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Redefining the SOB

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Abstract

Meet the SOB—Seductive Operational Bully—or psychopath "lite." SOBs don't usually end up in jail or psychiatric hospital but they do thrive in an organizational setting. SOBs can be found wherever power, status, or money is at stake. Outwardly normal, apparently successful and charming, their inner lack of empathy, shame, guilt, or remorse, has serious interpersonal repercussions, and can destroy organizations. Their great adaptive qualities mean they often reach top executive positions, especially in organizations that appreciate impression management, corporate gamesmanship, risk taking, coolness under pressure, domination, competitiveness, and assertiveness. The ease with which SOBs rise to the top raises the question whether the design of some organizations makes them a natural home for psychopathic individuals. This article begins with an elaborate example of such an individual, and notes the deep divide that distinguishes people without a conscience from the general population.

Most studies have resorted to a deficit theory to explain psychopathic behavior—something has gone with the wiring in the emotional part of the brain. Here, however, I suggest that nurture can also play a role in the etiology of psychopathy. The article explores ways of identifying and dealing with SOBs from an organizational and individual perspective, and recommends a clinical orientation to organizational diagnosis and intervention.

KEY WORDS: SOB executive; psychopath "lite"; sociopath; antisocial personality disorder; toxic leadership; narcissism; neurotic organization; clinical paradigm.

The more he talked of his honor the faster we counted our spoons.
—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

The psychopaths are always around. In calm times we study them, but in times of upheaval, they rule over us.
—*Ernst Kretschmer*

"The world is a dangerous place. Not because of the people who are evil; but because of the people who don't do anything about it."
—*Albert Einstein*

The psycho-path to success

Richard typified the enigma of upward failure. To people who knew him superficially, he seemed successful but people closer to him were less convinced. Those who had only a passing acquaintance with him thought him an obvious candidate for a senior position in the company. However, others who knew more about his track record came to a very different conclusion. None of the assignments for which Richard had been responsible had been truly successful. In fact, his career had been a moving disaster—but thanks to his seductiveness, charm, and talent at manipulating others, he had gotten away with it. Richard was like the proverbial cat with nine lives. Disaster frequently struck due to his incompetence or laxness, yet he had an uncanny ability to limit the negative fallout. His mental agility when faced with such moments of truth, and the speed with which he moved on to another assignment, and then another, were remarkable. It was always left to his successor to clear up the mess he made.

Richard's leadership style could be best summarized as 'the great unfinished'—mundane activities, like completing projects, were left to others. And if this bait-and-switch strategy failed to mislead his superiors and co-workers, he had a knack for blaming the failure on whoever suited him. Taking responsibility for his actions was another of Richard's missing qualities. Indeed, he appeared to find his self-serving behavior the most natural thing in the world. He even

managed to leave his most recent assignment (as senior VP of a small media company) just in time, having been headhunted to join a much larger organization. The results of his disastrous tenure only become apparent once he had gone.

Yet, on first impression, Richard had a lot going for him. Good-looking, he had the gift of the gab and was an expert at sweet-talking everyone he met. Most people watching or listening to his webcasts, podcasts, or interviews would consider him eloquent and socially adept. Fortunately for him, only a very few recognized the glibness and superficiality of what he said. His apparent "can-do" attitude toward whatever obstacles came his way didn't hurt his career prospects, either. He came across as a very decisive, action-oriented, gifted manager. His talents for impression management also made him remarkably effective in dealing with his superiors: he always told them what they wanted to hear. Small wonder that most people who met Richard saw him as fast-track material; however, an astute student of his behavior would be tempted to see him as a con artist.

For example, most of the promises Richard made turned out to be vacuous—and he was a habitual liar. He could lie point-blank to someone's face while appearing honest and candid, only to stab them in the back as soon as they turned away. A number of people who had worked closely with Richard suggested his lying was compulsive. Whenever there was a risk he would be caught out in one of his lies or half-lies, he was able to change the subject quickly. Mysteriously, he had got away with this very dysfunctional leadership behavior, seemingly forever. In that respect, he was a true Machiavellian, a real survivor. Manipulation came as naturally to him as breathing. His ability to make friends in high places and home in on people willing to protect him also helped him in his climb to the top.

People who had worked for Richard—and quit—described him as exploitative and deceitful, shamelessly ready to take credit for other people's work. They also complained about his ruthlessness and "instrumentalism," the way he used others purely as means to an end. For the yet unconvinced, they would list a whole line-up of victims who had crossed his path.

Richard was so manipulative that most people didn't notice what had hit them until they were victimized. Incompetent thought he was in many areas, Richard had remarkably good insight into the needs and weaknesses of other people. Good liars are often good judges of people. Power-driven himself, he knew exactly how to take advantage of other people's vulnerabilities, directing his energy toward insecure people in particular. He operated like a spider, weaving a web of lies and deceit, catching his victims unawares, sucking the life force out of them, discarding the empty husk, and moving on to next victim. He was extremely effective in taking away people's belief in themselves and their abilities, and their trust in others, leaving some of them cynical, bitter, and almost unable to function. Because he was prone to boredom, Richard seemed to need a constant supply of new victims to re-energize himself.

What really puzzled those who had the measure of Richard was that the people caught in his web usually described their initial encounter with him as like finding a soul mate, typically claiming, "We have so much in common," "We're so much alike." They seemed to delude themselves into thinking that they had initiated an instant friendship. They failed to recognize that Richard had really been engaging in an exercise in mimicry, reflecting their own persona back on the person he was talking to, a talent that is sure to be endearing—it's nice and easy to fall in love with yourself.

