

Beware, there is a psychopath in your office

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Psychopathy is a personality disorder associated with characteristics such as guiltlessness, lack of empathy, manipulativeness, callousness, superficial charm, impulsivity, and an inability to learn from experience. Historically, the word has been associated with crazed serial killers like Hannibal Lecter, Ted Bundy, and Jack the Reaper. More recently, however, we've begun to hear more about psychopaths in the workplace. Studies have indicated that depending on where you look, up to one in five of those filling company boardrooms and senior management positions are hiding psychopathic tendencies, using certain personality traits to charm and manipulate their way through the workplace.

Research by New York-based psychologist Paul Babiak has suggested up to 4% of business leaders in the US could be psychopaths. Another study of supply chain managers found between 3% and 21% had clinically significant psychopathy, compared to 1% of the general population. Swiss psychiatrist Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig, author of *The Emptied Soul: On the Nature of the Psychopath* (1980), believes that many psychopaths hold upstanding positions in society, including businesspeople. It makes sense that people who are almost psychopathic can be found in the business world; psychopaths are attracted to power and money the way sharks are attracted to blood. That makes them particularly dangerous to organizations, says Robert Hare, a University of British Columbia psychologist whose psychopathy checklist, the PCL-R, is used worldwide to screen for psychopathic personalities. Hare believes that psychopaths are increasingly common in business because they're attracted to the pace and volatility of today's hypercompetitive workplaces. Boddy, Ladyshewsky, and Galvin (2010) found that significantly more senior-level managers portray psychopathic traits compared to their lower-level employees.

Workplace psychopaths are often charming to staff above their level in the workplace hierarchy but abusive to staff below their level. They maintain multiple personas throughout the office, presenting each colleague with a different version of themselves. Hare reports that about 1 percent of the general population meets the clinical criteria for psychopathy. Hare further claims that the prevalence of psychopaths is higher in the business world than in the general population. Figures of around 3–4% have been cited for more senior positions in business. A 2011 study of Australian white-collar managers found that 5.76 percent could be classed as psychopathic and another 10.42 percent dysfunctional with psychopathic characteristics.

The workplace psychopath craves a God-like feeling of power and control over other people. They prefer to work at the very highest levels of their organizations, allowing them to control the greatest number of people. Psychopaths who are political leaders, managers, and CEOs fall into this category. They generally appear to be intelligent, sincere, powerful, charming, witty, and entertaining communicators. They quickly assess what people want to hear and then create stories that fit those expectations. They will con people into doing their work for them, take credit for other people's work, and even assign their work to junior staff members. They have low patience when dealing with others, display shallow emotions, are unpredictable, undependable, and fail to take responsibility if something

goes wrong that is their fault.

According to a study from the University of Notre Dame published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, psychopaths have a natural advantage in workplaces overrun by abusive supervision and are more likely to thrive under abusive bosses, being more resistant to stress, including interpersonal abuse, and having less of a need for positive relationships than others.

The workplace psychopath may show a high number of the following behavior patterns.

- Public humiliation of others (high propensity of having temper tantrums or ridiculing work performance)
- Malicious spreading of lies (intentionally deceitful)
- Remorseless, devoid of guilt
- Frequently lies to push his/her point
- Produces exaggerated bodily expressions (yawning, sneezing, etc.) as a means of gaining attention
- Rapidly shifts between emotions – used to manipulate people or cause high anxiety
- Intentionally isolates persons from organizational resources
- Quick to blame others for mistakes or incomplete work even though he/she is guilty
- Encourages co-workers to torment, alienate, harass, and/or humiliate other peers
- Takes credit for others' accomplishments
- Steals and/or sabotages other persons' work
- Refuses to take responsibility for misjudgments and/or errors
- Responds inappropriately to stimuli, such as with a high-pitched and forced laugh
- Threatens any perceived enemy with discipline and/or job loss to taint employee file
- Sets unrealistic and unachievable job expectations to set employees up for failure
- Refuses or is reluctant to attend meetings with more than one person
- Refuses to provide adequate training and/or instructions to singled out the victim
- Invades personal privacy of others
- Has multiple sexual encounters with other employees
- Develops new ideas without real follow-through
- Very self-centered and extremely egotistical (often conversation revolves around them – a great deal of self-importance)
- Often "borrows" money and/or other material objects without any intentions of giving it back
- Will do whatever it takes to close the deal (no regard for ethics or legality)

