



SNAKES IN SUITS

WHEN PSYCHOPATHS GO TO WORK

Paul Babiak, Ph.D. & Robert D. Hare, Ph.D.

Also by Robert D. Hare, Ph.D.

*Without Conscience: The Disturbing World
of the Psychopaths Among Us*

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In memory of Cheryl, and Paul

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PREFACE

Most workers are honest, loyal, law-abiding citizens, concerned with making a living, contributing to society, and raising a family in a fair and just world. Others, though, are more selfish, concerned only about themselves with little regard for fairness and equity. Unfortunately, there are some individuals in the business world who allow the responsibilities of leadership and the perks of power to override their moral sense. A rise in the number of reports of abuse in major corporations should not be a surprise, given the increased access to unrestricted power, resources of startling proportions, and the erosion of ethical standards and values.

Some who have faltered may have experienced a weakened moral sense of "right" in the face of excessive temptation and easy access to power. Others may feel justified in reaping the rewards in proportion to the size of the organization they lead, arguing that their extravagances seem excessive only to those who have little hope of being so rewarded. Still others have embraced the self-serving mantras that "greed is good" and that success at any cost to others is justifiable and

even desirable. But another group exists, one whose behaviors and attitudes are potentially much more destructive to the organization and its employees than those noted above who are motivated by greed or big egos. This group, the subject of this book, displays a personality disorder rooted in lying, manipulation, deceit, egocentricity, callousness, and other potentially destructive traits. This personality disorder, one of the first to be described in the psychiatric literature, is psychopathy.

A dozen or so personality disorders have found their way into the psychiatric nomenclature. What makes psychopathy unique is that its defining characteristics and traits often lead to behaviors that conflict with the generally accepted norms and laws of society. Some people with psychopathic personalities are in prison because of their crimes against people and property. Others are in prison for committing economic or white-collar crimes, such as fraud, embezzlement, or stock manipulation. These are crimes against businesses and institutions, as well as the employees who work in them.

In addition to the problems their abusive behaviors cause to spouses, friends, and family members, individuals with a heavy dose of psychopathic traits are potentially harmful to professional relationships. For example, their grandiosity, sense of entitlement, and lack of personal insight lead to conflict and rivalry with bosses and coworkers, and their impulsivity and “live in the moment” philosophy lead them to keep repeating these and other dysfunctional, antisocial behaviors, despite performance appraisals and training programs. Many experts believed that these traits alone make it difficult for psychopaths to have successful long-term careers in industry. At least that was the conventional wisdom until we did our research.

One might think that conning or bullying traits in a job applicant would be so obvious to employers that such candidates would not be hired for important jobs, especially those where the ability to get along with others is critical. One might also think that abusive, deceitful behavior toward coworkers would eventually lead to disci-

plinary action and termination. But, based on the cases we have reviewed, this often is not the case.

There are four possible reasons for this. First, some core psychopathic personality traits—we might call them talents—may seem attractive in job applicants, and contribute to their success at being hired. For example, psychopaths can be very charming, able to talk their way past even the most seasoned interviewers. When it is to their advantage, they can display a charisma that can disarm and beguile even the most wary individuals. Just as those who have unwittingly married a psychopath find themselves trapped in a web of deceit, abuse, and pain, so too can a company make a faulty hiring decision and find itself with a serious problem on its hands down the road. Psychopaths are skilled at social manipulation, and the job interview is a perfect place to apply their talents.

Second, some companies quite innocently recruit individuals with psychopathic tendencies because some hiring managers may mistakenly attribute “leadership” labels to what are, in actuality, psychopathic behaviors. For example, taking charge, making decisions, and getting others to do what you want are classic features of leadership and management, yet they can also be well-packaged forms of coercion, domination, and manipulation. Failing to look closely beneath the outer trappings of stereotypical leadership to the inner working of the personality can sometimes lead to a regrettable hiring decision.

Third, the changing nature of business itself is also a contributing factor to the increase in psychopathic persons being hired. “Bureaucracy” as a business model evolved early in the last century to address the problems inherent in coordinating and optimizing the efforts of large numbers of people who were performing many inter-related job functions. As business competition became more sophisticated, these support systems became more complex, and their supporting infrastructure grew in size. As a result, bureaucracies typically employed a large number of people, had multiple processes and procedures, and were expensive to run. These characteristics earned them a reputation for being almost too big to be effective.

Since then, organizational structures and processes have evolved considerably, with the most dramatic changes taking place during the early 1970s and 1980s, the beginning of what may be called “the organization wars.” During this time corporate takeovers, acquisitions, mergers, and breakups led to great social and financial upheaval in the business world. The desire to create sleek, lean, efficient companies was a good one, and long overdue in many industries. Eventually, in order to survive, many companies shed their old-style, bureaucratic policies and structures for a flatter, more free-form, faster-paced organizational environment. During the 1990s, this new, “transitional” organizational style—fewer layers, simpler systems and controls, more freedom to make decisions—became the norm. In fact, *change* became a matter of business necessity and economic survival. Competing successfully now required the quick generation and movement of new information. Speed and innovation were now more important than keeping track of what was already old news.

