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1994

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Clifford J. Shultz

Loyola University Chicago, [cshultz@luc.edu](mailto:cshultz@luc.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Shultz, C.J. "Machiavellianism and sales performance" in *Irish Marketing Review* 7, 1994. <http://arrow.dit.ie/jouimriss/1>

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# MACHIAVELLIANISM AND SALES PERFORMANCE

*Clifford J. Shultz, II*

**The relationship between Machiavellianism and sales performance is emotionally charged. Few comments evoke more passionate responses from sales professionals and scholars of personal selling and sales management than the mere hint that selling might be Machiavellian. Yet while frequently debated, the topic is generally misunderstood.**

**This article is intended to clarify the misunderstanding surrounding this relationship by explaining the concept of Machiavellianism, and by examining empirical data on Machiavellianism and sales performance. Recent findings suggest the success or failure of Machiavellian tactics used during personal selling appears to be related to the organisational structure of the firm for which sales representatives sell. In loosely structured sales-marketing organisations 'so-called' high Machiavellians tend to be more successful than low Machiavellians, but in tightly structured sales-marketing organisations, high Machiavellians tend to be less successful than low Machiavellians. Managerial implications and policy considerations are discussed.**

Niccolo Machiavelli wrote most of his manuscripts as survival manuals for a politically unstable and chaotic era. Many sales and marketing professionals would argue today's sales arena is a zero-sum game that is becoming increasingly competitive, with higher stakes. Add to this trend an international dimension that intensifies further and raises higher the competition and the stakes, respectively, and today's business world — fraught with promise and peril, and with few clearly defined rules — imitates in many ways the instability and chaos of Machiavelli's political world. More and more this rapidly evolving business world is the one in which sales representatives will be asked to sell, and by definition, it is ripe for the opportunism, manipulation, and exploitation of the Machiavellian.

Are Machiavellians manipulative cynics, opportunists, pragmatists, or some combination? Whether this question will ever be sufficiently answered remains to be seen. What we now know, however, is that in certain business settings — e.g., loosely structured sales organisations — Machiavellians generally outperform individuals who are not Machiavellian. Something else I have personally learned over the last few years, while sharing the empirical data that support that conclusion, is that few comments evoke more passionate responses from sales professionals and scholars of personal selling and sales management than the mere hint that selling might be

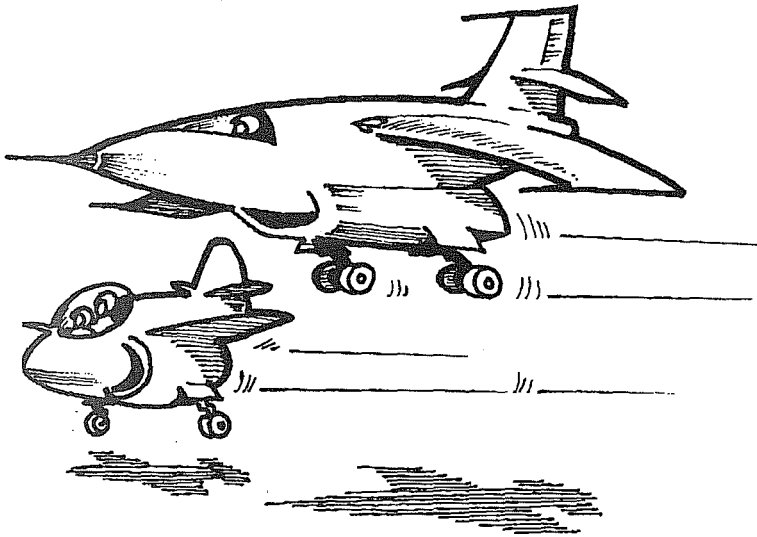
Machiavellian. The suggestion elicits disgust and revulsion from some and agreement and pride from others.

Rarely does one encounter an individual with interests in sales who is without a firm opinion on the relationship between sales and Machiavellianism. How can we explain these strong feelings and dichotomies? Are they rational? Do Machiavellians make better sales representatives? Are they preponderant in sales? What should sales managers know about the concept of Machiavellianism and should they manage differently Machiavellian sales representatives? In this paper I hope to answer these questions; to explain and to clarify the concept of Machiavellianism, its relevance to personal selling, and suggest implications and policy considerations for managers.

