



## Another Brick in the Wall

By Stuart White  
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It's been a crazy week and yes, it must have been a long time in politics. I think we are all a little gobsmacked at how the civil service strike has turned quite so uncivil so quickly, with no obvious resolve in sight. Even more surprising is the student involvement in it all, resulting in the Minister of Education closing schools nationwide and private schools responding the same way for fear of violence and disruption. As one newspaper reported during the week, the effects of the strike are being felt in almost every household with the education system now frozen and children aimlessly roaming the streets.

Any parent knows that when children are not kept busy trouble follows, a classic example of the saying "the devil makes work for idle hands". As I left the office the other day, a cavalcade of vehicles with riot police came screeching past on its way to Ramotswa – I never thought I'd see that day in Botswana. It reminded me of being a primary school student in South Africa in the 1970s on the periphery of the fallout from the Soweto riots, when hundreds of black students took to the streets to protest against the government's decree to use Afrikaans as a part-language of instruction. This of course was only the trigger, and historians can cite heaps of different reasons for why the Soweto riots happened – but they all come down to a central theme of dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

In the mid 80s, working as a young HR trainee, I witnessed businesses grudgingly welcoming into the workplace a workforce who were unashamedly products of their generation and time. Young, gifted and black, these 20-something Soweto riots "veterans" were intent, not so much on adding value to the bottom line or increasing the productivity of the organisation, but on righting civil and social wrongs, pursuing fairness - in essence - striking a blow at the system from within. Stay-aways, strikes, go-slows, you name it - industrial sabotage from the inside in every conceivable form was invented and enacted during that era.

The result for industries and even the country was a period of economic disaster, disinvestment, financial losses, chaos and confusion. In hindsight, our failure as HR Practitioners was not to adequately read the signs of the times. The emerging workforces were the same people who had fought the security police in the streets of Soweto with sticks and stones to protest the introduction of Afrikaans into their education system. They were the angry young men and women of their day and, sensing the winds of change blowing through the country, they built turbines of anarchy and injustice to harness the power of the storm. So a generation was formed that refused unilateral decision making, fought against exclusion and injustice, and outwardly prepared to do battle for what they believed. What we didn't anticipate was that they would be bringing it all to work, and even when confronted by it, we were still naive enough to believe that we could keep it at bay or at least in check.

So what parallels can we draw with what's happening today and how it might play out in our future workplace culture? Well for a start, long gone are the days when the "it takes a village to raise a child" concept has relevance and can be applied. The youth of Botswana today are clearly not as blindly accepting of instruction from above as has been the case in the past. A decade or two ago a parent or teacher would have been able to promptly take control of the situation just by a disapproving look or harsh word, such was the respect accorded to parents and authority.

Just as the students are demanding their quality education, now they will demand workplace rights in the future too, and that includes being listened to by their boss. Each generation is a product of its time, each more assertive than their parents and this is a time when impatience has become the virtue.

Student protests are not unique to Botswana; they are a natural progression in the ebb and flow of life. As they become more educated, they become more empowered and more ready to challenge the status quo. One could pinpoint a number of reasons for these characteristics; the environment that they have grown up in and experienced, social networking, and the mass media exposing them to other cultural ideas and behaviours. Whilst this could be an interesting topic for rhetorical debate, the bottom line is they are the reality that employers are facing. Within the next few years Generation 'Y'-ers will be the biggest population group in the workplace and it's only to be expected that these new job entrants are the most 'want it all and want it now' batch of employees by far.

This week the first salvo in an un-winnable war has been fired – the employment times they are a changin' and as employers you'd just better get used to it. It's the age-old paradox of when an irresistible force meets an immovable object – something's gotta give and by sheer force of numbers, it's probably going to be you.

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