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The Devil Lurks in the Suit

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Have you ever heard of this quote “The devil is more devilish when respected” by Elizabeth Barret Browning? How we define success guides our everyday actions. In today’s society, success is associated with power and often comes in the form of external gain such as money, objects, and titles. In fact, we often judge how successful people are by external cues: how they dress, how confident they are, how “driven” they seem to be. This definition of success is, without a doubt, what attracts dark personalities to the business world and also explains why these dark personalities easily get hired and promoted.

Employee selection processes are formed to hire the candidate with the most success potential. Because extraversion, charm, charisma, grandiose vision and promises, nice clothes and calmness during an interview are all seen as signs of success, candidates who show these characteristics during interviews have better chances of being hired.

Human resources (HR) professionals and industrial-organizational (or I/O) psychologists, who are usually in charge of employee selection and promotions, are governed by society’s standards of what constitutes success. They are asked to select a candidate according to managerial needs and are usually given a competency profile that they use to evaluate candidates. However, as previously mentioned, some external cues and characteristics are perceived as signs of success regardless of the position that needs to be filled. Because many of the characteristics associated with successful individuals are shared with dark personalities, it is crucial that professionals in

charge of selection processes are able to identify characteristics of such dark personalities. However, undergraduate and graduate programs, both in HR and I/O psychology do not introduce the notion of dark personalities and the repercussions these individuals can have on an organization. Unfortunately, the lack of knowledge on dark personality features and the propensity of these dark individuals to charm and manipulate others makes it extremely easy for these “masters of illusions” to enter organizations and climb the corporate ladder.

Dark personalities in the workplace

Three dark personalities, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy have been studied in businesses. Although the first two share similar traits with psychopathy, such as superficial charm, lying and manipulation, the inability to accept responsibility for their actions, and the complete lack of empathy, guilt and humility, a large body of research has demonstrated that psychopathic individuals are more dishonest, treacherous and destructive than the others. While all three dark personalities can be bad-news for a company, corporate psychopathy is the most dangerous. Nevertheless, because they use hard/deceitful manipulation tactics, are perceived as more dominant, and use overt means to appear more “attractive” to those they wish to manipulate, psychopathic individuals may have the upper hand when it comes time to identify and select the most likely to succeed candidate for employee selection and promotion.

The organizational “bad boy syndrome”

Over the years, CEOs, HR professionals, and academics have asked me if psychopathic traits are not part of what it takes to be successful in the business world, hence implying that hiring a psychopathic individual might just be what it takes to help the business be successful. In fact, some have even called individuals with psychopathic traits who work in the business world “successful psychopaths.” All is in the definition of success. If success is defined by the accomplishment of one’s goal, then I would say psychopathic individuals, by definition, are often successful. That is, they are successful at manipulating others into getting what they want, whatever the cost might be to others. Their ability to charm, manipulate and lie to others, coupled with the fact that their lack of empathy and guilt and failure to accept responsibility for their actions, gives psychopathic individuals the upper hand to attain their goals, by any means possible.

Most would argue that the ideal CEO profile is an extraverted charismatic individual who shows no sign of emotion under stressful circumstances, who is goal-oriented, aggressive with the competition, able to sell anything to anyone and who will be able to take drastic actions when needed. Coupled with the nice clothes, the charming smile, the expensive watch and the promises of bringing more money or wealth to the company, who can blame anyone for wanting to hire such individuals? However, will these characteristics bring success to the organization? Again, it all depends on the definition of success. If success is defined as getting new contracts or making risky business investments and decisions, and bringing profits for the organization, then they might be able to bring short-term success. However, in the long-run, their risk-taking behaviors, their lack of respect for rules, and abusive attitude towards others will leave a negative mark on the organization, especially on their colleagues and employees.

Many have asked me for advice on how to hire a psychopathic employee and profit from his skills while making sure that he remains honest and loyal to the organization. Basically, it's an organizational version of the "bad boy syndrome". Organizations want to see the candidate's aggressiveness, remorselessness and "bending the rules" attitude being used against their competition, not towards their own organization. The truth is that psychopathic individuals are not loyal in love or in business. They are only after one thing: their own benefit and they will not feel any remorse for defrauding their own company (or romantic partner for that matter). Would you call psychopathic individuals who commit violent crimes successful? Probably not. Still, some label individuals who defraud organizations and clients and who are abusive towards others in the workplace "successful psychopaths". While the end result may be associated with success for the individual (who may obtain hierarchical status, money and power), success needs to be also related to the process through which individuals achieve these goals. If not, then, society and organizations alike are opening the door to these individuals and disregarding their victims. While it may be tempting to hire candidates with psychopathic traits, these "bad boys" will not act faithfully and honestly towards the organization, regardless of how well the organization is treating them.

The difference between psychopathy in the business world and general psychopathy is the suit. In essence, the crimes are the same but it all comes in a more expensive and well-spoken package. Make no mistake, the long-term results are just as devastating.

Corporate psychopathy and leadership: Separating the good from the bad

Because psychopathic individuals do present some of the features that are viewed as associated with leadership or the “business world”, many are of the opinion that, to be a successful leader within organizations, one needs to possess psychopathic traits. It is crucial to understand that although psychopathic individuals may share some of the characteristics of great leaders, they do not make great leaders.