How a typical workplace psychopath climbs to and maintains power

The authors of the book *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* came up with a five-phase model of how a typical workplace psychopath climbs to and maintains power:

1. **Entry** – psychopaths may use highly developed social skills and charm to obtain employment into an organisation. At this stage, it will be difficult to spot anything indicative of psychopathic behaviour, and as a new employee, one might perceive the psychopath to be helpful and even

benevolent. Corporate psychopaths are readily recruited into organizations because they make a distinctly positive impression at interviews. They appear to be alert, friendly, and easy to get along with and talk to. They look like they are of good ability, emotionally well-adjusted, and reasonable, and these traits make them attractive to those in charge of hiring staff within organizations. Unlike narcissists, psychopaths are better able to create long-lasting favourable first impressions, though people may still eventually see through their facades.

2. **Assessment** – psychopaths will weigh one up according to one's usefulness, and one could be recognised as either a pawn (who has some informal influence and will be easily manipulated) or a patron (who has formal power and will be used by the psychopath to protect against attacks)
3. **Manipulation** – psychopath will create a scenario of “psychopathic fiction” where positive information about themselves and negative disinformation about others will be created, where one's role as a part of a network of pawns or patrons will be utilised and will be groomed into accepting the psychopath's agenda.
4. **Confrontation** – the psychopath will use techniques of character assassination to maintain their agenda, and one will be either discarded as a pawn or used as a patron
5. **Ascension** – one's role as a patron in the psychopath's quest for power will be discarded, and the psychopath will take for himself/herself a position of power and prestige from anyone who once supported them. Corporate psychopaths within organizations may be singled out for rapid promotion because of their polish, charm, and cool decisiveness. They are also helped by their manipulative and bullying skills. They create confusion around them (e.g. divide and rule) using instrumental bullying to promote their agenda.

Psychopaths can maintain calm when others are reacting to normal stress and dangerous situations which makes them good fits for jobs such as the military, politics, and finances. Studies of workplace psychopaths have found that they are not equally distributed across organisational types. Banking, finance, the civil service, police, fire service, commerce, and business have all been identified as being more attractive to psychopaths, whilst professions that involve caring for others are less attractive. Researchers have hypothesised that psychopaths are attracted to organisations and roles that hold the potential for power, status, and reward.

How to avoid hiring a psychopath

- **Conduct behavioural type interview**- Their thrill-seeking tendencies may be conveyed as high energy and enthusiasm for the job or work. Their superficial charm may be misinterpreted by interviewers as charisma. It is worth noting that psychopaths are not only accomplished liars, they are also more likely to lie in interviews.
- **Verify information contained in the curriculum vitae**- For instance, psychopaths may create fictitious work experiences or resumes. They may also fabricate credentials such as diplomas, certifications, or awards. Thus, in addition to seeming competent and likable in interviews, psychopaths are also more likely to outright make-up information during interviews than non-psychopaths.
- **Conduct reference checks**-This will give you a better understanding of how they performed at their previous employers.
- **Obtain work samples**-This will help show that they actually do good work and do not just ride

on the waves of others or take credit for others' work.

- **Carry out criminal reference checks**

Boddy 2017, identified the following as bad consequences of workplace psychopathy. These include workplace bullying of employees, employees lose their jobs, legal liabilities, shareholders lose their investments, wasted employee time, suboptimal employee performance, increased workload, difficult working conditions, poor levels of job satisfaction, lower perceived levels of corporate social responsibility, raised staff turnover, absenteeism, heightened level of workplace conflict – arguments, yelling, rudeness, divide and conquer and counterproductive work behaviour.

Successful psychopaths can hide very well within society and businesses. But it is important to be able to identify and deal with them correctly. This is a problem that Human Resource personnel as well as those in charge of promotions need to confront. Does this article remind you of anyone at work? Food for thought.

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