Richard could also be compared to a canny trapeze artist, always able to regain his balance due to his talent for getting others to cover for him whenever he got himself into trouble. And according to some who had not been conned by him, one of Richard's most recent victims was the company's head of communications. Those in the know felt that he was taking advantage of her naivety; given the way she talked about him, some wondered whether their relationship, which seemed to be a one-way street, went beyond work. She might be emotionally involved, but was he? She was always at his beck and call and always prepared to cover for him. People who had figured out what Richard was really like doubted whether he had an empathic bone in his body; when it came

to emotional sensitivity, he was color-blind. It was true that he seemed able to say the right thing at the right time but where was the real feeling? It seemed that he only knew how to pantomime feelings, rather than experience them. Short-term self-gratification seemed the only thing that counted.

Apart from these significant character flaws, Richard also demonstrated poor behavioral control. His emotional state could be very volatile, shifting between anger, happiness, and misery. People were recounting incidents when he had lost his temper, dressing people down in public. Witnesses to these outbursts reported that they didn't last very long and seemed to be instantly forgotten.

Finally, a serious concern for some people in the office was the confusion about Richard's background. Some began to question whether he was an imposter, citing impressive but fictitious credentials. Suspicion circulated about his previous activities and the opacity of his career timeline. Some whispered that there were some gaping holes. What was Richard trying to hide?

Identifying the psychopaths among us

Imagine being completely free of internal restraints and doing whatever you please. Imagine a mental state that entails no conscience. Imagine having no feelings of remorse or guilt, whatever unpleasant things you may be doing. Imagine caring only for number one, and having absolutely no concern for the wellbeing of others. Imagine responsibility being an empty term, having no conceptual meaning. Imagine giving no second thought to the shameful, harmful, or immoral actions you have taken.

Wouldn't such an emotional deficit be a great blessing? Wouldn't life be much simpler and more pleasurable without inhibitions? A conscience is a nuisance; empathy is a drag. Without the usual pangs of shame and guilt, you would be able to do anything. Nothing would hold you back.

We tend to assume that a conscience is a universal human feature, which makes it hard (for most of us) to imagine that there are people with this kind of

personality make-up. And because we can't imagine that such people exist, they become to all intents and purposes invisible to us. We are unprepared for encounters with these individuals. We don't recognize them. The presence or absence of conscience creates a deep divide between people.

For the purpose of maintaining our own sanity, we had better accept that a small portion of the population has a psychological makeup and mindset very different from the rest of us. Alien though they are, they blend in with the general population. They assume a kind of stealth position within organizations and society. Not only are they conveniently invisible, they may not even realize that they *are* different—they are equally invisible to themselves. Their lack of conscience means that the usual tools for societal control don't work and are irrelevant to them. The implications of this can be severe. These people can bring havoc to the lives of others and are often described as psychopaths (McCord and McCord, 1964; Person, 1986; Tomb and Christensen, 1987; Davison and Neale, 1990; Millon et al, 1998; Blair et al, 2005; Neumann, 2007).

Alien though psychopaths may seem to most of us, they have always been around. Many of the figures in our history who committed crimes against humanity fall within this category. Under traumatic social situations, like war, poverty, economic breakdown, epidemics or political strife, for example, psychopaths may even acquire the status of leaders and saviors. We only have to think of think of Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim Jong-Il, Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic, or Syria's Bashar al-Assad for some real-life examples. But we probably come across psychopaths more often in popular fiction and films, like the highly decorated renegade Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*; Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*, turning cannibalism into gastronomy; the investment banker and serial killer Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*; or Martin Vanger, another serial killer and a successful CEO in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. These morally depraved individuals represent the "monsters" in our society. They are portrayed as unstoppable and incorrigible predators whose violence is planned, purposeful, and emotionless.

But only a small subset of psychopaths becomes the violent criminals so often fictionalized in films and novels. There are many less extreme forms of psychopathy, quite different from what we usually associate with the kinds of character disorder found among criminal types. Not all psychopaths are destined for prison; some may even be in top executive positions. Wherever power, status, or money is at stake, such individuals will be around. The power games that typify organizational life come naturally to them. Compared to the monstrous historical and fictional characters mentioned here, these people are not overly violent or antisocial; their disturbing behavior is not so in your face. Instead, they are likely to channel their energies in less obvious, less violent ways. They know how to blend in and conceal their difference in order to manipulate others more effectively. Thus if we create a spectrum of pathology, fictional psychopaths like Kurtz, Lecter, Bateman, and Vanger, would represent the extreme end of the spectrum while the successful psychopathic executive would sit at the other (Simon, 1996; Stout, 2005).

To increase our understanding of this kind of behavior in an organizational setting, in this article I introduce the Seductive Operational Bully, or SOB executive—an individual who could also be described as psychopath "lite"—and differentiate SOBs from more traditional psychopathic types. Compared to "heavy" psychopaths, most of whom can be found in prisons or mental hospitals, SOBs are much better at keeping up a consistent outward appearance of normality. Their behavior may even be so adapted to certain organizations that some of them will reach top executive positions. I will also raise the question whether organizational design is responsible for their success in the workplace, and discuss the etiology of SOBs and how they can be identified. The article ends by exploring ways of dealing with such people from an organizational and individual perspective.