## **Popular Conceptions**

Much of the passion surrounding the issue of Machiavellianism and selling stems from the gross misunderstanding of Machiavellianism, or at least inconsistent and conflicting definitions of the term. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a more misinterpreted and misunderstood social psychological construct than Machiavellianism.

Lay definitions portray Machiavellians as individuals who view and manipulate others for their own purposes. At best, Machiavellians are generally considered to be cynics who are not opposed



to using guile, deceit and duplicity to achieve their objectives. At worst, they are considered to be immoral, and, some would argue, evil. These definitions, however, seem to be rooted in Elizabethan interpretations of Machiavelli and are not readily accepted by all scholars and students of Machiavelli (cf., Berlin, 1981).

### Psychological Conceptions

Psychological definitions suggest Machiavellianism is a disposition or personal orientation, fairly stable over time, that predicts how individuals will view the world and interact with others. For the purposes of empirical studies, the extent to which a person is or is not Machiavellian is dependent upon one's score on the Machiavellianism scales (see Christie and Geis, 1970). The scales are comprised of 20 items derived from fundamental beliefs espoused by Niccolò Machiavelli (translated 1940) and exist in two popular formats. Most studies have used the Likert-type Mach IV scale because it is easier to administer and produces higher reliability measures. I prefer the forced-choice format of the Mach V, however, because it controls socially desirable responses. This control is important because Machiavellians, not surprisingly, are quick to provide answers they think testers might want to see or hear if they think the impression created by their responses can be used to their advantage.

Typical items from the Mach scales include, for example, "most people are more concerned with making money than satisfying their conscience," and "never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so". The extent to which respondents agree with such items determines the magnitude of the respondent's Machiavellianism. Scores on both scales can range from 40 to 160, and depending on the population

of interest, average scores generally range from the low 90s to the high 90s. Thus Machiavellians, or "high Machs," tend to score in the upper 90s and higher, whereas low Machiavellians, or "low Machs" tend to score in the lower 90s and lower.<sup>1</sup>

I have found friends, colleagues and subjects to be surprised, dismayed, and sometimes satisfied to learn that their Mach scores indicate they are high Machiavellians. These responses partly may be a function of the aforementioned misunderstanding of Machiavellianism as a psychological construct and measure. It is important to note that a person's Mach score does not measure personal character or indicate whether one is intrinsically good or bad. High Machs tend to have a relative lack of affect or emotional attachment in interpersonal relationships, have little concern for conventional morality — where convention is usually determined by the norms of their reference group — are *not* grossly psychopathic, and tend to have low ideological commitment (cf., Christie and Geis, 1970).

Casual observers might conclude low Machs are better people or morally superior, but this conclusion is not consistent with research findings. For example, even though *low* Machs are opposed to dishonesty in principle, in low incentive conditions low Machs can be more easily pressured to cheat, while high Machs resist social pressures. In high incentive conditions, when end results or an absence of explicit rules may seem to justify questionable moral behaviour, high Machs more willingly cheat or use duplicitous methods to achieve their aims. Moreover, high Machs have been found to be more popular, better liked, and are frequently encouraged by their peers to seek leadership roles. The gifted high Mach, as it were, never appears to be obviously manipulative and is the kind of person who can dupe someone and then have that person thank him for the experience (Christie and Geis, 1970). At bottom, high Machiavellians tend to be rational game players who, unlike low Machiavellians, readily exploit opportunities to maximise personal gain.

### Machiavellianism, Situational Structure, and Performance

According to research-supported Machiavellian theory, simply having a Machiavellian orientation toward life and others may not necessarily be con-

ducive to success, or superior sales performance. For Machiavellians to outperform others, they must be in interpersonal situations that are conducive to effective Machiavellian tactics; that is, loosely structured social situations with few rules for conduct. These situations facilitate social improvisation and ultimately manipulation of events and other persons.<sup>2</sup>

High Machs win more, are persuaded less, persuade others more and otherwise differ significantly from low Machs in loosely structured situations. They are more attuned to the possibilities of rule infractions in a particular situation, tend to use rational strategies in manipulating others, are more likely to test the limits of what is permissible in a situation, and to be more flexible in the use of specific behaviours such as taking the initiative, bluffing, and the timing of offers made to others. Generally, they tend to "do what works".