With the need to embrace change came a switch from hiring “organization men and women” who would maintain the status quo to hiring individuals who could shake the trees, rattle cages, and get things done quickly. This hiring switch inadvertently led to the selection of some individuals with psychopathic traits and characteristics. Unfortunately, the general state of confusion that change brings to any situation can make psychopathic personality traits—the appearance of confidence, strength, and calm—often look like the answer to the organization’s problems. Yet, hiring individuals with these traits seemed like the right thing to do. Egocentricity, callousness, and insensitivity suddenly became acceptable trade-offs in order to get the talents and skills needed to survive in an accelerated, dispassionate business world.

Fourth, psychopathic individuals, known for ignoring rules and regulations, coupled with a talent for conning and manipulation, found these new, more flexible organization structures *inviting*. The temptation for someone with a psychopathic personality to join a

new, fast-paced, competitive, and highly effective “transitional” organization, especially one with few constraints or rules, is too great, and the personal rewards too significant, to be ignored. The effect of these things is that psychopaths are more attracted to work for businesses that offer fast-paced, high-risk, high-profit environments.

It is very important to understand how and why the psychopath so readily manipulates people and organizations, given the increasing financial and social risk to companies wishing to survive in a chaotic business environment filled with uncertainty, constant change, and increasing regulation. In addition to financial harm to a company and its shareholders, there are also personal dangers to coworkers. There is the risk to the careers of those subjected to the emotional or physical abuse of a psychopathic coworker. For example, senior executives may find their authority and security severely compromised by the “high-potential” management candidate moving up the ranks. Covert attacks and defensive maneuvers waste valuable time and energy that could otherwise be focused on creativity, productivity, and profitability. In addition, bruised leadership egos and lowered morale are much harder to measure but can lead to large declines in organizational performance.

Unfortunately, even an organization with sophisticated hiring and promotion practices would find it challenging to defend itself against these “corporate cons.” Even loyal coworkers—firsthand witnesses to much of the psychopath’s machinations—do not always understand what is happening. And, when some do raise the red flag, they may find that no one at the top responds to it.

This book evolved out of our growing realization that lack of specific knowledge about what constitutes psychopathic manipulation and deceit among businesspeople was the corporate con’s key to success. The scientific literature on the behavior of criminal psychopaths is extensive but geared to the forensic scientist and clinician. We hope to close some of the gaps in the current understanding of psychopaths among the business readers by using nontechnical language and case studies. We want to provide the reader with the

experience of working next to a corporate psychopath by presenting the kinds of real-life situations we've encountered in our work. Because a psychopathic coworker can harm your career in seen and unseen ways, we hope that this knowledge will prepare you to defend yourself in the future.

The premise of this book is that psychopaths do work in modern organizations; they often are successful by most standard measures of career success; and their destructive personality characteristics are invisible to most of the people with whom they interact. They are able to circumvent and sometimes hijack succession planning and performance management systems in order to give legitimacy to their behaviors. They take advantage of communication weaknesses, organizational systems and processes, interpersonal conflicts, and general stressors that plague all companies. They abuse coworkers and, by lowering morale and stirring up conflict, the company itself. Some may even steal and defraud.

This book will help you peel back the layers covering the psychopath's personality. We will approach this task in several ways, leading the reader toward an understanding of what makes psychopaths tick and what behaviors can be observed in the office that might provide clues as to their true nature. We will follow the exploits of "Dave," one of the first corporate psychopaths documented in the scientific literature, as he weaves his web of deceit. His ability to present himself as a rising star and corporate savior, all the while abusing his coworkers and eventually the company, will be made transparent. We will also explain in some detail what the current thinking is about psychopathic behavior in organizations, illustrating specific traits with examples and short case histories taken from real life. This book will introduce you to the way these "snakes in suits" manipulate others; it will help you see through their games and give you pointers on how to protect yourself, your career, and your company.

We consider it important to caution the reader that, although the topic of this book is psychopathy in the workplace, *not everyone*

described herein is a psychopath. The "snakes" we describe are not based on actual persons, and any resemblance to such persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Rather, they are profiles of generic psychopaths based upon composites of psychopathic characteristics derived from published reports, the news media, and our own research about such personalities. While we do at times refer to actual persons, such as in the sidebars, we do so only because the person's behavior is either consistent with the concept of psychopathy or illustrates a key trait or behavior that is typical of the disorder. While these individuals may or may not be psychopaths, their reported behavior provides a useful vehicle for elaborating the various traits and behaviors that define psychopathy. *The reader should not assume that an individual is a psychopath simply because of the context in which he or she is portrayed in this book.*