinks it's when you find that you're losing too much of yourself, when you don't trust yourself anymore and when you don't trust your judgement. Also when you lose all your self-esteem, because "in order for us to progress in our careers, we need confidence and self-confidence".

Campbell said that we should also always bear in mind that you need to hold your leaders or your managers to account as well. She recommends when toxic behaviour comes out - because people start fighting dirty - you need to keep your side

clean and hold your manager to account.



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6 Apr 2016



"Be clear about what you expect from them, and if your manager fails you, then consider leaving but don't leave without having a conversation, because often no one knows because what's being seen from the top down is great."

Queen bee behaviour

Greeff said much has been written about queen bee behaviour, where women feel that there isn't place for other women at the top. She referred to a [Gallup study](#) that found that both genders prefer a male manager and women more so than men. She asked the panel to elaborate on how we can change these conditions so that women support each other instead of wishing the other woman wasn't there.



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King answered and said one of the things she reckons we should be and we should encourage is allowing women to be women because often women tend to become caricatures of who they think they need to be when they are placed in a senior role. For example, they start acting like a man in the boardroom.

“ *Women can be whatever they want to be and having a strong EQ is an incredible leadership skill.* ”



'Queen Bee syndrome' and how it hampers other women's careers

10 May 2016



Kgasane said that it becomes a competition. "We all need to realise that there is space for all of us to shine. I think we don't speak up enough in terms of wanting to be recognised." She said that the only way we can make things better is to make space for one another.

Mean men

Greeff asked, "But what about the mean men at work? How do we cope with that?"

Orlandi answered and said, "Toxic is toxic!" She said that the behaviour is the same. "Everything that we've been talking about is true, regardless of the gender, and it's important that you recognise the behaviour for what it is and not write it off as acceptable because it's a man or write it off to the fact that she's just a bitch."

Carstens said that the most important thing to realise when you're dealing with a mean toxic man is to find your voice and call them out on it.

Campbell agreed and said the quickest way to take the power back is to actually tell men how they are making you feel. "They have to acknowledge it. Men don't interact with other men like that, so it's quite jarring most of the time for them and a

very good way just to nip that in the bud and to reprogramme them slightly in terms of how they interact with you."

Being too nice

Greeff switched it up and said, "But what about the opposite of mean; being too nice? How's that not good for your career?"

Carstens said we must be careful not to confuse nice with kind and fair. "Usually when women are being too nice in an environment, it manifests in being too complacent, not speaking up, and you run the risk of people walking all over you, and that's really dangerous."

She advised that you should find something in the organisation that you're really passionate about and that you have agency over and then talk about it. Because you'll talk from the heart and you'll talk with passion and then you'll start finding your voice."

King agreed and said you can be a strong leader and you can be a successful person, but you can be very kind.

“ *Kindness and empathy is something that makes a particularly good leader and it's something that we can always have more of.* ”



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Campbell said consistency, particularly around empathy, is important. "You can't be empathetic just with some of the people you are friends with. It doesn't matter where you are in your career, because empathy drives respect of your colleagues, of your seniors, of your juniors."

Orlandi said women should stop saying "I'm sorry," before they start talking in meetings. Apologising for yourself about something that you're about to say that can potentially add value or land killer insight is wrong.

“ *Be conscious and pay attention to what you are saying and how you say it and how you present yourself to the world.* ”

Finding your tribe
Kgasane said her work wives are outside of work but also in the same industry as her. "We bonded over the fact that we were being oppressed. We came together with the same frustration and it was refreshing to not have to pretend and to not have to filter yourself." She said that the support system really makes a difference and having 'that someone' in the office that you trust.

Carstens agreed and said that having someone that has your back and that you can scream and shout and vent with, knowing it's a safe space and that you're not going to be judged, is important.



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Campbell said that work wives and work husbands are so important because "every now and again you vent and they need to know that it is just you venting. But they also need to be that person that can call you out on your bullshit". She said that way you can realign yourself and take their advice and go forward and completely reassess the situation.

Some powerful words of wisdom. You can view future #SheSays events [here](#). Entry is free but space is limited, so RSVP to secure your spot.

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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