Machiavellian *behaviour* occurs during the interaction of two components: a collection of dispositions as measured by the Mach scales and loosely structured situations in which explicit rules of conduct do not prohibit high Machs from manipulating events and others to their advantage. In such situations, high Machs tend to be "cool" and focused upon task accomplishment, while low Machs tend to be "soft touches" susceptible to Machiavellian tactics. The coolness of high Machs can be explained by their following characteristics:

- (i) Resistance to social influence and persuasion tactics used by others.
- (ii) Orientation to cognitions, problem solving and goal achievement.
- (iii) Inclination to initiate and to control situational structure and rules of conduct, and to make no assumptions that there is a "right" way to achieve ends.

In contrast, the tendency to be a soft touch among low Machs is explained by these characteristics:

- (i) Susceptibility to social pressure and persuasion tactics used by others.
- (ii) Personal orientation and desire to co-operate with others, rather than to "win".

(iii) Willingness to accept and to follow structure and rules of conduct, whether specified by institutionalised rules, or rules initiated by others; further, low Machs have a tendency to make implicit assumptions about rules of conduct based on the prescribed conduct of their reference groups and expect others to make those same assumptions (Christie and Geis, 1970).

A hypothetical scenario of this situation x disposition interaction is illustrated in Figure 1. In highly structured situations both high Machs and low Machs tend to work within specified guidelines. Low Machs give serious effort to perform well, while high Machs give uninspired or apathetic performances. Conversely, in loosely structured situations, the tactics — and ultimately the performances — of highs and lows differ greatly. Low Machs assume unstated limits, accept structure defined by others and are distracted from predefined goals — e.g., closing the deal or making the sale — during the interaction process. High Machs test limits, initiate and control structure, and exploit the situation and others in ways that enable them to outperform others or to make the sale.

### Sales and Machiavellianism

Not long ago, Hunt and Chonko (1984) concluded that marketing professionals were no more Machiavellian than normative groups, and that Machiavellianism and "success in marketing" (p. 38) were unrelated. That marketing professionals, including sales professionals, are or are not more Machiavellian than normative groups, is not the issue. That Machiavellians do exist in sales organisations and, indeed, have been found to be more successful in certain organisations than persons who are not Machiavellian is the issue.

Christie and Geis (1970) actually argued that personal selling was not a likely vocation for Machiavellians: "Although it is theoretically consistent that a high Mach would make a better salesman than a low Mach ...very few people have a burning desire to become a salesman, and entry into the field is frequently preceded by a failure to be successful at some other occupation" (p. 355).

This assertion seems to be based on preconceived, antiquated, or stereotyped images of sales professionals. Although the vocation of personal selling

still has its share of pitchers, hustlers, and hucksters, many sales roles have achieved professional status by just about anyone's standards. Today's sales representatives are often an integral part of a sophisticated enterprise and are members of a profession in which complex responsibilities may require them to implement extraordinary skills and knowledge if they expect to be successful. Sales representatives are frequently called upon to be the vanguard for the company. As such they may be asked to prospect, chart new paths, create new business, and provide market intelligence. As their jobs become increasingly multifaceted, their roles become increasingly ambiguous and they find themselves in corporate boundary roles that are intrinsically unstructured, stressful, risky and (potentially) rewarding.

In these high risk/reward situations, high Machs are more impervious to stress, bargain more aggressively, are more likely to win, are more driven by winning than equity, repeatedly have been shown to use ingratiation as a tactic to their advantage, and do in fact outperform low Machs at a statistically significant level. Therefore, individuals who may strongly desire the rewards that certain sales positions provide may be at an advantage if they are more Machiavellian than normative groups.

Defining what or who a sales person is, or what the archetypal sales role requires is secondary to determining whether the "occupational role involve(s) control and manipulation of others for official or unofficial ends in situations in which success is related to keeping one's cool" (Christie and Geis, 1970, p. 355). *Post hoc* analyses and follow-up interviews indicate that the ability to remain *composed* and *focused* on task achievement is critical to the success of high Mach sales representative.

### **Sales Organisation Structure as an Extension of Laboratory Manipulations of Situational Structure**

Most studies on the relationship between sales performance and Machiavellianism have failed to address situational variables as a predictor of success (e.g., Christie and Geis, 1970; Hunt and Chonko, 1984; Milord and Perry, 1977; Turnbull, 1976), even though laboratory studies have

repeatedly demonstrated that high Machiavellians win more than low Machiavellians when they are engaged in loosely structured situations (Christie and Geis, 1970; Vleeming, 1979).

