What Are Organisational Psychopaths?

By Emma Howard

What are organisational psychopaths?
And what impact can they have on an organisation?

Arguably, the impact of organisational psychopaths on organisations can be devastating and pervasive. Psychopaths can cause mild to moderate consequences or result in severe and even catastrophic effects on an organisation. Working as a consultant Psychologist for many years across both the private and public sector, I have had the pleasure of meeting at least three of these individual characters and having had this exposure it came to mind that it was important to understand the profile of a psychopath, how they behave in the organisation and what potential impact these personalities can have on corporate decision making, financial outcomes and organisational culture.

Within a psychological framework, the profile of a psychopath is that of an individual who lacks empathy, a conscience, who has poor impulse control and who likes to control or manipulate others. Additionally, psychopathy is characterised by disinhibited or bold behaviour with features of antisocial personality patterns involving disregard for and violation of other people’s rights (Comer, 2001) and in line with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), psychopathy is classified as a syndrome of personality and behavioural characteristics (2013). Observable behaviours of these people can be dramatic, emotional and/or erratic causing extreme difficulties for them to have relationships that are truly nurturing and satisfying. Lastly, psychopaths create so many problems for other people that they have been studied extensively over other disorders of personality in the hope that causation and effective treatment programs are better understood and implemented (Cromer, 2001).

From an organisational perspective, a psychopath in the workplace presents themselves as being hireable and worthy of promotion, intelligent, smooth or charming, manipulative, happy to take others’ work as their own, opportunistic, calculating and operating without remorse (Walker, 2005). Moreover, psychopaths in leadership positions are known to be callously disregarding of the needs and wishes of others, further they are reported to be prepared to cheat, lie and bully and to neglect or cause harm to the welfare of others (Perkel, 2005). Much debate exists over the prevalence of psychopaths in our working community since these rates appear to depend largely on the study, the measurement scale used and cultural context. Research, however, tends to lean toward 1 percent of the general population and 1 percent prevalence rate in organisations (Boddy, 2006; 2014; Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007).

The realisation that psychopaths form a part of our society led research to hypothesise that these personalities were also to be found in the workplace (Hare, 1999 & Babiak, 1995) and across all levels of the organisation including a high percentage being in leadership positions (Ferrari, 2006; Pech & Slade, 2007 & Cangemi and Pfohl, 2009). Awareness and understanding of psychopathic personalities in the workplace brought about the notion of the ‘corporate psychopath’ and subsequent research in this area of organisational misbehaviour (Boddy, 2011).

From my experience as a Consultant Psychologist, the impact of organisational psychopaths can vary, from mild to moderate impacts, to devastating outcomes, such as seen in the high profile scandal with Enron in 2002 (Kidwell & Martin, 2005). Types of personalities and behaviours exhibited by psychopaths have been haunting industries and corporations for some time and despite changes in labour processes and movements prior and post industrialisation, modern organisations continue to grapple with psychopaths and their misbehaviour in the workplace.

Notwithstanding, it is important to note that not all misbehaviour is deemed terrible for an organisation as research has demonstrated that psychopathic behaviour
can result in productive and efficient outcomes for organisations through risk taking and dare-devilish practices (Richards, 2008). The real challenge for managers, however, seems to concern how much misbehaviour is reasonable, what types of misbehaviour is acceptable within the workplace and how to best manage often repeated instances of poor behaviour.

From the viewpoint that organisational psychopaths do more bad than good, a review of the literature, and in particular of Boddy's research, identified a number of effects on the organisation from the presence of organisational psychopaths in managerial roles (2006). Some, not all, effects are listed to include corporate failure, fraudulent activities, disheartened workforce and workplace bullying. Additionally, other implications caused by organisational psychopaths whereby I have been directly involved include needless employee redundancies, demoralised workforce, dysfunctional relationships between management and their staff and political decision making.

Clarke, in his book Working with Monsters (Clarke, 2005), illustrates similar destructive effects psychopaths have on the organisation, at a macro level regarding business outcomes and processes, and also at the micro level, concerning the welfare and mental health of employees. In his book, Clarke highlights the necessity of managers to implement ‘duty of care’ over their employees as a practical way to educate and shield employees from the devastating impacts of organisational psychopaths. Having read this book, it has broadened my insight into better understanding the mindset of an organisational psychopath, and most importantly, in creating awareness among organisational members across all levels of the corporation that psychopaths exist and that by working together we can go a long way in attempting to curtail the destruction and disorder these people can cause in organisations.

Strategies that can be offered to managers to help deal with psychopaths in the workplace can include, but are not limited to;

1. **Screening job applicants for psychopathy**

   Measurements such as Hare’s psychopathy checklist (Hare, 1991), originally designed to identify criminal psychopaths, is one such measure that can be used by corporations as a screening tool linked to specific on the job competencies. This self-report questionnaire is both scientific and clinical in nature, providing both a reliable and valid profile of an individual with psychopathic traits. Departments in an organisation responsible for talent management and recruitment could use similar screens to monitor for psychopathy. Targeting candidates who are applying for leadership positions, conducting 360 degree management reviews and conducting comprehensive performance assessments of current leadership positions (Nankervis et al, 2011) are all recommended to help identify a manager who may have a negative impact on the team.

2. **Careful Management**

   Managers who are in leadership positions and who act ethically and morally can successfully set the scene for a company culture that will not tolerate inappropriate behaviour of any kind (Boddy, 2014). From my experience, the training of new managers to be ethical and moral leaders is paramount in facilitating careful management and should also include educating the workforce and periodically assessing morale in the workplace such as through staff engagement surveys.

3. **Risk Management Procedures**

   Risk management procedures is a scientific approach aimed at prompting the organisation to invest in acquiring more knowledge about what psychopathy is and what it is not, how it effects their employees, what is costs the organisation, and how to develop innovative ways to stop it from occurring (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007).

4. **Boosting mantra of corporate social responsibility**

   Corporations which strive to act morally and ethically are those that work hard to conform to social norms and laws.
These organisations will discourage organisational psychopaths because they have a clearly defined management culture, through transparent policies and procedures, making it difficult for the psychopath to get away with their behaviour.

Hence, being able to understand, identify and effectively manage organisational psychopaths are just some examples of the ways in which to curtail the havoc that they create, however this is no easy feat. In light of my personal experience working as a consultant psychologist across professional service sector firms, I have spent countless hours instructing, negotiating, counselling and problem-solving with all those directly involved with the organisational psychopath. What stood out for me personally from my experiences in dealing with these personalities in the workplace is how very delicate and dynamic the situation can become. In agreement with both Clarke (2005) and Hare (1991), great care must be taken when identifying and dealing with psychopaths as it has been documented by Hare that even mental health experts and highly experienced HR managers can be fooled and undermined by these personalities (1994).

In summary, the effectiveness of these techniques can be limiting if management of organisations do not properly understand the definition of organisational psychopathy on productivity, employee health and well-being and business outcomes. While organisations need to insulate themselves from psychopaths, this is no easy task.

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References:


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