Corporate psychopaths and mental health (Apr 14)

In relation to a previous article in HR Zone on how corporate psychopaths influenced the workplace, one commentator on the article reported along the lines that that it was unfair to pick on people with mental health problems in the workplace, writing:-

“Whilst people with a particular set of personality traits may be more likely to occupy senior roles, using derogatory and outdated terminology such as ‘psychopath’ is not useful”.

Our use of the term “corporate psychopath” was meant to be in the modern sense of the term, denoting a psychopath in the corporate sector and differentiating these people from their more common association with criminality. Furthermore, picking on people with mental health problems was far from the intention of our article and we would argue that rather than being people with mental health problems, corporate psychopaths are people who create such problems for many of the employees whom they work closely with.

The evidence on psychopaths

In a host of recent research into psychopathy it is evident that psychopaths appear to have brain connectivity and chemistry issues that in turn seem to preclude their having any empathy, love or care for other people. This means their behaviour is entirely self-oriented, unrestricted by the inhibiting effect of a conscience and totally egotistical. This is not so much a problem for themselves because they know what they want and they know how they are going to get it. Because of this, they do not appear to suffer from
the minor neuroses, depressions, pangs of conscience and self-doubt that the rest of us experience from
time to time.

In the working world, corporate psychopaths can be detrimental because their actions can ride rough
shod over the feelings, rights and emotions of others in the workplace, and this can create a toxic, hostile
environment marked by bullying and high levels of conflict. Because of this, the long-term mental health
of other employees can suffer dramatically.

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You may be interested to read: Are you employing a corporate psychopath? and 'Shadow side' of
personality - there's more to it than corporate psychopaths

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Corporate psychopaths and bullying

One of the main reasons for assuming that corporate psychopaths will affect mental health in the
workplace is that they engage in frequent and vicious bullying behaviour being responsible for between a
quarter and a third of all bullying in organisations studied in Australia and the UK.1,2 Further research has
also established that being a target of bullying predicted people getting involved in the bullying of others,
meaning that bullying breeds more bullying.3

Workplace bullying involves the deliberate demeaning of co-workers and as such it is a serious and
destructive type of behaviour with serious consequences for its victims.4 Victims of bullying have been
found to experience a variety of negative impacts on their physical and psychological health.5 For
example, employees who are bullied can suffer from psychological despair6 and exposure to bullying
behaviours predicts subsequent increased symptoms of anxiety and fatigue among employees.7

Similarly in other research into bullying, nurses who had been bullied reported significantly higher levels
of anxiety, depression and propensity to leave their employment than other employees.8 Also, sickness
absence as a consequence of bullying at work is reported to be a prevalent and costly reality9 as
employees seek to withdraw from the hostile work environment created by bullying.

Bullying has also been found to significantly exacerbate the effects of job demands on depression,
exhaustion and uncertified absenteeism.6,10 Depression may be an outcome of witnessing bullying and,
more certainly, of being the victim of bullying.11 Bullying and other forms of job strain have been found to
be related to productivity loss via their effects on depression and so depression influences performance
as well as individual employees' mental health.12

Considerable amounts of stress can also be caused by bullying and it has been likened by its victims to
being tortured.13 Stress in turn influences mental health. Abusive supervision and bullying has also been
linked to the problematic drinking of alcohol among employees14. Employee wellbeing also suffers when
corporate psychopaths are present in management and recent research illustrates the effects of
perceived psychopathic traits in supervisors on employee wellbeing and job-related attitudes.2,15

Life under corporate psychopaths

Boddy's research found that under corporate psychopaths, employees were significantly more likely to
feel; angry, anxious depressed and discouraged and less likely to feel at ease, calm and content. Taken
together these are likely to influence mental health for the worse. Furthermore, psychopathy in
supervisors has also been found to predict employees' psychological distress.16
In short then corporate psychopaths can create a toxic, uncommunicative, bullying environment and this in turn creates stress, distress and probably mental health problems, such as depression, in those who work with and around the corporate psychopath. It's important we understand the traits and behaviours of corporate psychopaths to better understand the effect on the mental health of colleagues.

Modern research into corporate psychopaths proposes a methodology for the identification and analysis of particular psychopathic traits which when embodied in one individual manager can have catastrophic effects on an organisation and its employees. Where this reaches a high level of toxicity there is arguably a corporate duty of care towards other employees and a due diligence requirement for the health of the organisation itself.

For more information on corporate psychopaths, HRZone readers can refer to the papers below, provided as references for this article.

References

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