

A CLIMATE OF FEAR

**STONE COLD PSYCHOPATHS AT
WORK**

CLIVE R. BODDY

This version of the book is for Middlesex University Repository and contains the first chapter and some additional pages.

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Dedications and Thanks

Firstly, I would like to thank all the research participants who have shared their stories with me and taken part in the quantitative and qualitative research which this book draws on. Talking about and reporting on the experience of working with a corporate psychopath can bring back many painful memories and so discussing these experiences can be difficult. Hopefully it is also cathartic, enabling people to unburden themselves and move on with a greater and at least somewhat liberating understanding of what happened. Thank you also to the numerous people who write to me to offer their appreciation and encouragement for my research into corporate psychopaths. I do try and reply to all such messages but sometimes, because of my poor memory, some communications may get lost or misplaced. However, it is always a positive experience to learn that this research into corporate psychopaths has helped many people understand and come to terms with their own abusive experiences with psychopathic and bullying managers.

I should also thank my lovely wife Hsiang-Ju for her unfailing love, support, patience and understanding while I conduct this research and then try and write about it. Thanks also to my three daughters, Katherine, Cassandra and Christine, as well as Eric Henderson, for their constructive comments on various aspects of this book and its dissemination. Lastly, I thank my fellow academics whose insights into leadership, psychopathy and toxic management have provided the bedrock of knowledge on which I have tried to base this book.

1. Introduction

This book examines multiple contemporary and historical failures in ethical organizational leadership through the lens of corporate psychopathy and finds that this viewpoint helps to illuminate and explain these breakdowns. A further finding is that workplace bullying should not be so readily dismissed by organizations as it currently is, because this abusive behaviour and the fearful climate that it generates, is often just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Out of sight of senior organizational managers and directors, a plethora of nefarious activities are simultaneously underway, orchestrated by the bullying corporate psychopath in order to enrich themselves by appropriating the resources of the organization which employs them. Perhaps more than anyone can remember in their lifetimes, there currently appears to be a plague of toxic leadership. Modern society seems to be full of organizational leaders who apparently tick all the correct boxes for success and who present their audience with a mask of cool, unperturbed, smiling, professional competence. Frequently these leaders are honoured by heads of state, admired by politicians and feted by the press, thus cementing their façade of competence and the illusion of their deserving leadership respectability. However, and unfortunately, the fruit these leaders bear is marked by self-indulgence, narcissistic self-regard, organizational failure, bullying, greed, fraud, illegality, corruption, favouritism, un-sustainability and a careless indifference to the fate of their employees and of wider society. As a result, a “climate of fear” is reported to exist in business concerns, sports organizations, health service providers and numerous other areas of human activity.

Some writers on leadership report that this is an on-going crisis of ethics and character in leadership and that globally, toxic leaders are ‘everywhere’ at the moment. I agree; too many organizational leaders have bullied, lied, cheated and manipulated their way to the top. The presence of corporate psychopaths in leadership appears to be so pervasive and influential that I would argue that it is one of the most important subjects for investigation by academics or anyone else. This research therefore constitutes a very important stream of management and social inquiry for the twenty-first century. Furthermore, if leading HR commentators and Corporate Psychopathy Theory are correct, and recruitment procedures remain shallow and mainly interview-based, then without remedial action being taken, destructive and psychopathic employees are increasingly likely to emerge as organizational leaders. This is because these people shine at interviews, regardless of their true qualities.

In the immediate future, the problems of toxic leadership will therefore get worse rather than better.

So far, research shows that corporate psychopaths have a large, noxious influence on bullying, conflict workload, work ethic and poor leadership in organizations. This is discussed later on in this book. The presence of corporate psychopaths also has a very large impact on employee well-being, emotional health, job satisfaction and on perceived levels of corporate social responsibility, where all of these decline in the presence of these stone-cold psychopaths. The ruthless persecution of their detractors and those who dare to blow the whistle on the destruction these leaders are achieving is also evident, as recent headlines make clear. These destructive, toxic, selfish and money-loving leaders appear to populate the senior levels of all areas of life.

