HAVE YOU EVER MET A PSYCHOPATH? THE ANATOMY OF THE CORPORATE PSYCHOPATH

by Adrian Furnham

When we think of psychopaths, we think of blood-thirsty crazed killers who spend their lives in chains at maximum security prisons after getting caught. But there is another type of psychopath, the type that makes waves in business and careers and is often very successful. Here is how to recognise and deal with them.

Did you bump into a psychopath today? Ever met one? How would you know? Does the image of the killer and the shower scene in the Hitchcock movie "Psycho" come to mind? Are there more in prison or the City of London?

The concept is bandied about a lot, but there is a fascinating research history that can inform and warn those who come into contact with the psychopath at work.

A theme has been developing in academic literature. It is that psychopathy at work is a double-edged sword, in the sense that it can predispose to both positive and negative outcomes. The idea that a psychopath could be (highly) successful in business settings is based on the spectrum concept that suggests that a person can have various *degrees of psychopathy*. Thus, someone could have a mild expression of psychopathy in the form of a subclinical manifestation where certain behaviours like fearlessness, self-confidence and charm can be very useful. Some of the ideas coming out of this literature are that psychopathic traits seem over-represented in certain groups such as senior business people. Also, in business, psychopathic traits are associated with a lack of integrity, aggression, and counter-productive behaviours.

BACKGROUND

In his famous book *The Mask of Insanity*, Cleckley (1941) first set out 10 criteria of the psychopath: superficial charm and intelligence; absence of anxiety in stressful

situations; insincerity and lack of truthfulness; lack of remorse and shame; inability to experience love or genuine emotion; unreliability and irresponsibility; impulsivity and disregard for socially acceptable behaviour; clear-headedness with an absence of delusions or irrational thinking; inability to profit from experience; and lack of insight. Cleckley classed the slick but callous business person, the smooth-talking and manipulative lawyer, and the arrogant and deceptive politicians as psychopaths.

Cleckley identified 16 personality traits that, through his work with such individuals, he believed captured the essence of the psychopathic personality. They included: Superficial charm and high "intelligence"; Lack of remorse or shame; Poor judgement and failure to learn by experience; Pathologic egocentricity and incapacity for love; and Failure to follow any life plan.

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Cleckley believed that most psychopaths are not violent. While he acknowledged that a substantial proportion of incarcerated individuals exhibit psychopathic traits, he asserted that the majority of psychopaths are not incarcerated. According to Cleckley, the psychopath:

"Is not likely to commit major crimes that result in long prison terms. He is also distinguished by his ability to escape ordinary legal punishments and restraints. Though he regularly makes trouble for society, as well as for himself, and frequently is handled by the police, his characteristic behaviour does not usually include committing felonies which would bring about permanent or adequate restrictions of his activities. He is often arrested, perhaps one hundred times or more. But he nearly always regains his freedom and returns to his old patterns of maladjustment." (p. 19)

More recently, it has been suggested that three themes seem to characterise all psychopaths: *Disinhibition*: problems with impulse control leading to irresponsibility, unreliability and untrustworthiness; *Boldness*: fearless, tolerant of ambiguity, able to deal with stress and become dominant; *Meanness*: emotionally detached, defiant, competitive and rebellious (Smith and Lilienfeld, 2013).

CORPORATE PSYCHOPATHS

Over the last 25 years, psychologists and psychiatrists have identified what have been called corporate psychopaths, white-collar psychopaths or *successful psychopaths*. They also go under various names such as "corporate destroyers" or "snakes in suits".

Hare (1999), in an early chapter on white-collar psychopaths, noted how many were "trust-mongers" who, through charm and gall, obtained, then very callously betrayed, the trust of others. He noted how they make excellent imposters and how they frequently target the vulnerable. They target and exploit people's gullibility, naivety, and Rousseauian view of the goodness of man. Cold-hearted, selfish, manipulators of all others, he called them *subcriminal psychopaths* who can thrive as academics, cult leaders, doctors, police officers and writers. They violate rules,

conventions and ethical standards, always just crossing legal boundaries. He also noted that there is no shortage of opportunities for psychopaths who think big. It's lucrative. "They are fast-talking, charming, self-assured, at ease in social situations, cool under pressure, unfazed by the possibility of being found out, and totally ruthless" (p. 121).

In another early and important study, Babiak (1995) found five characteristics of the corporate psychopath: each a) began by building a ***network of one-to-one relationships*** with powerful and useful individuals, b) ***avoided virtually all group meetings*** where maintaining multiple facades may have been too difficult, c) ***created conflicts*** which kept co-workers from sharing information about him. d) ***co-workers who were no longer useful were abandoned*** and e) ***detractors were neutralised*** by systematically raising doubts about their competence and loyalty.

