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The Disturbing Link Between Psychopathy And Leadership

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It is not the image we like to have when we think of business leaders. But troubling research indicates that in the ranks of senior management, psychopathic behavior may be more common

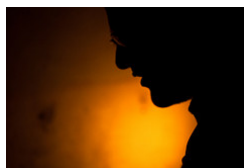


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than we think – more prevalent in fact than the amount such seriously aberrant behavior occurs in the general population.

At first blush this may seem counterintuitive, even outrageous. We tend to think of psychopathy as the province of criminals, with leadership qualities that may land someone atop a fringe religious cult, say – not in a boardroom. But before discussing the research, let's consider for a moment why this possibility is actually less bizarre than it may initially seem.

The hallmarks of the psychopathic personality involve egocentric, grandiose behavior, completely lacking empathy and conscience. Additionally, psychopaths may be charismatic, charming, and adept at manipulating one-on-one interactions. In a corporation, one's ability to advance is determined in large measure by a person's ability to favorably impress his or her direct manager. Unfortunately, certain of these psychopathic qualities – in particular charm, charisma, grandiosity (which can be mistaken for vision or confidence) and the ability to “perform” convincingly in one-on-one settings – are also qualities that can help one get ahead in the business world.

Snakes in Suits – An excellent book, [Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work](#)

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snakes_in_Suits:_When_Psychopaths_Go_to_Work),

by Paul Babiak, Ph.D., and Robert Hare, Ph.D., published in 2006, is the foundational work on the subject and offers a comprehensive look at how psychopaths operate effectively in the workplace. To quote a few portions:

“ Several abilities – skills, actually – make it difficult to see psychopaths 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.

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The authors also note that many psychopaths, of course, are not suited for the business environment:

“ Some do not have enough social or communication skill or education to interact successfully with others, relying instead on threats, coercion, intimidation, and violence to dominate others and to get what they want. Typically, such individuals are manifestly aggressive and rather nasty, and unlikely to charm victims into submission, relying on their bullying approach instead. This book (*Snakes in Suits*) is less about them than about those who are willing to use their ‘deadly charm’ to con and manipulate others.

How prevalent are psychopaths in the ranks of senior management? Exact counts are impossible to obtain. (It is humorously difficult to imagine a researcher approaching a head of Human Resources and asking, “We’d like to do some research to assess just how many psychopaths your organization has in its leadership.”) In 2010, however, Paul Babiak, Robert Hare and Craig Neumann had the opportunity to examine psychopathy in a sample of 203 individuals from numerous companies’ management development programs. While these individuals were not yet at the top rungs of their organizations, they were on track potentially to get there.

The study’s findings (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20422644>) were disturbing, bearing out the large amount of anecdotal evidence the researchers had long been gathering. The research showed that approximately 3% of those assessed in this management development program study scored in the psychopath range – well above the incidence of 1% in the general population. By comparison, the incidence of psychopathy in prison populations is estimated at around 15%.

* * *

I was drawn to this topic at the end of a long career in business, as I tried to make sense of what I’d observed over the years, the many executives (and characters) I’d known, and the types of personalities that occasionally excelled in leadership roles. Am I saying that vast numbers of executives appear to possess such qualities? Not at all – certainly many business leaders are among the most accomplished, admirable people I’ve had the privilege to know. But I’d also note that to get to the highest levels of an organization there are sometimes – naturally not always, but sometimes – elements of egocentrism and ruthlessness that can aid in one’s rise... and this makes me believe that the work of Babiak and Hare is, unfortunately, insightful and accurate.

In my own *entirely unscientific* estimation do I personally think business leadership is comprised of 3% psychopaths? I have no way of knowing, but an instinctive reaction is that just in my own experience (given the strict standards for true clinical psychopathy) 3% feels a bit high to me. But would I guess the incidence does exceed the 1% level of the general population? For the points mentioned earlier, that seems entirely reasonable.

Preventing Organizational Problems – One final but not insignificant topic: Given the very real potential for harm that psychopaths in positions of power have (both for other people and for entire organizations), what steps can companies take to help prevent costly and damaging hiring and promotion mistakes?

Snakes in Suits devotes some 40 pages to this important subject (reading I’d highly recommend to all Human Resources executives). In the interests of brevity, here are my own three key considerations that I believe hiring committees, boards of directors, and senior managers should bear in mind when considering candidates top-level hires and promotions.

Internal succession planning – A well-conceived internal succession program is the best way to inoculate an organization against a disastrous candidate, as those making promotion decisions will presumably have had years – not hours

– to study an individual in action and observe his or her character.

Focus on verified, tangible results – Since internal candidates are not always a satisfactory option, when hiring from the outside focus on real substantive accomplishments that can be verified – more than on personal charm and force of personality. While charisma and persuasive speaking skills are naturally desirable leadership talents, they’re also well within the repertoire of a psychopath. Be sure there’s a solid foundation of actual accomplishment to support all claims.

Glean whatever you can about the moral and ethical character of a candidate – This isn’t always easy in a formal interview process, but any subtle insights that can be gained about an individual’s moral compass and value system can be critical. Bear in mind a psychopath’s skills to manipulate a situation and tell interviewers what he or she believes they want to hear.


In short, this is just another lens through which to view high-level hires and promotions. But it can be a lens worth carefully looking through – when one considers the high human and financial costs of psychopathic leadership.

This article first appeared at PsychologyToday.com.

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