In sports like football and racing, in religions, in business, the media and in politics across Europe and the Americas we find case after case of lying, bribery, bullying, corruption, concealment and naked self-interest. This raises a number of intriguing questions. Who are these leaders? How did they get to the top? In what ways can they be identified? Why is it that they are not effectively opposed? These are some of the questions that this book, in its examination of corporate psychopaths, seeks to answer. Firstly however, the concept of the psychopath needs to be made less ambiguous. This is because over time, psychopathy has become confused with criminality and people tend to assume that psychopaths are criminals. People do not commonly associate psychopaths with the corporate world. Therefore, when I mention that I spend my time researching this breed of psychopaths, and what they do within organizations, some academics laugh as this apparently weird juxtaposition of words – or at least they used to.

However, a large minority of people know only too well what I am talking about because they have worked with these psychopathic people as colleagues or as managers. These people who have worked with corporate psychopaths have invariably suffered for it in terms of their emotional well-being, self-esteem, how much they trust their peers, financial outcomes and career development. There are also important negative consequences for the organizations which have corporate psychopath leaders within them, as well as sub-optimal outcomes for society. This book has, in part, been written so that people who have worked with psychopathic colleagues can understand these experiences and put them in the context

of what is known about corporate psychopaths. Hopefully such knowledge can help to minimise the psychological and emotional damage that has been done, by providing a greater understanding of what has happened.

This book also helps to address the absence of research-based knowledge regarding corporate psychopaths, whom some academic commentators such as Alasdair Marshall and his colleagues, regard as being a serious and worldwide threat to the practice of business ethics.

For those readers who have never worked with a corporate psychopath I hope your luck continues. Nevertheless, if you, or your friends or loved ones do come across a corporate psychopath, this book may provide you with some defence because to be pre-warned is to be at least a little pre-armed. Thus, despite some people's initial scepticism, the study of corporate psychopaths has now emerged as an important area of management and social research. This book describes the findings of the research that has taken place over the last twelve years. This research details important findings relating to the sheer extent of the damage that corporate psychopaths have inflicted on many corporations and on society, and in terms of their intimate links with the global financial crisis.

Papers reminding us of the negative impact of one type of corporate psychopath, the political psychopath, have also been published. The trio of top Nazi's in 20th century Germany; Adolf Hitler, Hermann Goering and Rudolf Hess, were all quite independently diagnosed as psychopaths. For example, Hitler was diagnosed as a psychopath in 1933 which was just about the time he initially gained power but before his gargantuan psychopathic crimes were manifest. In other words, psychopaths can be spotted before they get to the top.

This manuscript illustrates how corporate psychopaths have been expected and have been found to behave towards other employees, the organizations which employ them and towards society. The book is very much a catalogue of abuse.

It'll also addresses the emerging and somewhat sensational and headline grabbing notion from psychology, that psychopaths can be successful or that psychopathy and success go together.

This is a limited, narrow and misleading viewpoint. So far, my own research uncovers that psychopaths in business and other organizations are ultimately, wholly destructive. There is evidence of the presence of corporate psychopaths at senior levels in charities, marketing companies, the civil service, academia, the NHS, manufacturing companies, politics, finance and many other kinds of organizations. Their personal success in achieving promotion to managerial levels is usually at the expense of those who are humbler and less good at self-promotion, but who are nevertheless better qualified and more suited to do those jobs effectively and for the benefit of all.

In terms of how they achieve their ends, corporate psychopaths, in both the UK and USA, appear to have a similar protocol for accomplishing their self-oriented objectives. Their modus operandi involves using loud, regular, public bullying combined with more discrete threats of violence to create a fearful, cowed and compliant workforce who can easily be manipulated and controlled by the abusive corporate psychopath. The result for the organization is that important resources of time and money are diverted away from essential services and towards the self-enrichment of the corporate psychopath.

Furthermore, money is spent on legal defences, compensation for bullying and unfair dismissals as well as pay-offs for signing non-disclosure agreements, rather than on organizational care, employee care, customer care and patient care. Corporate psychopaths do not care for anything or anyone except themselves. Therefore, once in a management position, the psychopath invariably has a malevolent impact on other employees, a destructive impact on organizational performance and a negative impact on society. Before these impacts are described in more detail, a brief definition of psychopaths, and corporate psychopaths, is given in the following chapter.

