

Does it pay to be a psychopath?

We all know that to get to the top – whether it is in finance or Formula 1 – you need that killer instinct. You need the ability to edge out your rival at the last bend, or negotiate behind the scenes to close multibillion-rand deals. As many psychology gurus have pointed out, this killer instinct is associated with a very particular kind of person – one whose drive and ambition propels them to break boundaries, sometimes, moral boundaries. Indeed, this fierce drive can be symptomatic of a mental condition that many believe is most common among highly successful business people.

In case you're confused, we're talking about antisocial personality disorder which, to the average Joe, translates into someone a little on the crazy side, or, a psychopath. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the key features of this disorder are: (1) antagonism (which includes manipulation, callousness, deceitfulness, and hostility), and (2) disinhibition (which includes risk-taking, impulsivity, and irresponsibility). Psychopaths are therefore hell-bent on scoring short-term gains and making the 'quick killing', as opposed to planning for the long term.

Now wait a minute... does that not sound like a description of how some of the world's most powerful financial houses and companies are run? Playing financial Russian roulette with risk-laden derivatives, murky hedge funds, and exploiting the vulnerable with reckless, unsecured lending can all very comfortably fall into the category of impulsive, psychopathic behaviour.

As Dr Gavin Price, who teaches on leadership and ethics at GIBS, points out, the parallel drawn between psychopathic behaviour and leading CEOs and financial wizards is not a new one and, in many ways, can be viewed as an unflattering

reflection of modern business and the kind of behaviours it both rewards and encourages.

"There is legitimate evidence that supports the idea that CEOs have psychopathic tendencies, which stems from the fact that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) has a checklist for diagnosing psychopathic disorders, and CEOs tick most of the [antisocial personality disorder] boxes," Price explains. "This is not to say that every CEO is a psychopath, just that there are often striking similarities in the personality profiles."

It should come as no surprise then, that books such as Kevin Dutton's *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success*, and business blogs are spreading the idea that there are certain jobs that attract literal psychopaths – and leading multibillion dollar companies and high-powered financial houses are undoubtedly among them.

"A number of psychopathic attributes [are] actually more common in business leaders than in so-called disturbed criminals – attributes such as superficial charm, egocentricity, persuasiveness, lack of empathy, independence, and focus," author Kevin Dutton explains in the book.

So, is there really such a fine line between some of our most esteemed business leaders – whom many aspire to emulate – and despised conmen like Bernie Madoff who pilfer money from pensioners? And, if so, should we really be aspiring to become yet another cut-throat CEO or hedge fund manager?

Cynthia Schoeman, MD of local consulting firm Ethics Monitor, argues that the answer to the first question is a straightforward 'yes'.

"Intelligence, ambition, charm, drive... these are all common characteristics in both successful conmen and respected CEOs," she explains. "With the former, however, you are just removing the ethics

part."

Encouragingly, Schoeman believes that CEOs without ethics (potential conmen, that is) have less and less room to manoeuvre, because business is undergoing a profound shift from being reckless and profit driven – no matter the cost to society and environment – towards more 'responsible capitalism'.

Schoeman points to the countless lobby groups, global NGOs and fierce environmental advocates, the Internet, and new laws such as the Companies Act and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in the US – all of which are forcing CEOs and the companies they lead to become more accountable. And the majority of them are beginning to toe the line.

Whether this is because leaders believe in 'doing the right thing', or because being responsible and ethical is becoming a business imperative, is irrelevant, Schoeman argues. The key point is that the transformation is happening.

For those who do possess the killer instinct then, these days it is perhaps best (and most profitably) paired with a generous dose of social consciousness.

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