I work with a team on understanding the impact of psychopathic individuals in organizations and, so far, we have found that corporate psychopathy in managers is associated with increased psychological distress in employees, increased employee turnover and job neglect, and lower employee job satisfaction and work motivation. We have also found that managers who score higher on corporate psychopathy also score higher on negative leadership style and lower on positive leadership styles. In fact, we found that psychopathic traits in leaders are better predictors of employees’ lowered job satisfaction, job neglect, lowered work motivation and intention to quit their job than the manager’s leadership style (see a list of references below). One cannot lead without followers. While a title may give someone hierarchical authority, it does not give them increased leadership power. The power of a leader is not in his title; it lies within the relationship he has with his followers. The key to any organization’s success is its employees.

The relationship employees have with their direct supervisor is directly associated with their well-being and their view of the organization. Employees will associate the values put forward by their supervisors with organizational values. If a manager is abusive towards employees, the latter will see not only their supervisors as abusive but their organization as well. The impact of a bad hire at the management level is not just on the tasks associated with the manager’s position; it is on every one of his employees. If the manager has 50 employees, then the negative impact of the bad hire is multiplied by 50.

While both psychopathic individuals and good leaders share traits such as the ability to make difficult decisions, charisma, and extraversion, they also present significant differences. Good leaders possess high levels of emotional intelligence while psychopathic individuals have been shown to possess very low levels of emotional intelligence. This distinction is extremely

important as good leaders are able to focus on the task and on employees' well-being. A good leader will make decisions based on what is best for the organization and his employees while psychopathic individuals will base their decisions solely on their own best interests. Good leaders as well as psychopathic individuals will have a vision of where to take the organization in the future. However, good leaders will consult with others and take calculated risks and a long-term vision while psychopathic individuals will charge full-speed ahead and take uncalculated risks associated with a short-term vision.

Many organizations hire leaders based on task-oriented skills or work experience. For instance, they take their best salesman and make him head of the sales department. However, positive leadership is about more than being an expert; it is about being able to inspire others to follow a certain direction. In order to mobilize employees, the leader not only needs to know how to do, he needs to know how to be.

Throughout history, we have seen the rise of different kind of leaders; in my opinion, one of the most important distinctions between dark leaders and positive leaders is the intention behind their actions. And while leaders with psychopathic traits may bring more immediate or short-term success to the organization, good leaders will bring more long-term prosperity.

Undress the sheep to find the wolf

Because many businesses still rely solely on an interview and "gut feeling" for their hires, they may put themselves at risk in terms of hiring psychopathic individuals who can easily impress during interviews. As mentioned, psychopathic individuals share some important traits with great leaders, which makes it difficult, based on interviews alone, to screen these candidates out during the selection process.

In their book entitled "Snakes in Suits", Paul Babiak and Robert Hare present characteristics of psychopathic individuals in the business world. These traits include not being a good team member, inability to be modest, and inability to tell the truth. Furthermore, psychopathy has been associated with low emotional intelligence and empathy for others. All of these traits can be assessed through a competency-based structured interview in which the interviewer asks in-depth questions to assess whether the candidate possesses the competencies associated with the

position. There is a difference between being confident and not being capable of humility or modesty. Good leaders will back their realization and success stories with verifiable facts and will do it with a certain dose of humility, occasionally giving credit to others. Moreover, good leaders will take some credit but will also give credit to their team members while psychopathic individuals are likely to take all the credit for previous achievements.

While a competence-based structured interview is a good tool in a selection process and can help identify a number of traits, the use of psychometric personality tests reinforces what was observed during the interview. Some of the traits associated with corporate psychopathy mentioned above (i.e., inability to work in a team, lack of modesty and empathy, and low emotional intelligence) can be measured with the standard personality tests used by I/O psychologists for selection purposes. However, while these traits are part of what makes corporate psychopathy, they are by no means sufficient to give someone a diagnosis of psychopathy. They may, however, serve as “red flags” during the selection process. Paul Babiak and Robert Hare are developing a new measure of corporate psychopathy, the B-Scan. There are two versions of the B-Scan; a self-report measure of corporate psychopathy and a measure of corporate psychopathy in others. This instrument may prove to be useful in identifying psychopathic traits in candidates in the future.

Because psychopathic individuals would be very likely to lie about their credentials, it is also recommended that you run a thorough background check on candidates (references, education, previous work experience). The more you know about the candidate, the safer the hire. Bottom line: Do NOT rely on gut feeling alone. However time-consuming and expensive you think a hiring process such as the one proposed might be, you can be certain that the cost of hiring a psychopathic individual will be many times higher.

Final thoughts

In conclusion, associating psychopathy with success speaks more about our values as a society than it does about the individuals we call successful. Organizational success is only attainable through its employees' efforts and hard work. No leader, as excellent as he might be, can achieve success on his own. Good leaders will stimulate employee productivity by increasing their job satisfaction, work motivation and psychological well-being. That is why it is essential for

selection / promotion experts to be able to differentiate the good from the bad when it comes to management positions. While they may promise the moon, psychopathic individuals will leave employees and organizations in the dark when the time comes to rise to the occasion.

It is my opinion that the corporate psychopath's greatest success is making everyone believe that he is successful. Psychopathic success only benefits psychopathic individuals and comes at a high price for others and organizations who are merely seen and treated as means to an end.

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