2. Psychopaths and Corporate Psychopaths

“The typical psychopath, as I have seen him, usually does not commit murder or other offences that promptly lead to major prison sentences”. Hervey Cleckley, (The Mask of Sanity)

Psychopaths

Something in the region of one per cent of people have no inner voice of conscience, no sympathy or moral principles to guide, inhibit and regulate how they deal with and act towards other people. These people are called psychopaths. Their lack of conscience correlates with certain neurological features to do with abnormal brain connectivity and chemistry, centred in the areas of the amygdala (emotion) and orbital/ventrolateral frontal cortex (self-management and control). Scientists like James Blair and Kent Kiehl have investigated this in detail. This anomaly in brain activity exists alongside a lack of empathy, undeveloped emotions and a lack of ability for the psychopath to have any feelings for other people. This enables corporate psychopaths to be ruthless seekers of their own material gain and financial advancement regardless of the cost of this to others. These psychopaths who work in corporations have been called various names over time, including ‘Executive Psychopaths’, ‘Corporate Psychopaths’, ‘Industrial Psychopaths’, ‘Organizational Psychopaths’ and ‘Organizational Sociopaths’ and they roughly correspond with groups also referred to as ‘Successful Psychopaths’ and ‘Primary Psychopaths’. These differences in terminology are evidence of the fact that a commonly accepted vocabulary does not fully exist in this emerging field of study.

In recent times, the term “corporate psychopath” has more and more been adopted for use and this is the term I have used in all my research since 2006. In terms of gender, psychologists used to estimate that there were 2 male psychopaths to every 1 female, but currently it is reported as 4 males for every female. However, there is little concrete evidence about this and my own view is that the ratio may prove to be even wider than this. In other words, psychopathy appears to be a male dominated personality.

Corporate Psychopaths

Definitions of personalities such as psychopaths, corporate psychopaths Machiavellians and Narcissists are made up by people; it is us humans who characterize and name these personalities. These delineations are therefore contested and have been subject to 'conceptual drift' – changes in our understanding and definitions of these personalities over time. They are also differently defined by different people. Thus, the descriptions of aberrant personalities are not as definitive as those for naturally occurring genera in the physical world such as gerbils and mice, whose mammalian similarities and genus specific variances can be scrutinized and described. Therefore, some researchers may discuss aggressive or extreme Narcissists and Machiavellians as being essentially the same as corporate, successful or primary psychopaths.

According to the 'Encyclopedia of Business and Professional Ethics' (in press):

“Corporate psychopaths can be defined as those psychopaths – ruthless people with no conscience or empathy – who work in the organizational or corporate sector”.

The existence of organizational leaders with aberrant personalities or personality disorders, and the potentially negative impact they may have on corporate life and organizational performance has emerged as a subject of interest to business and management academics like Jean Lipman-Blumen, Kets de Vries, Belinda Board, Katarina Fritzon and others, since about the last quarter of the last century. Before this the occurrence of well-adapted psychopaths operating relatively unnoticed in society and possessing white collar and professional jobs had been examined in a book called 'The Mask of Sanity'. This was first published in 1941 and was based on observations from the clinical and professional practice of a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry called Hervey Cleckley.

Cleckley made clear in his book that psychopaths were challenging to deal with and presented complications for whoever interacted with them, including for their relations, tutors, social workers and the general public. Cleckley also pointed out that psychopaths were adept at avoiding restraints on their behaviour and good at wriggling out of any punishments that may be deserved. Cleckley, in his pioneering book, discusses psychopaths as businessmen and as capable, apparently knowledgeable people.

Originating from well-to-do family backgrounds, reports Cleckley, psychopaths progress through university based on using or plagiarising the work of their peers. They then move on to employment, gaining jobs such as being brokers, dealers and advertising executives where they frequently give no attention to their primary work responsibilities but nevertheless get along in their careers based on their interesting personalities, their charm, apparent sophistication, cordial manners and verbal dexterity. Cleckley describes such psychopaths working in institutions like universities and hospitals, as lawyers and engineers and as people who portray themselves as able, educated and influential and who appear to be living industrious and well-adapted lives within society. They thus come across as advantageous people to know and as agreeable, upbeat, cheery, socially at ease and genuine. However, despite experts on psychopathy like Harvey Cleckley and Michael Levenson reminding us that many people who could readily be classified as psychopaths will not ever end up in prison, psychologists have only slowly realized that not all psychopaths are criminal.