The SOB executive

While psychopathic serial killers ruin families, corporate, political and religious psychopaths ruin organizations and societies. And organizations of all sizes can be duped, charmed and ultimately destroyed by these people if they are given enough power (Clarke, 2005; Boddy, 2006; Babiak and Hare, 2006; Babiak, 2007; Pech and Slade, 2007; Babiak et al, 2010; Boddy et al, 2010). SOBs thrive on political sabotage, power play and turf wars. Ironically, many of the qualities that indicate mental problems in other contexts may appear appropriate in senior executive positions, particularly in organizations that appreciate impression management, corporate gamesmanship, risk taking, coolness under pressure, domination, competitiveness, and assertiveness. Even those traits that reflect a severe lack of human feeling or emotional poverty (lack of remorse, guilt, and empathy) can be put into service by SOBs in situations where being ''tough'' or ''strong'' (making hard, unpopular decisions) and emotional slickness work in their favor. Their innate charm, their deceitfulness, their need for "thrills and regressions," can turn into a very heady, effective package. Their destructive, backstabbing behavior, and ruthlessness toward their adversaries, can be highly effective.

As suggested before, SOB executives sit at the lower end of the psychopathy spectrum. At the other extreme are antisocial individuals who do not respond to any form of sanction or social disapproval. These are the unstoppable psychopaths, people who have never known what a conscience is. Their emotional life seems very different from ours; their brains appear to dance to a different beat. They never seem to be bothered by the consequences of their actions. In that respect they are quite different from more "ordinary" criminal types, who have a conscience (Lykken, 1995). Feelings of shame and guilt are quite alien to these people. They have no understanding of empathy; they are unable to see beyond their narrow self-interest; and they only care about what is good for number one. They also have no moral code or understanding of what is right or wrong. Expediency is all that matters. It is not conscience that enables them to control their antisocial impulses, but convenience. They may have

learned the hard way that extreme undisguised acting out can cause problems—it lands them in prison, or leads to psychiatric institutionalization. Their interior emptiness and neediness mean these people will do anything to cope with their constant boredom. Illicit, illegal indulgences such as drugs, alcohol, or prostitution are attractive to them. They are compelled to use others for their own, frequently malicious, purposes. And abusing others, in a variety of ways, is a way to obtain (temporary) satisfaction. In victimizing others, they have no equal. They are cunning, manipulative, untrustworthy, unethical, parasitic, and utterly remorseless. They can be highly irrational, ruthless, and even violent.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find the psychopaths "lite" I mentioned earlier, the SOB executives. SOBs keep up a far better and more consistent outward appearance of being normal than psychopaths at the criminal end of the spectrum. They are often described as daring, adventurous people who have a unique way of looking at the world. The catch is that these people (imagining that they are invincible) tend to overestimate their capabilities, regardless of (or notwithstanding) their lack of achievements. Not surprisingly, they tend to be narcissists, are exploitative, have a grandiose sense of self, and feelings of entitlement (characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder). They talk about themselves endlessly; they like to be in the limelight. In some ways they are like children, believing that they are the center of the universe, unable to recognize the needs and rights of others. They appear to be charming yet can be covertly hostile and domineering, seeing their "victims" merely as targets and opportunities; like master and slave, they try to dominate and humiliate them. For them, the end always justifies the means. And after people serve their purposes, they are quickly cast aside.

Pathological behavior often goes unrecognized, however. Often, psychopaths come across as rather unconventional people who are constantly banging their own drum. What is readily observable, however, is the difficulty in making connections with them. Genuine emotional experiences make up no part of the SOB package. The emotions they express have a pseudo-quality. Like Richard, they are masters of mimicry, pretending to experience the emotions of others,

and their relationships have a parasitic quality. They know to be "nice" at the beginning of a relationship but once they think they have hooked the other person, their true nature shines through. Neither they nor their promises are genuine. And as the case of Richard illustrated, their behavior has a predatory quality.

These SOB executives can be inspiring, charming, seductive, but also extremely Machiavellian. They are prepared to trample the bodies of their weaker colleagues, taking credit for the work they have done, and scapegoating them when things go wrong. There's nothing they won't do, and no one they won't exploit, to get what they want. They will manipulate financial results, plant rumors, turn co-workers against each other, and alter their persona as needed to destroy their targets. They can be irresistible, with an uncanny ability to seduce others into seeing and doing things their way. SOBs often do long-term damage, both to their co-workers and the organization as a whole, due to their manipulative, deceitful, abusive, and sometimes fraudulent behavior. Many organizations, however, are set up in ways that foster such behavior, allowing SOBs to prosper in an organizational setting.

SOB executives are easily labeled as difficult-to-manage high potentials. Given their perceived qualities, others are prepared to cut them a lot of slack—which turns out to be a very poor investment. Their major expertise is getting away with it, pulling a fast one, and turning other people's weaknesses to their own advantage. They never accept blame themselves; they always blame others. SOBs are also masters of rationalization and extremely good at justifying their misdeeds. Unfortunately, scapegoating reinforces passivity and obedience and induces guilt, shame, terror, and conformity in whoever is subjected to their whims. Often, when they are confronted with their wrongdoings, they will turn on their victims, accuse them of suffering from "delusions" and declaring them mentally unstable. They may indeed drive the other party crazy, as they are highly effective in group polarization and creating an "us-versus-them" mentality. One particularly damaging element of their behavior is their attitude that temptation is not to be resisted but needs should be acted out. Thus a heavy

dose of sexual adventurousness comes with the package. If they marry, the marriage is likely to break up—to have them go on to the next relationship, and so on. Unfortunately, the pathological quality of their behavior takes time to be recognized.

