

# Taming Toxic People

Dealing with psychopathic personality in the workplace -  
Part 2 – surviving a psychopathic boss©

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## How do we feel when encountering a Psychopathic Boss?

Can we rely on our own feelings and intuitions that someone we have encountered may display psychopathic personality traits? In the absence of a thorough clinical interview, or putting the Hare Psychopathy Checklist under the nose of someone you suspect may be a psychopath, it is probably one of the only things we've got. The following feelings and intuitions are in no way a rock solid guide to psychopathic personality disorder or a definitive account that the person you suspect may have psychopathic tendencies. Other things may be going on that may explain their behaviour. Be that as it may, if we feel we are being constantly watched and micro managed at work, always feel criticised or that decisions are changed all the time without notice or consultation, you may be sensing something is not right. Other possible signs could include that your boss does not like challenge to their authority, displays unpredictable bad temper and often flies off into a rage. You may even experience occasional flattery and praise, or that you are "walking on eggshells" constantly on your guard that any slight mistake may trigger an aggressive response or attack.

There are also particular signs that may indicate you are working with a psychopathic boss, namely they can affect your own confidence and judgement, or you feel or become isolated from others. You may get a sense of incredulity where they often get away with unethical behaviour while at the same time appearing well liked by their superiors.

## On Patrons, Pawns, Police and Patsies

Dr Robert Hare who developed the Hare Psychopathy Checklist suggests that psychopaths divide the workplace into four groups. The first group is their *Patrons*, these are people who have real power and authority and often protect the psychopath to engage in their unconscionable behaviour. *Pawns* are people without power or influence that the psychopathic boss can manipulate, intimidate and control. *Police* are those in the organisation that often have statutory authority and can constrain the psychopath but not contain them. *Patsies* are simply those who are "surplus to requirements" and are often

discarded *Patrons* and *Pawns* once their usefulness is no longer needed.

Psychopathic bosses are particularly skilled in impression management with their superiors. Often superiors cannot believe that a psychopathic boss could act so terribly while the subordinates cannot believe why senior personnel cannot see it. This is often because the psychopathic boss will shift their power relationships according to the type of person in front of them – people are either enablers, prey, harmless or useless.



## Surviving the psychopathic boss

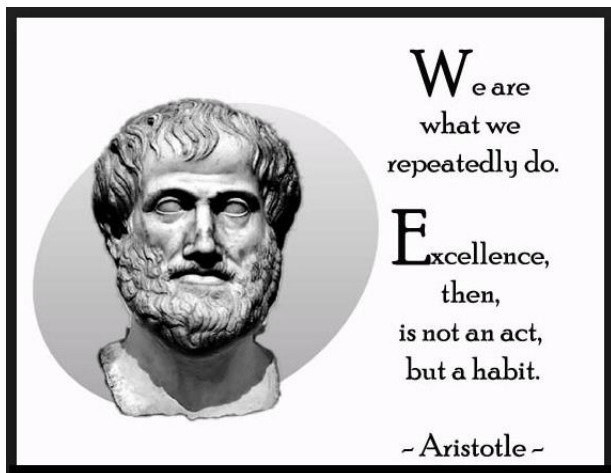
David Gillespie suggests there are some things you can do if you encounter a psychopathic boss. The first thing to do is to accept reality and remember that this too will pass. Never take on a psychopath alone and head on – they enjoy the fight and will one up you every time because they lack social boundaries. Always be polite and in all circumstances maintain privacy since they may use your private life to leverage something from you. Always be honest since psychopathic personalities are habitual liars – you need to have a "true north" while their moral compass swings every which way. Fact check everything they say and where possible document everything including your permission to do work that you know is questionable. If this can be done by company email the better. Be compliant since you are likely to experience changes that may run contra to previous decisions. Try your best to be emotionless because they will be looking to read your response to unreasonable demands. Also make sure you have a support network of family and friends because often people with psychopathic personality traits will undermine your own confidence and reality checking. Since they act in incredulous ways you may think it is you who has the problem – certainly

this will be one tactic the psychopathic boss will use to undermine your foundations to act from a strong base.

**How to psychopath-proof your organisation**

The truth is that certain organisational cultures foster psychopathic behaviours while others don't. Where secrecy lies, so to does the tendency for psychopathic behaviours. A culture of honesty is critical in reducing the impact of psychopathic behaviours. For me as an organisational psychologist, leadership is simply *values and behaviours worthy of imitation*. This is because we are imitative social creatures. Organisational cultures are essentially normative behaviours and values that are expected to be imitated. If there is a strong presence of a "shadow culture" where it is win at all costs, highly personally competitive and ruthless in the execution of decisions without little consequence of its impact on others, then this creates the perfect ecosystem for psychopathic personalities to thrive. In addition, decentralised decision making that promotes open communication can help reduce the concentration of power to few single minded ruthless individuals. Another antidote to psychopath proofing your organisation, is to encourage communal investment in goals and decisions making. Where decision making is more open, distributive and collaborative in nature, the psychopathic personalities have a harder time getting a foot hold into the organisational culture.

In a sense, organisations should consider re-examining the practice of virtue ethics. The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that virtues can be practiced into a habit of being.



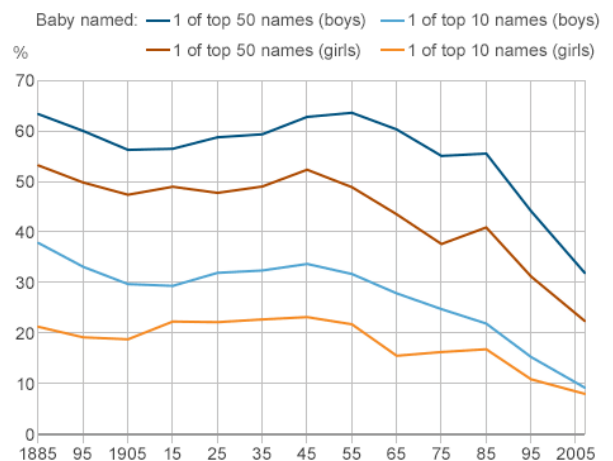
Acting well and virtuously in any given situation and encouraging this as part of an organisational culture, allows the organisation to aspire to ideals beyond the simple utilitarian *whatever it takes* mentality. Either way,

if these ideals of virtuous behaviour are not made explicit, other forms of values may dominate the organisational culture that favour oppositional, combative and anti-social behaviour. The classical psychologist William James argued that habit is "the enormous flywheel of society ..." and fostering good over bad habits of social relationships may be a countervailing force to constrain psychopathic behaviour in our organisations.

**The individualistic society and psychopathy**

Most modern Western societies privilege and encourage a pursuit of individual self expression. Indeed, there has been a rapid decline since the mid 1980's in the adoption and uniformity of common names for both genders. In other words, our search for individual expression appears in our desire to reject common socially prescribed names and to adopt new and unique names and spelling (I pity the modern school teacher).

The declining uniformity of American names



Source: Jean M Twenge et al, Social Psychological and Personality Science, 2010

Cultures that value individualism may encourage more psychopathic behaviours while more collectivist cultures tend to regulate psychopathic tendencies in individuals. Social media appears to encourage and amplify uncivil behaviours and we know in recent research incivility has doubled in the past 10 years in reported acts of rudeness in organisations. Striving for individual expression should not be at the expense of others but creating cultures of virtue may constrain the psychopath in all of us.

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