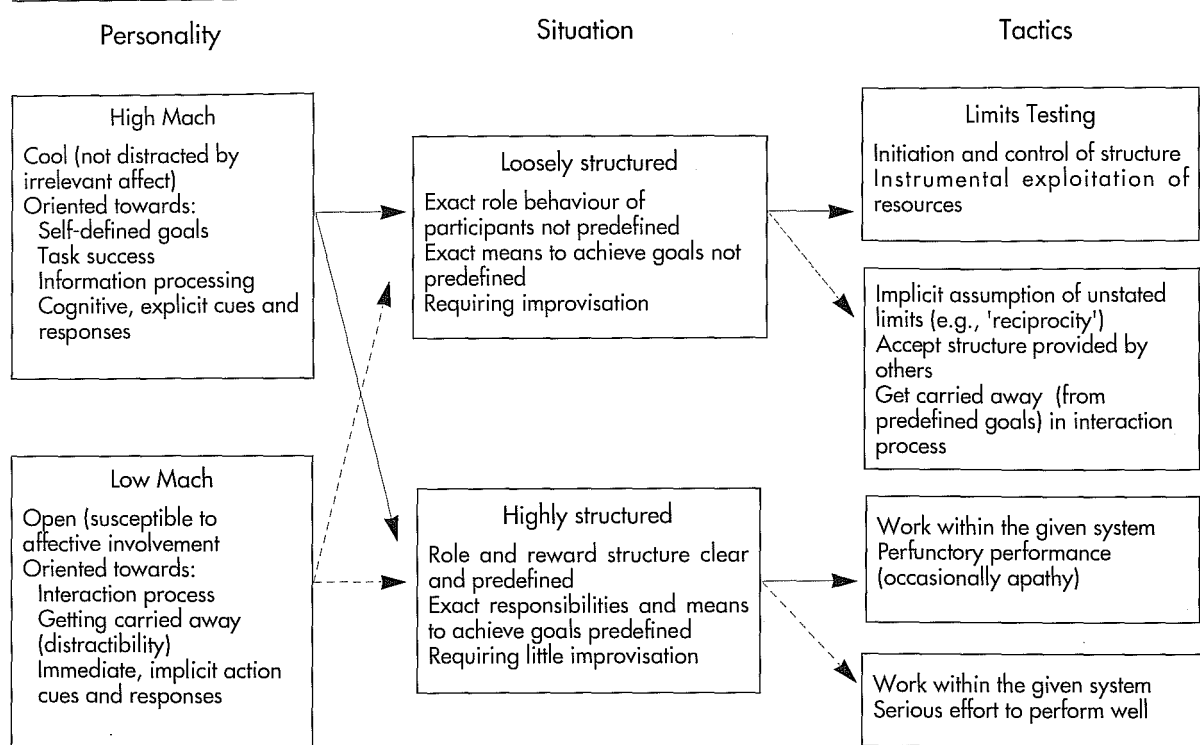
In laboratory settings tightly structured and loosely structured situations tend to be differentiated by the following criteria: "In highly structured situations roles of participants are clear, the way in which goals are achieved is defined, the rewards associated with each goal are defined, and there is little latitude for improvisation. Rules for behaviour are reasonably explicit and variation from them is penalised. Loosely structured situations are characterised by ambiguity as to the roles of participants, the means to achieve goals, and their associated rewards. In the absence of formal rules, the situation permits a variety of ways to introduce structure and to take advantage of its absence" (Christie and Geis, 1970, p. 350).

During my efforts to determine whether we can extend the laboratory findings to working populations of sales representatives I examined sales organisations that had disparate organisational structures as determined by configurational analysis (See Dunnette, 1983). The following criteria were used to discriminate tightly structured and loosely structured organisations and seemed to be equivalent to laboratory manipulations of situational structure.

(i) The ratio of sales representatives to managers. More sales representatives per manager indicate looser structure, less direct supervision and less managerial intervention in the sales representatives' daily selling routines.

(ii) The number and breadth of published rules, loosely defined rules, and/or unenforced rules regarding personal selling tactics and general sales conduct. More rules and comprehensive rules indicate tighter structure; loosely defined rules and/or unenforced rules indicate looser structure.

