

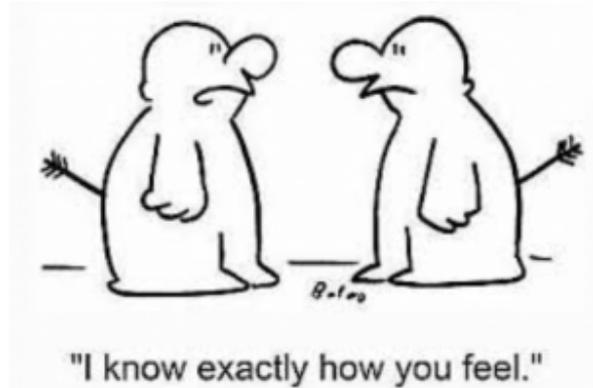


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Do workplace psychopaths have the capacity for empathy?

— David Hanlon

Keeping calm in a crisis seems essential for our being able to think clearly. Sounds sensible and it is one (of several), key traits that many in senior management look for when promoting leaders. This is just the right environment for our psychopath (and the statistics show that while some 1-2 percent of the general population is psychopathic, it is four times that percentage among CEOs). Psychopaths, narcissists and Machiavellians are known as the "dark triad" in leadership. They can be charming, charismatic and convincing (when they need you) and they project the sort of self-confidence and certainty that is reassuring in a chaotic world.



But what are the downsides to this? What if keeping calm makes you too cold to care? What if it makes you oblivious to the impacts on the rest of the team? And do we evaluate the negative impacts sufficiently? In this short article, we look at the three characteristics of empathy and how to manage that psychopath in your workplace.

However lets first, take a look at the three forms of empathy:

1. **Cognitive:** the largely conscious drive to recognise accurately and understand another's emotional state. Sometimes we call this kind of empathy "perspective taking". It is important in understanding the others perspective: particularly in negotiation. However, it has its "dark side". That is, we can have cognitive empathy without having any fellow-feeling or sympathy with it. Cognitive empathy is deliberate: it is a skill that everyone at work can learn and needs to use. It can often be considered *under-emotional*.
2. **Emotional:** Is where you feel the other person's emotions as strongly as they do. You can easily put yourself in their position and completely understand what they are going through. There are good sides of emotional empathy and bad sides. Emotional empathy is essential in healthcare professions such as counselling. Here, being able to empathise with patients is crucial. The bad side of emotional empathy is when a person becomes overwhelmed by their feelings for others.



The Right Mind

3. **Compassionate:** we not only understand a person’s predicament and feel with them, but are spontaneously moved to help, if needed. It is built on the skill of sharing honestly with another person. It makes isolation difficult to maintain because it undermines self-obsession. Compassion is the antidote to compulsion.

Successful and enduring leaders enable others in their teams to develop and grow. Research clearly demonstrates that people in leadership positions who possess psychopathic tendencies are self-serving and, whilst appearing to be supportive, do so to meet their own ends.

Characteristic traits

Emotional capacity	Exhibit an excess of self-serving and/or maladaptive emotions	Arrogance, grandiosity, pleasure, anger, hostility, contempt, overweening, envy, greed, suspiciousness, impatience, and irritability.
	Are severely deficient in “pro-other” emotions	Love, compassion, gratefulness, peacefulness, pleasantness, sympathy, guilt, and remorse.
People management/relationships	Dealing with upper management	Nothing is too hard, question why outsiders need to be brought in (eg. ourselves), make themselves appear indispensable.
	Dealing with staff below them	Isolates them, continually checking up and finding fault in little things, bullying, makes sure there is no “evidence”.

Dealing with Psychopaths in the workplace

Dealing with one in the workplace can be stressful and for a lot of people it results in health issues. Hard as it may be, the key to handling them successfully is to be proactive. In short, they thrive not because they lack emotions in general, but because they use emotions (in addition to other tricks) to control others. Senior management, who are often not aware of the damage being caused below until it’s too late, support them as they “get results”.



Key tactics

1. Use your values. Most organisations give lip service to their values. Most in leadership positions can't recall them. More importantly, they don't clearly state which behaviours are acceptable versus unacceptable. Psychopaths are attracted to organisations that allow their negative traits to go unchecked. Encourage and support your organisation to be clear on acceptable versus unacceptable behaviours throughout the organisation and check on them just as safety checks are done. Groups that use their values overtly can eliminate or curtail undesirable behaviours.

2. Have witnesses. Wherever possible have someone else in the conversation. If you are alone with a bullying and/or aggressive boss or team member, excuse yourself as quickly as possible.

3. Never make it personal. They may make it personal, but don't fall into that trap. Keep about the issue and, if at all possible, ask for evidence.

4. Be neutral. Don't be the hero (be very sure of your potential outcomes if you are a whistle-blower and do it when you have good evidence – see below). Also, don't be a victim. Perform well.

5. Document every conversation or issue. Most people are poor at this. Date, time and place. What occurred. No judgement (hard at times, however objectivity wins in the long run).

Example

We were doing extensive work with the leadership team of a great company: wonderful values and very supportive. One of their senior managers exhibited tell-tale signs very early in our work with this organisation. And to us as outsiders the signs were:

1. "Buttering" up the boss. Nothing was too difficult and going out of the way to do little extra things;
2. Saying this or that direct report got along well but was not 'ready to step up' – the opposite to what the direct reports told us and the "heads up" senior management gave us about their view of the relationship;
3. Consistently telling the boss something and giving us the direct opposite; and
4. Creating an extremely stressful situation for direct reports via checking on every conversation with ourselves and with senior management. Threatening direct reports by reminding that he could terminate their positions at any time.

Our Advice:

1. To management:

-They had a psychopath and to be very careful;
-They regularly check with this manager's direct reports; and
-Make desired versus undesired behaviours explicit.

2. The direct report:

- ...Follow tactics 2,3,4 and most importantly 5 above; and
- ...Have an exit strategy if the stress is too much.