

## **Organizational Psychopaths - Who Are They and How to Protect Your Organization from Them**

**By Marcel Faggioni & Dr. Michael White\***

The term “Psychopath” conjures up all kinds of horrific and sensational images and thoughts. Typically, when one thinks of psychopaths, it is natural to think of cold-blooded, violent and callous criminals that are devoid of conscience or remorse. Although the media and the movies have traditionally exploited this version of “psychopath”, there is also a segment of the psychopathic population that have received relatively little recognition until recently. In recent years, the organizational psychopath has been receiving greater attention as a result of organizational downfalls of companies such as WorldCom, Enron and Arthur Anderson. Many have speculated that the demise of these once-giant pillars of the corporate world is in large part due to the actions of a few members of their respective senior executives. Although, these individuals did not commit heinous crimes attributed to criminal psychopaths, their self-serving actions have caused financial devastation to their corporations, their shareholders and their employees. In North America alone, conservative estimate pegs the number of psychopaths to be in the range of 2 million. Furthermore, even before these individuals cross over into the domain of *bona fide* criminal activity, their interactions with subordinates and/or superiors can be significantly injurious to company morale thus seriously affecting productivity. The interesting thing about organizational psychopaths is the relative ease with which they are able to climb the corporate ladder and assume control.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM – IV), psychopathy is a syndrome of personality and behavioural characteristics. This syndrome is characterized by lack of empathy or conscience, and poor impulse control or manipulative behaviours. The term is derived from the Greek words psyche (*soul*) and pathos (*to suffer*), and was once used to denote any form of mental illness. Much of the work on Psychopathy has been done by Dr. Robert Hare, a world renowned psychologist from the University of British Columbia. According to Dr. Hare, the organizational psychopath may not be involved in atrocious acts of crime as the criminal psychopath, but they do share some of the following disturbing personality traits:

- no concern for the feelings of others
- complete disregard for any sense of social obligation
- egocentric and lack insight of any sense of responsibility or consequence
- emotions are almost non-existent and any emotional sign are superficial, shallow and insincere
- considered callous, manipulative, and incapable of forming lasting relationships (devoid of meaningful love), let alone showing any kind of meaningful love
- Spends time and energy on matters that only matter to him/her (devoid of any genuine altruism)

The organizational psychopath may show a high number of the following behavioural patterns. The individual behaviours themselves are not exclusive to the organizational psychopath; though the higher number of patterns exhibited the more likely he or she will conform to the psychopath's characteristic profile:

- Public humiliation of others (High propensity of having temper tantrums or ridiculing work performance)
- Malicious spreading of lies (intentionally deceitful)
- Remorseless or devoid of guilt
- Frequently lies to push his/her point
- Rapidly shifts between emotions – used to manipulate people or cause high anxiety
- Intentionally isolates persons from organizational resources
- Quick to blame others for mistakes or for incomplete work even though he/she is guilty
- Encourages co-workers to torment, alienate, harass and/or humiliate other peers
- Takes credits for other peoples accomplishments
- Steals and/or sabotages other person's work
- Refuses to take responsibility for misjudgements and/or errors
- Threatens any perceived enemy with job loss and/or discipline in order to taint employee file
- Sets unrealistic and unachievable job expectations to set employees up for failure
- Refuse or reluctant to attend meetings with more than one person
- Refuses to provide adequate training and/or instructions to singled out victim
- Invades personal privacy of others
- Has multiple sexual encounters with junior and/or senior employees
- Develops new ideas without real follow through
- Very self-centered and extremely egotistical (often conversation revolves around them – great deal of self importance)
- Often borrows money and/or other materials objects without any intentions of giving it back
- Will do whatever it takes to close the deal (no regards for ethics or legality)

From an organizational perspective, organizations can insulate themselves from the organizational psychopath by taking the following steps:

- Conduct behavioural type interview
- Verify information contained in the CV (if it's too good to be true, you should be suspicious...)
- Conduct reference checks (do not accept unsolicited letters of reference!!! Request reference from a number of sources.)
- Obtain work samples (i.e., report, project outlines, etc...)
- Carry out criminal reference checks

As mentioned earlier in this article, organizational psychopaths are very adept at entering the organization and ascending to positions of authority with relative ease. So, what if an organization suspects the infiltration of an organizational psychopath? The organization should undertake a multifaceted approach in exposing the individual. Some of these include:

- Educate your workforce
- Conduct a workplace audit (verify the source of employee dissension & complaints)
- Periodically assess morale in the workplace via anonymous survey questionnaires which are then analyzed to highlight departmental patterns
- Conduct an Employee Attitudinal Study
- Develop and enforce an “Anti-Harassment/ Anti- Bullying Policy”
- Take all employee concerns seriously
- Conduct comprehensive performance assessment
- Structure meetings with minutes and agenda (to keep everyone accountable)
- Promote team-building and teamwork

In the short-term, organizations can remain quite stable even with the parasitic presence of the organizational psychopath. In the long-run, the survival of the organization can be jeopardized with the insidious actions and behaviours of the organizational psychopath. Once in power, the psychopath can wreak havoc on the fundamentals of good human resources management. Therefore, it is essential that the organization protect itself from the potentially devastating effects of the organizational psychopath.

\* Michael V. White obtained his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Ottawa, an accredited American Psychological Association Doctoral program. He is a member of the Ontario Psychological Association, the Canadian Psychological Association, and the American Psychological Association. Michael White is the leading authority on Experiential Therapy in Northern Ontario.