(iii) Decentralised locus of decision making. Sales representatives have the authority and opportunity to negotiate favourable remuneration outcomes, i.e., opportunities to "cut deals," and to manipulate terms or the product mix in ways that enhance sales commissions. This decentralisation occurs in loosely structured organisations.

**Figure 1 Model of Hypothesised Interaction: Mach X Situation with Predicted Tactics**

### Empirical Evidence from Working Samples of Sales Representatives

The hypothetical scenario in Figure 1 has been demonstrated in actual sales organisations selected for their differences in organisational structure. High Mach sales representatives make significantly higher sales commissions than low Machs in these same loosely structured business settings. Just the opposite occurs in tightly structured firms.

Two types of sales organisations were selected to test the hypothesised interaction. The selection process was based on intuitive assumptions about organisational structure and work environments in certain industries; then the intuitive selection was tested by a configurational analysis based on the preceding criteria. Current folklore, intuition, and personal contacts with sales representatives, stock brokers and relationship managers from brokerage houses and investment banks led me to believe that these "sales organisations" would be loosely structured. As a comparison group, intuition and personal contacts again led me to believe various sales offices from NYNEX — an American telephone and communications company with relatively rigid codes of conduct, assigned territories, and regulated sales commissions — would be representative of a tightly structured sales organisation. The configurational analysis supported the intuitions:

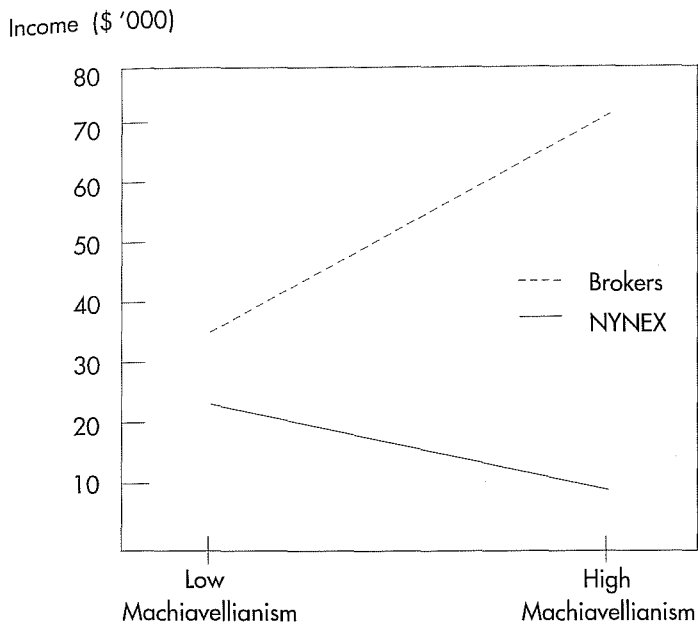
Figure 2 illustrates the statistically significant

interaction between Machiavellianism and organisational structure when income from sales commissions was the criterion variable. This figure is derived from self-report responses provided by 101 high and low Mach sales representatives from various brokerage houses and NYNEX offices (see Table 1).

The findings support the contention that in certain conditions, Machiavellianism is related to success. In loosely structured organisations that enable sales representatives to improvise in ways to enhance reward outcomes, high Mach sales representatives are more successful than low Mach sales representatives. In tightly structured organisations that do not enable such improvisation, low Mach sales representatives are more successful than high Mach sales representatives. Thus, performance clearly can not be predicted by Machiavellianism per se, instead we must consider the professional situations in which sales representatives are asked to sell.<sup>3</sup>

### Managerial Implications

What are the managerial implications of these findings? I do not believe that sales managers or human resources personnel should use Machiavellianism as a selection or promotion criterion. The factors that predict success are numerous and complex and using a decision criterion based on a single measure is simplistic and unfair to both companies and employees. I do believe, however, that knowing an employee's orientation toward

**Figure 2** Incomes for High and Low Machs in Tightly and Loosely Structured Sales Organisations

Machiavellianism would help sales managers better understand and identify roles for which sales representatives might be best suited. Sales roles that require representatives to be "Hunters" — individuals assigned to new territories, high risk situations, very competitive situations, and/or cross-cultural international, and unfamiliar settings — might be more appropriate for high Machiavellians. Sales roles that require representatives to be "Gatherers" — individuals assigned to fairly stable and less competitive situations that would require the representative to nurture and counsel extant clients — might be more appropriate for low Machiavellians.

