



DO YOU HAVE A TIME BOMB LURKING IN YOUR MANAGEMENT TEAM?

Psychopaths in the Workplace

David Hanlon, December 2013

"We depend on psychopaths every day and don't even know it."¹ - Kevin Dutton

Mention the word psychopath and the world of Alfred Hitchcock comes to mind: chilling murderers who are feared unconditionally. This is the extreme end of the spectrum. However, the uncomfortable evidence according to Australian psychologist and author of the book, "Working with Monsters", Dr John Clarke, is that at least one person in every workplace department probably demonstrates some level of psychopathic behaviours." And why? Clarke suggests that today's workplace is the perfect place to nurture these types of people. The drive for performance and results fits their personality type perfectly.

Clarke adds, we "are actually dealing with over-controlling and insecure managers or people who have been promoted without having the appropriate social or people management skills."

This behavioural style has been honed from their early childhood where they like the experience of gaining power or control over someone. This feeling of power or control makes them feel good. A child who bullies or who manipulates their peers or parents are some early signs things are not quite normal.

What are the statistics?

The general consensus is that around 1% of the population are psychopaths. Determining how many psychopaths in an organisation is difficult: imagine me turning up and asking your HR Manager or General Manager: "I just want to know how many psychopaths you have on your team!!" However a revealing study by Babiak et al² in 2010 of 203 corporate professionals selected by their companies to participate in management development programs found that around 3% of them exhibited clear psychopathic tendencies. These 3% ranked high in terms of charisma/presentation style (creativity, good strategic thinking and communication skills) and low in responsibility/performance (being a team player, management skills, and overall accomplishments).

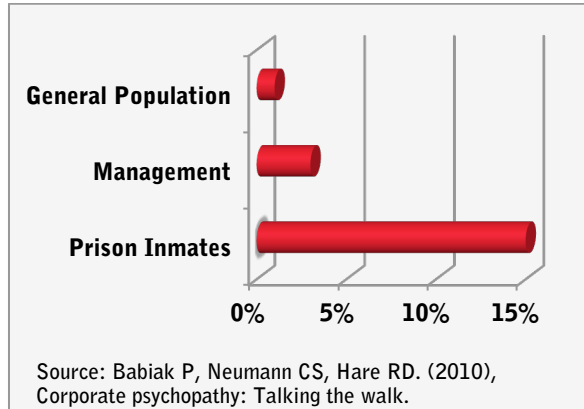
Supporting evidence comes from research by Sara Konrath³, which found the capacity of American college students who empathise with others has, in the past 30 years, reduced by 40%.

¹ Dutton, Kevin (2012), *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers can Teach us About Success*. Scientific American.

²Babiak P, Neumann CS, Hare RD (2010), *Corporate Psychopathy: Talking the Walk*. Behav Sci Law. Vol 28(2):174-93.

³ Konrath Sara, et. al. (2011), *Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis*. Pers Soc Psychol Rev.

Figure 1: Psychopathy in various populations



What professions.....

It may be surprising to see that esteemed professions such as law and surgery attract people with high psychopathic tendencies. However, as indicated in Table 1, highly intelligent people with low emotional intelligence and/or low empathetic capacity can indeed end up in highly responsible positions. Does this make them bad? NO is my answer. However, if you asked: "can they be difficult characters and can they be ruthless and cause damage to some people?", the answer is an emphatic YES.

Babiak suggests there's evidence that the business climate has become more tolerant of psychopaths in recent years.

Table 1: Psychopathic career paths		
	High Intelligence	Low Intelligence
Violent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Forces • Criminal mastermind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-level thug • Enforcer
Non-violent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lawyer • Surgeon • CEO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Petty criminal

The positives

Given the career choices outlined above, it is not surprising that some of the characteristics found on the psychopathic spectrum are useful. Dutton (*The Wisdom of Psychopaths*) recalls an interview with a surgeon who said: "as soon as you start thinking of that person as someone's wife or husband, you're beginning to walk an emotional tightrope".

The difference between a leader who wrecks havoc and one who doesn't is their ability to "flick the emotional switch".

Table 2: Positive characteristics of a psychopath?	
Area	What it means
1. Cool under pressure	Ones ability to hold one's nerve and not crumble.
2. Focus	The ability to make the necessary sacrifices; to be able to screen out distractions.
3. Ruthlessness	The ability to finish the job, no matter what the circumstances are.
4. Vulnerability radar	The ability to sense weaknesses in the oppositions psyche, game plan or strategy. The difference is genuine leaders will not attack an individual when they are down.
5. Mental toughness	The capacity to deal with setbacks and put them behind them.
6. Living in the present	Good leaders do not dwell on past mistakes of others or fear moving forward due to errors of their own. They evaluate circumstances with what is in front on them. In dealing with people, they do not hold grudges.
7. Charm and charisma	Their charm and charisma assists building their "presence". However, a genuine leader does not "switch it on and off" as a tool.