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In a now-celebrated book on this topic, Babiak and Hare (2006) noted that psychopaths are indeed attracted to today's business climate. The successful, corporate psychopath is characterised by the following:

1. Comes across as smooth, polished, and charming.
2. Turns most conversations around to a discussion of him or herself.
3. Discredits and puts down others in order to build up own image and reputation.
4. Lies to co-workers, customers, or business associates with a straight face.
5. Considers people he or she has outsmarted or manipulated to be dumb or stupid.
6. Opportunistic, hates to lose, plays ruthlessly to win.
7. Comes across as cold and calculating.
8. Acts in an unethical or dishonest manner.
9. Has created a power network in the organisation and uses it for personal gain.
10. Shows no regret for making decisions that negatively affect the company, shareholders, or employees.

Some psychopaths can look like ideal leaders: smooth, polished, charming. They can quite easily mask their dark side – bullying, amoral, and manipulative. In the past, it might have been politics, policing, law, media or religion that attracted psychopaths; but more and more, it is the fast-paced, exciting, glamorous world of business.

In a book entitled *Corporate Psychopaths: Organisational Destroyers*, Boddy (2011) described corporate psychopaths: *"They seem to be unaffected by the corporate collapse they have created. They present themselves as glibly unbothered by the chaos around them, unconcerned about those who have lost their jobs, savings and investments, and lacking any regrets about what they have done. They cheerfully lie about their involvement in events, are very persuasive in blaming others for what has happened and have no doubts about their own continued worth and value. They are happy to walk away from the economic disaster that they have managed to bring about, with huge payoffs and with new roles advising governments how to prevent such economic disasters."* (p1)

He suggested that there are six identifiable outcomes of employing corporate psychopaths: a heightened level of conflict; commitment to employees plummets dramatically; heavier than necessary organisational constraints; poorer communication and a blame culture; reduced employee job satisfaction; organisational withdrawal of many good employees. He suggested that

"Corporate Psychopaths prefer to implement their self-serving plans unnoticed, but when they fear being found out, their strategy is to create chaos so that in the confusion they can avoid scrutiny and detection as the people around them in the organization concentrate on bringing order to the mess created." (p78)

So, while there are some differences in language, all the experts tend to agree on the clinical description of psychopathic behaviour.

PSYCHOPATHS AT WORK

Have you worked for or with a psychopath? What sort of behaviours did you witness? Tick off those you saw most often: Impulsive non-conformity (reckless, rebellious, unconventional); Blame externalisation (blames others, rationalises own transgressions); Machiavellian ego-centricity (interpersonally aggressive and self-centred); Carefree non-planfulness (excessive present orientation with lack of forethought or planning); Stress immunity (experiencing minimal anxiety); Fearlessness (willing to take risks, having little concern with potentially harmful consequences), and general Cold-heartedness (unsentimental, unreactive to others' distress, lacking in imagination).

These seem to factor into *two* dimensions: one related to high negative emotionality and the other to low behavioural constraint. Further research suggested two distinct facets of the psychopath: *fearless dominance* (glib, grandiose, deceitful, low stress) and *impulsive anti-sociality* (aggressive, anti-social, low control). This suggests that within the psychopath population, one may be able to distinguish between these two groups.

Dotlick and Cairo (2003) noted that the Mischievous Psychopath knows that the rules are really "only suggestions". They are rebels without a cause, rule-breakers who believe that rules, laws and other restrictions are tedious and unnecessary. They have destructive impulses and a preference for making impulsive decisions without considering any consequences. They can, and do speak their mind, use their charms and creativity, but for no clear business goal.

They document five signs and symptoms. Staff question the Mischievous Leader's commitments and projects they have initiated but subsequently neglected; they frequently never take time or effort to win people over; everything rates as a challenge to them. Also, they

are easily bored and they have to spend a lot of effort covering up mess-ups and mistakes.

DEALING WITH PSYCHOPATHS

How to deal with the psychopath? Easier said than done, however, Dotlick and Cairo (2003) offer four pieces of advice for what is, no doubt a successful psychopath. Encourage them to take ownership of their action and interrogate their rule-breaking, consequence-ignoring behaviours. Encourage them to think clearly about which rules they will really follow as opposed to break. They may also benefit from being on the receiving end of the sort of mischief they dish out. Finally, they may benefit from confiding in a coach.

Oldham and Morris (2000) offer ´tips on dealing with the adventurous person in your life'. *"First, have fun but be careful: your partner seeks excitement through charming, disarming adventurousness. Next, have no illusions about changing him or her: they won't or can't so you have to be the flexible one. Third, don't crowd them or try to keep them on the traditional "straight and narrow" path. Fourth, you have to be responsible for your own safety, others' welfare..... because they won't be. Next, know your limits for excitement, risk, drugs, etc. because he/she will draw you into their world. Sixth, don't expect much support and help because you are not going to get it so you need to be strong, resilient, tough. Finally, stay as sexy as you are. Keep your sexual relationship interesting and lively. Toss your inhibitions and be ready and willing to experiment"* (p. 243).