One would think that high and low Machiavellians would tend to gravitate toward professional situations and organisations that would facilitate their professional growth. Although this phenomenon has been observed in some studies (cf., Christie and Geis, 1970) it does not always occur, as evidenced by the almost equal number of respondents in the cells of Table 1. When a manager does encounter a high Mach in a tightly structured organisation, what should he or she consider? The manager can be almost certain that the high Mach representative in a tightly structured firm does not commit all his or her energies toward job-related activities. It might be prudent for managers to examine how high Machs spend their time on and off the job as compared to low Machs. In the study mentioned here, high Machs did not perform so perfunctorily that they were fired (they had been with the company for an average of six years), but their lower commis-

**Table 1** Income Means and Standard Deviations for High and Low Machs in Tightly Structured and Loosely Structured Sales Organisations

(\$ '000)	Structure	
	Tight	Loose
High Mach	11.6 (16.1) 26	71.8 (47.2) 26
Low Mach	22.3 (24.2) 24	34.4 (30.9) 25

sion earnings indicate that they were not working as diligently as low Machs. This also suggests they were spending less time on the job, and perhaps, were spending their non-work time moonlighting, pursuing political or social goals, or some other non work-related activities.

Given the demonstrated superior performances of high Machs in loosely structured sales organisations, should we encourage "Machiavellian tactics" when such tactics could be advantageous to both employee and firm? Would we expect to observe any social, commercial, or political "fallout" from encouraging Machiavellian tactics? What are the corporate implications for companies whose transactions involve a sensitivity to international issues, such as laws, customs, and political instability? Remember, high Machiavellians will not automatically engage in sales tactics that are immoral. They will tend to make rational assessments about the success of particular tactics, with consideration for the constraints of the situation, and then use tactics that will work in that situation. Therefore, it might be advantageous to sales representative, firm, manager, and stock holder to encourage representatives to "do what works".

If management chooses to make this strategic decision, management should also consider that in an increasingly competitive world of international sales, corporate and cultural parameters of ethical behaviour are frequently confusing, conflicting, and sometimes even inappropriate. While agreeing on the extent and scope of ethical standards is difficult, research tells us that if managers hope to optimise the potential of high Machs who sell in unstructured situations, they should also consider doing the following:

- (i) Establish policies that clearly delineate unacceptable tactics and practices.

- (ii) Educate sales representatives about these policies.
- (iii) Enforce sanctions for violations of corporate policies.
- (iv) Create a corporate culture that encourages employees to consider whether their sales tactics

that work also cross the explicit or implicit line that separates moral from immoral conduct.

By so doing, many managers should be able to leverage the effective improvisational sales skills of high Machiavellians without the negative repercussions that some would associate with Machiavellian tactics.

### Author

Clifford J. Shultz, II is Visiting Professor, Columbia University Graduate School of Business, Uris Hall, New York, NY 10027. His research and publication interests encompass marketing management, organisational behaviour and economic analysis.

### Acknowledgment

I dedicate this paper to the memory of Richard Christie, scholar, mentor and friend. I also thank Aidan O'Driscoll, Morris Holbrook, Noel Capon, Donald Lehmann, the late Richard Christie and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. The data, table, and figures have been presented in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* and are used here to clarify and to illustrate concepts of interest to managers.

### Notes

1. I performed a median split to discriminate high and low Machs in the data presented here; the median score for this sample was 99. Trend analyses suggest that average scores on the Mach scales are rising, vary as a function of cultural origin, geographic location, religious orientation and gender, but not intelligence. For a detailed discussion of the psychometric development of the Mach scales, see Christie and Geis (1970, Chapter 3).
2. More precisely, Machiavellians in laboratory settings were most successful when (a) subjects interacted face-to-face with others, (b) latitude for improvisation was present and the subject was free to initiate responses as s/he can or will, and (c) affective involvement with details irrelevant to winning distracted low Machs (Christie and Geis, 1970, p. 312). Face-to-face interaction seems to be less important than originally thought. In fact, most selling these days occurs via telephone

communication, which according to theory would place high Machs at a disadvantage. However, even without face-to-face interaction, "improvising a conversation or deciding what to do in an unstructured situation can have the same effect". (Christie and Geis, 1970, p. 293).

3. For a complete discussion of the methods, procedure, statistical analyses of all measures, and design limitations, readers are encouraged to read the original *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* article.

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