Further, it has come to be realized that many of these ruthless psychopathic individuals seek white-collar careers in major corporations, political organizations and other centres of power and finance. Corporate psychopaths have been identified as the types of people who can easily get them-selves employed by these sorts of organizations. Once hired, the corporate psychopaths then evaluate the corporate environment for opportunities for personal gain, assessing how they can manipulate their colleagues and events to their own advantage. Psychopaths are thus merely those people, representing about 1% of the human population, who have no conscience and who demonstrate a grasping, predatory and freeloading approach to life. This predatory approach to life appears to be related to brain functionality differences in psychopaths.

Corporate psychopaths are conceptualised to be career oriented but nevertheless ruthless, unethical and exploitative employees. Estimations are that while about 1% of junior employees are corporate psychopaths (assuming an even distribution of psychopaths across society) they exist at a higher incidence of about 4% at senior organizational levels. Notably, these percentages may be even higher in certain types of organizations, as corporate psychopaths are thought to gravitate towards organizations where they can acquire money, power and control, as well as honours and prestige, rather than to the less rewarded and less well-remunerated caring professions. Caring for other people is simply not on their agenda.

Psychopaths have indeed been found to be more common in some organizations rather than others including, according to psychology researcher Kevin Dutton, as CEOs and as lawyers. This level of incidence results in between 5% and 15% of employees working closely enough with a corporate psychopath at any one time to realise that something is nasty and unethical about their personality.

In the interests of giving a balanced view, it should be noted not all commentators believe that workplace psychopathy is important or necessarily negative. For example, in one academic paper, authors called Caponecchia, Sun and Wyatt appear to dismiss the importance of psychopaths in the workplace and report that this lack of importance is because psychopaths represent only 0.6% to 1.2% of the adult population. However, their own finding that 13.4% of their sample of employees rated a colleague as high in psychopathic traits, supports the view that psychopaths in the workplace are fairly commonly encountered. I discuss this in more detail in the chapter (Ch 5) about the importance of corporate psychopaths at work.

Other commentators suggest that psychopathy may be beneficial to organizations and an on-line search for “success and psychopaths” will take you to papers and articles articulating this viewpoint. Psychopaths have also been depicted by researchers like JJ Ray and JA Ray, as being popular, extroverted, affable and confidence inspiring which helps those psychopaths get ahead in work and society.

This charming affability logically makes them difficult to identify when they are first encountered. While psychopaths are known to be very good at manipulating their own image among those whom they wish to impress, and at projecting a trustworthy persona, it may nevertheless be useful for those who are involved with policing managerial behaviour within organizations and with preventing fraud, for example, to know what personality traits corporate psychopaths possess.

The traits that they possess almost all of are described below. This high level of multiple, simultaneous trait possession is important to realize, as some of the traits may be held by everyone to a restricted extent. However, psychopaths more or less possess them all. They display an amount of charm when first met and this entails their being very convincing when it suits them, silver-tongued, pleasant and extroverted, while being compelling and

fascinating talkers. This makes them immediately affable and apparently friendly. They are also able to lie convincingly when they need to; they are naturally good at spinning a plausible story and being able to talk themselves out of trouble when found to be deceitful. This makes them appear convincing and credible.

On the other hand, corporate psychopaths are also domineering and good at deceiving and using other people; they have well developed political and networking expertise and are accomplished at emotionally and/or sexually seducing people.

They will claim to be very good friends with important people whom in reality they hardly know and could not care less about. In an attempt to impress the gullible, gilt edged photographs of corporate psychopaths shaking hands with VIP's will prominently fill their hallways.

However, we know that corporate psychopaths have a negative influence across a range of organizational outcomes and their behaviour is the opposite of constructing and sustaining effective, sustainable high-performance teams and organizations. Nonetheless, Cleckley also describes a psychopath as someone who can appear to be somehow superior and more attractive than normal people usually do upon first meeting them. This is because psychopaths come across in conversation as reasonable people who are sound in judgement, appear to be ethical and seem to have admirable human values.

The following section of this chapter discusses in greater detail how to identify corporate psychopaths.