Ironically, taken at face value, SOBs make exciting colleagues or bosses, as they are prepared to take risks others won't take and so appear bold and courageous. At other times, they pose as misunderstood geniuses, which inclines others to attribute their bad behavior to a creative temperament. Self-assured, cool under pressure, thriving on chaos, and socially adept, these larger-than-life figures seem to be natural leaders. All of this masks their unparalleled capacity for fabrication, manipulation, and thrill-seeking. In that respect, they fit perfectly in modern, fast-moving organizations, which are ideal places for SOBs to flourish, as political skills, rather than competence, are the keys to the top.

The inappropriate, irresponsible behavior of SOB executives can cause a great deal of suffering and have a negative effect on organizational culture, as well as the organization as a whole (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984). SOB executives have no allegiance to the organization at all. Their personal obsession "to win" at any cost overrules good corporate citizenship. Their machinations also prompt more qualified executives to leave, while others end up severely wounded. Those who resist their manipulation are hammered down, until they give in, break down, or leave the organization.

Unburdened as SOBs are by a conscience, they can be quite effective—at least for a while. Many global corporations have become highly attractive to people who are eager to enrich themselves at the expense of others and the companies they work for. Financial institutions in particular have turned out to be playing fields where SOB executives can really shine. We have only recently woken up to the fact that trusting our money to "banksters" is a highly risky proposition. Because financial institutions need a high level of trust in order to function effectively, we make the false assumption that the people who run these institutions are honorable. But SOB executives, of whom trustworthiness is not a feature, flock to

these financial institutions. Instead, they feed on the trust placed in them by others to their own advantage. Such "feeding" frequently has a very pathogenic nature (McLean and Elkind, 2004).

What should we make, for example, of the statement by Dick Fuld, the former CEO of Lehman Brothers and the architect of the company's downfall, that he wanted to "rip out [his competitors'] hearts and eat them before they died"? How much trust should we put in a person who talks like this? And how did this man make it to the top? Taking another example from the financial world, why was Fred Goodwin, the CEO of Royal Bank of Scotland, able to get away with the things he did? What happened to risk management at RBS? Ironically, before Goodwin managed to incur a corporate loss of £24.1bn, the highest in UK history, he had been idolized by the City of London—and even been knighted. His talent for ruthlessly cutting costs earned him the admiring monikers of "Fred the Shred," and the "corporate Attila." And to take yet another example: under the slogan of making Barclays Bank "a better corporate citizen" in the community of organizations, Bob Diamond, its former CEO, ran an institution that was unperturbed by fixing interest rates and other unethical practices. Before the London Inter-Bank Offered Rate (LIBOR) scandal surfaced, Diamond had observed in reference to previous banking scandals that there had "been a period of remorse and apology for banks and I think that period needs to be over." Fortunately for Diamond, despite his humiliating departure, he (like many other banksters) is not suffering financially, having made around £120 million from the bank over the past five years. This begs the question whether Diamond and his kind were only negligently incompetent, delusional, or actually pathological liars. What's clear is that many of these SOB "masters of the universe" have been busily destroying the universe for personal gain.

The track record of the banking industry doesn't make it a poster child for truth, ethics, or the public interest. Clearly, the City of London and Wall Street are very attractive to many SOB executives, although other industrial sectors should not be excluded—glaring examples include the travails of Enron under Kenneth Lay, Jeffrey Skilling, and Andrew Fastow, or the activities of "Chainsaw Al" Dunlop.

Many of these people were engaged in corporate chicanery, making bucket loads of money while taking advantage of everyone else.

Even when SOBs have been identified, they have the communication, persuasion, and interpersonal skills to override any negative fallout from their activities. It is remarkable what they get away with, considering that their negative impact on companies, and society at large, can be phenomenal. SOB executives have no qualms about buying up companies, tearing them apart, firing all the employees and selling off parts of it to earn a nice profit. "Downsizing" comes easily to them. They are not concerned about the welfare of their employees, or about their mental health. They are great believers in a more Darwinian model of management.

What makes for an SOB executive?

To understand SOB executives better, we need to take an excursion into the field of psychiatry and a closer look at psychopathological behavior (Millon et al, 1998a, 1998b). This peculiar condition has been recognized for centuries, described as "madness without delirium" and "moral insanity." In 1835, the physician James Cowles Prichard portrayed "moral imbecility" as a mental derangement, not of intellect but of perverted feelings and depraved behavior patterns. Emil Kraepelin (1915), one of the founders of modern psychiatry, used many terms to describe psychopathy, including antisocial, morbid liar or swindler, impulsive, self-serving, glib, and charming but lacking inner morality. In the late 1800s a German psychiatrist coined the term "psychopath" (Koch, 1891). However, it was up to Hervey Cleckley, in his classic discourse on psychopathy *The Mask of Sanity* (1941/1976), who broadened the definition to include behavioral patterns such as manipulativeness, insincerity, egocentricity, and lack of guilt—characteristics of criminal behavior that are also found in less manifestly disturbed individuals, including executives. Psychopaths were described as predators who control and intimidate others to satisfy their own selfish needs, always looking out for number one (Bursten, 1973). Lacking in

conscience and empathy, they are prepared to take what they want, and do as they please, violating social norms and expectations without any feelings of guilt or remorse.

