



with Robert Hogan, Ph.D.

Psychopaths in the C-Suite

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by disregard for the rights of others, lack of empathy or remorse, and grandiosity. Although the world's prisons are full of people who fit this description, not all psychopaths are in jail. In fact, a surprising number can be found in the corner office.

Q: For most people, the word psychopath brings to mind criminals like Charles Manson. How does this term apply in the business world?

A: In the business world, a better term for psychopath is swindler or confidence man – a person who is bright, charming, flirtatious, and fun, but utterly ruthless and with no capacity for guilt.

Q: How have changes in the typical career, specifically the frequency with which people change jobs, affected the rate of occurrence of psychopaths in leadership positions?

A: Psychopaths are very clever, and usually get caught when former victims begin to compare notes. In high mobility careers, it is hard to catch them because there is almost never a critical mass of former victims who can compare notes.

Q: When people describe the characteristics of a great leader, charisma often makes the list. Why do we find charismatic people so alluring?

A: What's one person's charisma is another person's poison. Many liberals find Obama charismatic; conservatives tend to find him incompetent. The French thought Napoleon was charismatic; the English thought he was a worm. The Germans thought Hitler was charismatic; others had different opinions.



Q: Are women charismatic in different ways than men? Do they carry equal risk?

A: I don't like to get involved in discussions of sex differences because they usually result in trouble. But my sense is that men equate female charisma with sex appeal. You would have to ask women what they think charisma is in other women. My sense is that women don't find other women charismatic. Women are more competitive than men.

Q: What is the dark side of charisma?

A: Selfishness and betrayal – when the charismatic person works his or her magic for personal and selfish reasons.

Q: What kind of impact can these leaders have on business?

A: The data suggest that, in business, charisma is equal to narcissism, and that narcissistic CEOs are almost always bad for business.

Q: What can companies do to prevent putting a psychopath in charge?

A: Ask the people who used to work for the person to evaluate him or her. Subordinates always see through these people; senior people are always charmed by them.



Dr. Robert Hogan, founder of Hogan Assessment Systems, is recognized as an international authority on personality assessment, leadership, and organizational effectiveness. He has authored more than 300 journal articles, chapters, and books, and is widely credited with demonstrating how personality factors influence organizational effectiveness.