The negatives

Table 3: Negative characteristics of a psychopath?	
Area	What it means
1. Lack of empathy	Unable to empathise. Their skills are used to exploit, abuse and exert power.
2. Pathological lying	Has no problem lying coolly and easily. Sometimes it looks like they cannot themselves distinguish facts and fiction.
3. Superficial charm	Perfectly able to use superficial charm to confuse and convince their audience. Well trained verbally.
4. Extremely manipulative and cunning	Never recognises the rights of others and see their self-serving behaviours as permissible. They appear to be charming to strangers, yet are covertly hostile and domineering.
5. Grandiose sense of self	Feels entitled to certain things as "their legitimate rights". Creates and maintains group polarisation, "us-versus-them" mentality.
6. Complete, absolute lack of remorse, shame or guilt	Instead of friends, they have victims and accomplices who end up as victims. The end always justifies the means.
7. Shallow, often non-genuine emotions	When they show what seems to be warmth, joy, love and compassion, it is more feigned than experienced and serves as an ulterior motive.
8. Dominating, expect unconditional control	They are very harsh in testing it from their devotees and expect them to feel guilt for their failings.

Are you selecting for psychopathic tendencies?

The workplace psychopath is frequently hard to detect as they don't do anything illegal or criminal. However, they are unlikely to display loyalty, guilt or remorse. They will burn people repeatedly if that is what it takes to get the job done or have their goals/needs met and will turn "complainers" or people who block their path into victims. In this way, they alienate those who are team players making out they are "soft".

Unwittingly a large part of the selection criteria for leaders and managers is around strong sociopathic attributes. Below I have identified some of the "strong" traits commonly selected for and what to do about them to ensure balance in an individual.

Table 4: Are you selecting for psychopathic tendencies in your leaders?			
Area	What it means	Supporting psychopathic attributes	Counterbalancing traits to look for
1. Ability to make the hard decisions	We admire and promote people on their ability to "make the tough calls".	Lack compassion or conscience.	Strong values and evidence of values-based decision making.
2. Influence and persuasion	There is much emphasis in today's management literature on having leaders who can influence.	Master manipulators and very charming.	Ability to form deep and lasting relationships at all levels of the organisation.
3. Strength	We seek and admire strength when others falter or crumble.	Unemotional and lack empathy.	High emotional intelligence <u>and</u> high empathetic capacity.
4. Vision	We seek those who can share or create a vision for the organisation.	Excellent at having grandiose and egocentric schemes.	Reasoned and considered planner.
5. Do what it takes to get the job done	We admire "finishers".	Remorseless and ruthless in achieving <u>their</u> aims.	Team player.

So how do organisations deal with these people?

The short answer is poorly. The skill of the psychopath makes it difficult to see them for who they are. First, they are motivated to, and have a talent for, "reading people" and for sizing them up quickly. They identify a person's likes and dislikes, motives, needs, weak spots, and vulnerabilities. Second, many psychopaths come across as having excellent oral communication skills. In many cases, these skills are more apparent than real because of their readiness to jump right into a conversation without the social inhibitions that hamper most people. Third, they are masters of impression management; their insight into the psyche of others combined with a superficial – but convincing – verbal fluency allows them to change their situation skillfully as it suits the situation and their game plan.

The motivation to remove such a person generally comes when they start costing the organisation money – usually in the form of high staff turnover and/or poor bottom line performance. The difficulty is these people are masters at externalising the problem and creating doubt in the mind of management.

All the evidence suggests that rehabilitation attempts fail and we can back this up where we have been called in to help “change the ways of difficult characters”.

Systems and structures to manage

Dr Andrea Quinn⁴ believes organisations should have:

- Robust team processes and effective team leaders;
- Key Performance Indicators clearly tied to outcomes, and especially KPIs relating to leadership of people;
- Policies and procedures about what constitutes bullying behaviour;
- Training about identifying and responding to bullying behaviour in a staff induction program;
- Effective modelling of appropriate leadership and management behaviour by senior management;
- Clear policies and procedures around entitlements and career progression; and
- Exit interviews to uncover any patterns in why people resign.

Calling to account

Having systems and structure in place is the first step. The second and most important part is acting on these policies and procedures consistently and unambiguously. We also suggest that one of the key issues in failing to manage these people is that organisations give lip service to values and more importantly, specific acceptable and unacceptable behaviours around these values. Values are aspirational and general. For example, respect has at least 70 “see or hear” behaviours (acceptable or unacceptable) that have been mapped which meet work-place needs. In other words, behaviours are concrete. Consistent values-based correction and merit assessment helps to manage these traits more effectively.

The challenge is not to fear functional psychopaths, it is to manage them effectively without becoming caught in their game. It is about being careful and ensuring the culture of the organisation is sufficiently resilient that agreed antisocial behaviours are not tolerated – Full Stop.

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⁴ Helen Burns (2005). *Organisational psychopaths: the enemy within*. Management Today, Australian Institute of Management.