

Book Review

Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work

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This is a book that has been a long time coming. While investigators toss around the term “psychopath,” this readable, non-technical text helps us understand the psychopathic personality and his actions in

a business environment. The authors, both experienced in dealing with psychopaths, use storytelling to demonstrate how these predators might operate within a company.

Not all psychopaths are serial killers, but they are, as a group, controlling, aggressive, abusive, and predatory. They also re-offend earlier and at a higher rate than the general criminal population.

While psychopaths make up about 1 percent of the general population, they account for about 15 percent of prison inmates. An additional 10 percent of the general population falls into a gray area of psychopathy we should be concerned about.

In the author’s original research of 200 high potential executives, they found 3.5 percent who fit the psychopathic profile.

The authors define several important terms that are used throughout the book.

Psychopathy is a personality disorder described by personality traits and behaviors. Psychopaths are without conscience and are incapable of empathy, guilt, or loyalty to anyone but themselves.

Sociopathy is not a formal psychiatric condition. It refers to patterns of attitudes

and behaviors considered antisocial and criminal by society at large, but are seen as normal or necessary by the subculture or social environment in which they developed.

Sociopaths may have a well-developed conscience and a normal capacity for empathy, guilt, and loyalty, but their sense of right and wrong is based on the norms and expectations of their subculture or group. Many criminals might be described as sociopaths.

Antisocial personality disorder differs from psychopathy because it does not require for diagnosis the personality traits found in psychopathy, such as lack of empathy, grandiosity, and shallow emotions. APD is three or four times more common than being psychopathic in the general population and in prisons. This is a broad diagnostic category found in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition.

Psychopaths have a propensity to break rules and tread the extreme boundaries of acceptable behaviors, taking advantage of people who trust them. One of the early researchers into psychopaths, Hervey Cleckley, noted that psychopaths’ use of language is different from most people. Their sentence structure, choice of words, and speech tempo were all different. In his previous book about psychopaths, *Without Conscience*, Dr. Hare found psychopaths have difficulty understanding the emotional content of words or how they might relate to them.

According to the authors, most of us will come into contact with a psychopath daily, but because they are adept at reading people and hiding their true selves they may be difficult to identify. Psychopaths are able and skillful communicators who deliver with a style that is confident, filled with jargon and clichés. Since the psychopath believes he deserves whatever he can get, he uses

these skills to become a “social chameleon” and master manipulator.

There also may be elements of narcissism in the psychopath. Narcissists believe the world revolves around them and as a result they ignore the needs of others.

Unfortunately, psychopaths tell stories so creatively and so believable many people instinctively trust them. The listener is fooled by the delivery over the content of what is really being said.

The authors’ note psychopaths will lie to people who know the truth and it will be those people who will doubt their own knowledge of the facts.

Psychopaths also shift the blame to avoid responsibility for their actions. They do so unencumbered by the guilt a normal person would feel since they do not experience that emotion. Once the victim has lost his or her value or is no longer useful to the psychopath he drops them and moves on to the next unfortunate soul. They have no attachment to the victim and are just as likely to blame the victim for the misfortune he caused them.

People often form impressions of others very quickly, especially positive ones. To maintain consistency with an early impression, people will disregard information contradicting their first sense of the individual. This is especially important for the psychopath’s success since he relies on style over content. However, the psychopath now moves to the second phase, manipulation, using his considerable charm. The conversation resonates with the victim since the psychopath has created an image of someone who shares the same beliefs and values as the intended victim.

Psychopaths follow a predictable pattern, beginning with the assessment of the individual: “How can I use this person?” In the initial phase the psychopath uses his considerable skills of observation to

determine attributes of the victim’s personality that may be manipulated. The second phase involves the actual manipulation of the individual: “How can I get him to do what I want?” The relationship is markedly one-sided, lasting only as long as the psychopath sees value in the victim’s ability to provide favors or other things of value. Once the victim’s value is over, the third and final phase, abandonment, takes place. In this final phase the psychopath may actually blame the victim for causing any problems.

Ironically, the victim may seek to reestablish the relationship with the psychopath because she misses the closeness she felt with him. Also, it is easier for the psychopath to maintain a mask with one person than it is with a group, so they often select vulnerable individuals as their victims. However, groups having a collective predisposition to trust, such as religious or political groups, are exceptions to this solitary victim scenario.

The authors cite a study by Reid Meloy and M. J. Meloy, who researched mental health and criminal justice professionals’ reactions to interviews with psychopaths. The professionals’ reactions to the psychopaths were varied and ranged from queasy stomach, feeling ill, shaky, weakness, pounding heart, shortness of breath, skin crawled or Goosebumps. Others reported being ill at ease, a sense of repulsion or need to flee—all of which are the body’s autonomic fight or flight response to a predator.

Businesses pose a challenge and yet provide incredible opportunities to the psychopathic personality. The authors laced the text with fictional examples of a psychopath in a business environment. Businesses are problematic because psychopaths are by their nature rule breakers, not team players, nor are they interested in the long-term goals of the organization. However, in rapidly growing companies these factors may be overlooked

at the outset because the psychopath comes across as ambitious, likable, competitive, and loyal.

Once management is convinced of the psychopath's "value to the organization," their support is assured and difficult for other employees to overcome because the psychopath is adept at manipulating impressions he gives others and uses secrecy to his advantage. The downfall for the psychopath comes when too many people start to see through his carefully crafted mask, although this may be delayed because of the strong political support he garnered early in his tenure.

The second part of the book looks at employment strategies to weed out the psychopath prior to hiring. As the authors note, skilled human resource representatives, auditors, and loss prevention personnel are the psychopath's worst enemy because of their in-depth interviewing experience and suspicious nature.

The authors advocate a strong pre-employment selection process using background investigations and intensive interviewing strategies to identify these types of individuals. Careful interviewing to evaluate the candidate's real qualities and successes will eliminate many of these dangerous characters from consideration.

For those who are interested in hearing Dr. Robert Hare speak on the topic of psychopaths, he will be presenting at the 19th Annual Association of Certified Fraud Examiners Fraud Conference. The conference will take place July 13 - 18, 2008, in Boston, Mass. For additional information, visit www.fraudconference.com or call 800-245-3321.