Babiak and Hare (2006) offer good advice to people dealing with psychopaths. The following is their advice to lawyers if the client is a psychopath.

"1. *Get paid upfront. If you lose the case, you will be blamed and unpaid. If you win the case, the client will take the credit and you will still be unpaid.*
2. *Be very careful about boundaries. The client is not your friend and will collect and use against you whatever information is obtained. (This includes information related to the case and related to you personally.)*
3. *Remain in charge. A psychopathic client will attempt to run the show and manipulate you and the system, making your job much harder.*

4. *Don't take at face value the client's description of events or interactions with others. Check everything out.*
5. *Be aware that the client will distort and minimize his or her criminal history. When confronted with the inaccuracies, the client will offer excuses that place the blame on a defence attorney, a corrupt system, or others.*
6. *The client will flatter you as long as things are going smoothly. If the case goes sideways, often because of the client's tendency to take charge and ignore advice, you will become the enemy.*
7. *Keep copious notes on everything."* (p. 314)

It is difficult to estimate the number of successful corporate psychopaths. It is also sometimes difficult to explain how they "get away with it" for so long. However, it is no mystery when enquiring from those who do or have worked with a successful psychopath how much misery or dysfunctionality they can bring to the workplace. Psychopaths can easily get hired using charm and blatant lies. Next, they soon identify, befriend, woo and "sweet-talk" all the powerful "key players" in the organisation. They build these people

Hare (1999) warns those who associate with psychopaths to be aware of their power struggles and to set firm ground rules to prevent manipulation. He also advises cutting your losses: the psychopath's appetite for power and control knows no bounds and is best left to their own devices.

In their practical, popular and work-oriented book on successful psychopaths, Babiak and Hare (2006) note how psychopaths attempt to ruin others' reputations in terms of their competence and loyalty. They operate as brilliant manipulators and puppeteers to destroy your reputation. Because they try to create conflict in work teams through "divide and conquer", it is important to build and maintain relationships at work. They offer seven pieces of advice if your boss is a psychopath:

1. Build, nurture and maintain your (true) reputation as a good performer.
2. Keep records of everything and put it in writing.
3. Make use of and be very wary of the performance appraisal process.

into a support network to establish their own reputation but more importantly, to undermine their potential opponents. Next, they abandon those who have been useful to them.

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Hare (1999) in his clinical study of psychopaths asks "Can anything be done?" He says nothing seems to work, precisely because psychopaths see no reason to change. Further, therapy can make them worse because it teaches them more effectively how to deceive, manipulate and use people. They learn therapy language (getting in touch with their feelings) without ever actually changing.

However, he does offer a survival guide that comes under two headings: Protect Yourself and Damage Control. The former is a warning to be on your guard; disregard their clever acting; beware of their flattery, feigned kindness and tall stories; and know yourself because psychopaths are skilled at detecting vulnerability. He also warns those who deal with psychopaths to be very aware of who the victim is. That is, psychopaths like to portray themselves as the victims, yet you are likely to be it.

4. Avoid confrontation by minimising contact and never responding to their bait.
5. Be very wary about making a formal complaint, as anonymity is not always assured and retribution is very likely to follow.
6. If you have to leave (by transfer or resignation), do so on good terms.
7. Move on remembering the lesson.

They offer similar advice for the psychopathic co-worker, subordinate or client.

The same authors suggest that there is a common pattern when psychopaths join a company. They charm at assessment and through their honeymoon period. Soon they become manipulative and disparaging to others and doing flagrant image-enhancement. Then they confront by trying to neutralise enemies

and abandoning those of little use to them. Finally, if successful, they tend to abandon their patrons as they move ever upward and onward. To be alerted to the possibility of this pattern may help identify psychopaths before it is too late.

CONCLUSION

The term psychopath is much used but often misunderstood. Psychopathy lies on a continuum from low to high. Successful, subclinical, corporate psychopaths can be very successful at work. If they are clever and presentable, articulate and informed, their superficial charm and boldness may suit them well, particularly in business situations that are rapidly changing.

One test of whether a person is a subclinical psychopath lies in their biography. From the age of adolescence onwards it may be possible to detect early signs of delinquency, brushes with the law, and a string of people lining up to testify, quite happily, about the way they were lied to, cheated and "conned" by a particular individual they trusted. They change jobs, towns, and even countries often. They re-invent themselves regularly. Hence the importance of thorough biographical checks when selecting senior managers. When they are caught and exposed there is always the disbelief that they could so easily "get away with it" for so long.

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