Descriptions of psychopathy, sociopathy, and antisocial personality disorders (APA, 2000; Millon, 1996), can be quite confusing. Many of these classifications are repetitive, overlap, and are used interchangeably. The term psychopath (and its later 1930s synonym, sociopath) has always been a sort of "wastebasket" category, originally widely and loosely applied to violent and unstable criminals (Millon, 1981, 1996; Millon et al, 1998). To emphasize this point, the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for the Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) tends to view the terms psychopathy and sociopathy as misnomers, preferring to remain with observable behavior. According to them, the identification of variables such as remorse and guilt gives clinicians too much room for subjective interpretations (APA, 2000). The World Health Organization, however, has taken a different stance in its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) by referring to psychopathy, antisocial personality, asocial personality, and amoral personality as synonyms for dissocial personality disorder.

It becomes apparent, as we wade through this nosological mess, that the use of these different terms depends largely on the background of the people using them. For example, the term sociopathy is preferred by psychologists and sociologists, who see personality disorders as social factors, produced by childhood trauma and abuse. In contrast, neuroscientists, biologists, and geneticists view psychopathy as a consequence of physiological defects that result in the underdevelopment of the part of the brain that is responsible for impulse control and emotions.

Whatever the definition used, the major differentiator that signifies psychopaths from the rest of the population is lack of conscience. SOB executives are unable to experience "normal" feelings of shame, guilt, or remorse. And although their stealth behavior makes them hard to recognize, there are plenty of them out

there. According to Robert Hare, a major specialist in psychopathy, approximately one percent of the population falls within the psychopath category—and a much larger number can be found in executive positions (Hare, 1999). Estimates vary, but approximately 3.9 percent of corporate professionals can be described as having psychopathic tendencies, a figure considerably higher than is found in the general population (APA, 2000; Babiak et al, 2010). From these observations we can deduce that many people working in organizations have a fair chance of experiencing a pathological boss.

Unfortunately, we often don't see these people's behavior for what it truly is. True psychopaths end up badly but those who work in an organizational or political setting (like banking) are rarely identified for what they truly are: psychopaths "lite." Within this category we can find seductive politicians, investment bankers, cult and religious leaders, white-collar criminals—people who might not be included in a superficial count. Encouragingly, full-blown psychopaths are extremely rare in top management positions, as then tend to self-destruct before they reach that point.

Etiology

But where does psychopathy come from? What causes it? First, psychopathy does not spring into existence unannounced in adulthood. From early on, children with a psychopathic disposition behave differently from other children in indeterminate ways. They are said to be more "difficult," "willful," "troublesome," or "hard to relate to." But whatever the early indications of psychopathy may be, the etiology of psychopathic behavior is complicated by the intricate interplay of biological and environmental variables. Mental health professionals spend an inordinate amount of effort trying to figure out whether nature or nurture contributes to this condition. For example, children manifest a psychological problem called conduct disorder (APA, 2000; Robins, 1978). This presents itself through a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior whereby the basic rights of others, or major age-appropriate norms, are violated. Such behavior is often the precursor of antisocial personality disorder. However, while these childhood signs have been found in a significantly higher proportion

of psychopaths than in the general population, not all the subjects of such childhood diagnoses turn out to be psychopaths as adults, or are even dysfunctional. Again, we are faced with the nature-nurture conundrum. There are no early life experiences that are consistently found to be directly associated with a subsequent diagnosis of psychopathy. Many people who experience a difficult childhood grow up, succeed in overcoming their past, and turn out to be upstanding citizens. Decades of research and clinical observation have failed to produce consistent findings about negative experiences in the background of psychopaths. Most people who are maltreated in childhood do not become psychopaths or criminals (although, in many cases, serious problems may ensue).

Because of the paucity of direct causal relationships, the etiology of psychopathy has remained rather obscure (Hare, 1999). The origin of a central feature of the psychopathic mind—lack of conscience and lack of empathy—continues to mystify mental health professionals (McCord and McCord, 1964; McCord, 1979). No wonder, then, that there has been a trend within forensic psychology to discount possible adverse childhood experiences as precursors of adult criminality. Many criminologists hold the view that true psychopaths are born, not made. They point out that children's ability or inability to bond readily, and their problems with attachment behavior, are largely the result, rather than the cause, of psychopathy. From this perspective, the causality of abuse has not been popular. Psychopaths' talent for preying on others' sympathy is legendary. No wonder that diagnosis of the condition has overshadowed etiology.

The question remains, what can be viewed as developmental and what genetic in the creation of psychopathy? Given the lack of consistency about causality, most research about psychopaths has taken a genetic or neurological direction. The biological relationship between the brain and psychopathy is at the center of most of these studies. For example, many intriguing, consistent correlates of psychopathy (affective, semantic, and physiological differences) have been established in the laboratory. Usually, these tests suggest that psychopaths are prone to neurological (probably genetic) anomalies—that is, faulty wiring can be

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blamed for their condition (Livesley et al, 1992; Harris et al, 2001). According to some of these studies, biogenetic deficiencies (neurological abnormalities, mainly in the frontal lobe of the brain) prevent psychopaths from processing complex emotional experiences. The cause of the non-typical anatomy or chemical activity within this area of the brain may be abnormal growth (possibly genetic), brain disease, or injury.

Psychopathy has also been associated with a reduced response rate in the amygdala, two small regions buried near the base of the brain that are associated with emotional reactions and emotional learning, affecting aggression, sexuality and recklessness. Dysfunction of the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for impulse control, decision-making, emotional learning and behavioral adaptation, is also associated with psychopathy (Williamson, Harpur and Hare, 1991; Lynham and Henry, 2001). It appears that in psychopathic individuals, only the more primitive affective reactions from the reptilian brain (for example, fight-flight) come through, unmodified by the functions of the cerebral cortex. Because of this specific deficit, psychopaths are unable to "recognize" emotions in others.

