Psychopaths in the C-Suite: How to Avoid Them

Key Concept
Not all psychopaths are destined for prison or secure psychiatric hospitals. There’s a subset of ‘psychopaths lite’ – and it includes the ‘seductive operational bully’ (SOB). Manipulative, unprincipled and devious, and often highly persuasive and articulate, SOBs are capable of rising to the top of organizations - and wreaking havoc while there. Stopping them depends on creating an ‘inhospitable’ environment - and taking a ‘clinical’ approach to organizational diagnosis and intervention.

Idea Summary
Only a small number of psychopaths become violent criminals. Others lead outwardly normal lives and appear integrated into society. Strongly attracted to money and power, these ‘psychopaths lite’ often seek careers in finance and business. (According to some estimates, approximately 3.9 per cent of corporate professionals have psychopathic tendencies, against approximately one percent of the population generally.)

Like the psychopaths fictionalised in films and novels, ‘successful executive psychopaths’ or ‘seductive operational bullies’ (SOBs) might be termed ‘morally insane’. Incapable of experiencing normal feelings of guilt, remorse and shame, they continually flout moral laws. Left unchecked, SOBs can do irreparable damage, poisoning culture and taking risks that destroy value. They can even bring organizations down – through, for example, white-collar crimes such as accountancy fraud. Con artists skilled at manipulating others and covering their tracks, they can be difficult for employers and senior leaders to spot. Knowing something of their pathology will help with a ‘diagnosis’.

Signs of a psychopathic personality include:

- strong sense of ‘entitlement’ - narcissism and individualism;
- inconsistency and unpredictability - SOBs are chameleons who behave differently with different people, intimidating and demeaning those below them, flattering those above them;
- a low boredom threshold - never ‘completer-finishers’, SOBs leave the mundane tasks to others and tend to switch frequently between projects;
- constant need for self-gratification (often manifest in sexual promiscuity and drink and drug abuse);
- inability to empathise - ‘successful executive psychopaths’ won’t think twice about making people redundant or buying companies to carve them up;
- a Machiavellian tendency to put the expedient thing before the ‘right’ thing;
- reluctance to share knowledge or power and poor team leadership and team playing skills;
- inability to accept responsibility - a tendency to blame mistakes on others and look for scapegoats;
- dishonesty - lying is the ‘default’ position of the SOB;
- glibness and slickness, outward charm.

Since several of the above characteristics can easily be mistaken for effective leadership qualities - for example, decisiveness, coolness under pressure, confidence and eloquence – it’s vital that SOBs are weeded out early, or, better still, denied entry in the first place. This has clear implications for methods of recruitment and selection (see Business Application, below). More than this, however, it raises important questions about the extent to which organizations might foster psychopathic tendencies.

Although psychopathy is generally thought of as a neurobiological or deficit disorder (patients appear to lack a conscience), in most instances of complex personality dynamics, both nature and nurture play a role. Some people
may have a genetic predisposition towards a disorder, but the environment in which they are brought up will help determine how dysfunctionalities are expressed.

SOBs are most likely to flourish in companies that value impression management, corporate gamesmanship, risk taking, domination, competitiveness and assertiveness - and that appear ruled by the profit motive and the creation of shareholder value.

The best defence against the psychopath in the workplace is a structure that ‘selects’ them out. In successful organizations, there are cultural sanctions against psychopathic behaviours – in successful organizations not run by SOBs, that is.

**Business Application**

- **Try to detect** SOBs before they join the workforce. Screen résumés for lies and distortions - follow up references. Retain a healthy degree of scepticism when interviewing job candidates - don’t be easily flattered.
- **Watch out** for inconsistencies in ways direct reports and junior employees perceive colleagues and how their peer group or boss perceive them.
- **Listen** carefully to the ‘pitch’ of so-called star performers and employees classed as ‘high potential’. What’s impressing you when you hear them speak - style or substance?
- **Create** a team-oriented culture; deter the narcissist and the individualist.
- **Use** exit interviews to bring bullying behaviours to light.
- **Introduce** two-way appraisals and 360 degree feedback - and encourage junior employees to blow the whistle on SOB line managers.
- **Look** for clinical signs of psychopathy when assessing employees. (The checklist developed by criminologist Robert Hare is the standard reference.)
- **Encourage** accountability - tie key performance indicators to outcomes and make it hard for people to conceal their mistakes.
- **Consider** coaching and therapy for detected psychopaths lite, but be realistic about what it can achieve. Signs of short-term progress can be quickly reversed. Never assume an SOB has been ‘cured’.

**Further Reading**

**Further Relevant Resources**
Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries’ profile at INSEAD
INSEAD’s profile at IEDP

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