This line of research has been supported by studies using positron emission tomography (PET), a nuclear medicine imaging technique that produces a three-dimensional image or picture of functional processes in the body. PET provides a visual demonstration of the reduced metabolic activity of neurons within the brains of psychopaths (Blair et al, 2005; Blair, 2008; Williamson, Harpur and Hare, 1991). Hormonal functioning has also been assessed in attempts to identify physiological differences between psychopaths and "normal" people. For example, a few studies have found psychopathy to be linked to low cortisol levels (Weber et al, 2008).

In spite of this considerable body of research evidence depicting physiological differences between psychopaths and the general population, the nature proposition for psychopathy does not necessarily rule out the influence of nurture. In most instances of complex personality dynamics, both nature and nurture play a role. For example, some people may have a genetic predisposition

to a disorder, but the environment in which they are brought up very much determines how these dysfunctionalities will be expressed. As 35–50 percent of personality characteristics are inherited, a considerable percentage of what makes people behave the way they do is left unexplained (Lyons et al, 1995; Williamson et al, 1992; McGuffin and Thapar, 1989).

Thus in spite of the biogenetic predominance in research concerning the behavior of psychopaths, a substantial number of mental health practitioners continue to address the role of unstable, unhappy childhood environments in the genesis of criminality and antisocial behavior. Psychopathy, parental rejection, and lack of affection seem to be close cousins. Difficult nurture can accentuate psychopathic behavior patterns (McCord and McCord, 1964; Tomb and Christensen, 1987; Willerman et al, 1992). Apart from the many biogenetic findings, there is also a substantial body of research that points out that inconsistent discipline and disruptions to family life (e.g., divorce, separation, and rejecting, physically abusive parents) can be predictors of adult criminal activity (McCord, 1979; van Dusen et al, 1983; Wilson and Hernnstein, 1985). Most psychopaths begin to exhibit serious behavioral problems—for instance, persistent lying, cheating, theft, arson, truancy, substance abuse, vandalism, precocious sexuality—at an early age.

We can even postulate the existence of two kinds of psychopath: the fundamental "heavy," positioned at one extreme of the spectrum, as described earlier; and the psychopath "lite" (the SOBs), who are "hypothesized to have experienced a 'de-activation' or dissociation of a developing basic affective nature and conscience" (Porter, 1996, p. 183). Unlike fundamental psychopaths, born without the capacity to form emotional bonds (due to serious genetic abnormalities), psychopaths "lite" experience a de-activation of the development of basic affective patterns (due to the interplay of nature-nurture). In their case, developmental forces have played a more significant role. The repair of faulty wiring was not an option. Their capacity for empathetic response was incapacitated due to repeated disillusionment in their childhood, caused by physical or sexual abuse or other forms of maltreatment. Over time, these

negative environmental experiences may have led to the deactivation or poor repair of normal human emotion, resulting in psychopathic behavior patterns. In later life, affective inhibition can have serious consequences, particularly if psychopaths function on a larger stage—like organizations or society.

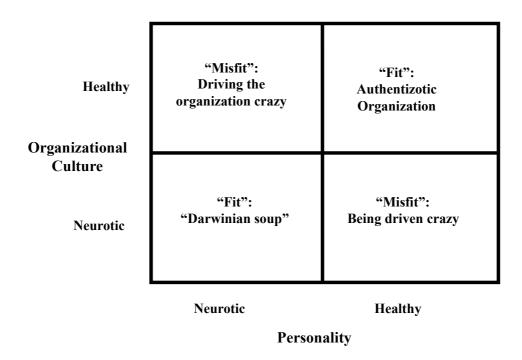## Fit between Individual and Organization

The behavior of SOB executives raises the question of the nature of the interchange between individual and organization. How do organizations affect people, and vice versa? How does this interplay work itself out? Is the modern corporation a heaven for psychopaths? Take, for example, Joel Bakan's popular documentary film *The Corporation* (2003). Bakan's film maintains that modern corporations are driven by shareholder value, regardless of how this affects the interests of workers, society, or the environment, and that this simple motivation is seriously worrying. It can easily become a liability, and dangerous to societal well-being. In their unimpeded pursuit of profit, many companies pollute the environment, exploit workers and commit accounting fraud. Maximizing shareholder value contributes to a list of pathologies that includes "disregard for the well-being of others," "inability to form lasting relationships," and "deceitfulness," adversely affecting the mental health of the people who work for such institutions. The film suggests that corporations, driven by self-interest and financial greed, are themselves psychopathic.

In Bakan's view, corporations motivated to create wealth for their shareholders conveniently ignore the social burdens that accompany their activities. They put others at risk in order to satisfy their profit-maximizing goals, and in the process harm employees and customers, and damage the environment. Instances of serious social damage include child labor, exploitative low wages, manipulative advertising, unhealthy foods, and unsustainable environmental destruction. They can be two-faced and opaque—exercising selective disclosure, they may not reveal information indicating that their products can cause harm; that can be amoral, rationalizing their decisions; they are conscience-free, yet able to mimic

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caring and altruism, helped by deceptive advertising campaigns. Corporations relate to others only superficially, via make-believe versions of themselves created by media companies. What's more, through their relentless pursuit of profit, a number of these companies get good people to do bad things. This begs the question, from an adult development point of view, whether it is the corporation that reinforces (and accentuates) people's SOB characteristics, or whether SOB executives create this type of corporation?

Perhaps it is an issue of fit. We can construct a simple individual-organization matrix with dimensions such as "health" and "neurosis" and identify the worst of all scenarios: perfect fit between the neurotic organization and the neurotic individual (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984). This combination creates a highly toxic, Darwinian organizational culture. To survive in it, executives need to be ruthless, incessantly looking out for number one. At the opposite end of the matrix, we find a more constructive situation in which both organization and individual are relatively healthy. This is the best fit, but it is also a rare one. I have called these authentizotic organizations, places where people operate at their best (Kets de Vries, 2001). The more problematic quadrants represent situations where there is a misfit between organization and individual. One of these contains a healthy individual in a neurotic organization, which makes the individual sick. It is not easy to remain sane in insane situations. Another quadrant contains a sick individual—an SOB executive, for example—who is responsible for creating a toxic corporate culture in an otherwise healthy organization. See Exhibit 1 for a review of the various options.

Exhibit 1: Individual-Organization Fit

	Neurotic (Personality)	Healthy (Personality)
Healthy (Organizational Culture)	"Misfit": Driving the organization crazy	"Fit": Authentizotic Organization
Neurotic (Organizational Culture)	"Fit": "Darwinian soup"	"Misfit": Being driven crazy

Organizational Culture (vertical axis: Healthy / Neurotic)

Personality (horizontal axis: Neurotic / Healthy)

How to identify SOB executives

One of the major problems in identifying SOBs is that the organizational world appreciates many of their qualities. In a manner of speaking, they are hidden in plain sight. Their behavior is adaptive in a highly competitive environment, because it gets results for both individual and organization. This does not create a great incentive to ferret them out. Furthermore, it can be very difficult to distinguish between a genuinely talented executive and an SOB. Many of their defining characteristics—their polish, charm, cool decisiveness, and fondness for the fast lane—are easily mistaken for effective leadership qualities. So how can we distinguish SOBs from genuinely talented executives? How can we spot these wolves in sheep's clothing?

It is not easy. Psychopathy is one of the most difficult disorders to spot. SOBs can be chameleons. They can act perfectly normally, and indeed to be utterly charming, all the while wreaking havoc on the lives of the people around them and the organizations they inhabit.

The psycho-diagnostic tool most commonly used to assess psychopathy in contemporary research and clinical practice is Robert Hare's Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (Hare, 2003). This checklist has been adopted worldwide (Wormith et al, 2007; Ronson, 2011) as the standard reference for researchers, clinicians, and criminologists.

Hare's checklist consists of a list of questions with a detailed description of how to score a person according to numerous factors. Many of the questions on Hare's checklist can be adapted to find out whether a person fits in the SOB category.

Are you dealing with an SOB executive?

Think about the following questions when referring to people with SOB tendencies in your organization:

- Does s/he come across as too glib and too charming?
- Is s/he very self-centered?
- Does s/he have a sense of grandiosity?
- Does s/he have a constant need for stimulation?
- Is s/he prone to boredom?
- Is s/he a chronic liar, even about minor issues?
- Is s/he cunning and manipulative?
- Does his/her behavior demonstrate a complete lack of remorse, shame or guilt?
- Is s/he characterized by shallow emotional experiences?
- Is s/he callous?
- Does s/he lack empathy?
- Is s/he extremely self-serving?
- Does s/he have a parasitic lifestyle?
- Does s/he see others as targets and opportunities?
- Does s/he have poor behavioral controls?

- Can s/he act extremely irresponsibly?
- Is s/he very impulsive?
- Does s/he bend organizational systems and rules to their own advantage?
- Does the end always justify the means for him/her?
- Is s/he good at blaming others for their own mistakes?
- Does s/he have a strong sense of entitlement?
- Does s/he construct complex webs of lies?
- Does s/he have difficulty distinguishing fact from fiction?
- Does s/he like to exploit, abuse and exert power?
- Does s/he act as though "winning" is all that counts?
- Is s/he sexually promiscuous?
- Did s/he have early behavioral problems?

If the majority of these questions are answered in the affirmative, you may be dealing with an SOB executive. The typical executive would rate a "yes" on only a few of these questions.

Note: These questions are based on an adapted version of Hare's questionnaire (Hare, 1996, 2003; Hare and Neumann, 2006; Babiak and Hare, 2006).

Other Danger Signs

If affirmative responses to these questions are not enough in themselves, there are additional danger signs that identify SOB executives. One give-away is their lack of modesty. This can be extremely irritating, as there is no justification for their boasting. The successes and triumphs that they trumpet turn out to be very hollow when looked at closely. But if they are confronted with the facts, they are very quick to find excuses, usually blaming others for whatever went wrong. Another obvious sign of psychopathy is the way these people brag about their experiences, even unsavory ones. They are perfectly comfortable with their deviant behavior and unbothered about admitting breaking the rules.

Their lack of team skills is another give-away. Their preoccupation with number

one makes it impossible for them to be team players. Worse, their narcissistic personality gives them a knack for derailing teams, and sabotaging the work of the team leader (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985).

Another danger sign is their tendency to hoard information. They are power-driven, and knowledge—something they are reluctant to share—is power. Because they consistently put their self-interest before the interest of the organization, they are strong believers in the mushroom treatment, that is, keeping others in the dark. They have no sense of good corporate citizenship.

Another telling characteristic is role playing. As loyalty and trust are not words that belong in SOB executives' vocabulary, they have an extremely instrumental approach to relationships. They are masters at "kissing up and kicking down," which makes them particularly dangerous in organizations. They are very good at managing upward, but their treatment of people whom they don't perceive as useful to their cause can be devastating. There is no authenticity in their leadership style, given their very disparate treatment of the people with whom they deal, but there is great unpredictability, particularly when they are faced with setbacks.

Intimidation and bullying come naturally to them. They have no scruples about making people feel uncomfortable or even frightening them. Their weapons are unwarranted or invalid criticism, nit-picking, fault-finding, excluding people, singling them out, shouting, verbal humiliation, excessive monitoring, issuing verbal and written warnings, and much more. They make others extremely nervous about dealing with them.

Coping with SOB Executives

SOB executives wreak more havoc on organizational society than other dysfunctional executives. Because they act counter-culturally, and are unaffected by social norms and traditions, they manipulate people and organizations at will,

leaving a trail of destruction behind them. SOBs can be found in any type of organization, at any level, from chief executive to junior employee. Given the damage they can cause, it is essential that people and organizations know how to protect themselves against them.

As mentioned earlier, SOB executives are difficult to spot—at least initially. Many of us will fail to recognize their Machiavellian disposition, and remain incredulous about the accusations of improper, unethical behavior made against them. The issue is also muddied by the reluctance of people who are in the know to admit that they have been betrayed and fooled. SOB executives often operate by making friends with people high up the organization who can protect them. Identifying and neutralizing these people may require the ability "to listen with the third ear" and pick up subtle signals in the organization. A clinical orientation to organizational analysis can go a long way to ferret out these individuals (Levinson, 1972; Kets de Vries, 2006).

A clinical outlook is important, not just because the behavior of SOB executives has serious negative interpersonal ramifications; acceptance of their practices can also contribute to toxic organizational cultures (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984). Others may imitate their behavior, believing that it is the best way to move forward in the organization. The first line of defense against SOBs in the workplace is to screen new entries very carefully; the second is the creation of a coaching culture where trust and openness prevail and where people can speak their mind.

Organizational Preventive Measures
Before entry
The best way to start is to detect SOBs before they enter the organization. Once they are entrenched, it will be much harder to get rid of them. The obvious starting point is the application. Résumés must be screened for lies and distortions and references followed up and crosschecked very carefully, reading between the lines of what others say about the applicant. Structured behavioral interviews, in which interviewees are asked the same questions by different

interviewers, can be very useful. SOBs have a tendency to tell interviewers exactly what they want to hear, so as many stories may emerge as there are interviewers. When the various stories don't add up, a closer look is warranted.

It is important to keep in mind that SOBs are notorious for not answering questions put to them. If an honest answer to a question doesn't suit them, they will either lie or answer in such a way that the question is never directly addressed. Lying is preferable to displaying their shallow and superficial knowledge about the job they are applying for. Bullshitting in this way can help them get on even if they lack a deep knowledge of the business. A candidate who flatters a senior interviewer but is condescending toward a junior interviewer should be on the watch list: he or she is exactly the kind of person that has psychopathic tendencies.

When conducting these interviews it is important "to use yourself as an instrument" and pay attention to your counter-transference reactions—how an individual makes you feel (Kets de Vries, 2007). For example, if something does not "feel" right, it probably isn't right. If you think you are being flattered, look out. If the interviewee tries a game of one-upmanship, be careful not to be drawn into the game—you are likely to lose your bearings. If someone makes you feel uncomfortable, or wary, you may have picked up his or her scary undertow. If the candidate overwhelms you with hard luck stories, resist your feeling of pity. Empathy can sometimes prevent you from recognizing what is really going on. Above all, retain a healthy amount of skepticism, whatever the person is telling you. Don't wear blinkers.

Using yourself as an instrument, a psychoanalytic skill, is not for everyone but other tools can be used. For example, from an organizational perspective, psychometric testing may reduce the possibility that one of these individuals enters the fold, particularly into a position of power and influence. Although these tests are not foolproof—and SOB executives may have learned how to fake them—they can help signal these people.

Many of these screening procedures will be too cumbersome for most organizations. A better solution to the elimination of SOB executives is to create the kind of organizational structures, systems and culture that promote diversity, reflectivity, and openness at all levels.

Organizational processes

A team-oriented culture may offer a degree of safety and be a preventive measure. Organizations that have robust team processes in place—and effective team leaders who make sure that a team culture prevail—will create a degree of immunity to such people. Teamwork is alien to SOBs and this kind of antipathetic culture will keep them away. Organizations would also do well to put key performance indicators in place, clearly tied to outcomes, and make people accountable. This will ensure that SOBs cannot use their bait-and-switch tactics, and avoid accountability. Clear organizational policies about what constitutes bullying behavior—including anti-bullying training programs—will not only deter SOBs but also equip employees with the means to identify and deal with them. Training programs should include a discussion of the traits and characteristics of organizational psychopaths; how they manipulate employees and organizational control systems; and why their behavior is so often confused with good or creative leadership. Senior management should exemplify appropriate leadership behavior. Exit interviews can also supply important information, if done well. Many talented employees leave because of bullying or other kinds of misbehavior within an organization; the exit interview is an opportunity to bring these things to light.

Most important, for weeding out any SOBs who have managed to gain entry to an organization, is a culture where people have a healthy disrespect for their boss and can speak their mind. It should be made easy for rank-and-file employees to express concerns about their colleagues and bosses. In a culture where multi-party feedback is par for the course, this process is easier to facilitate. Feedback systems are good ways to signal the presence of psychopathic executives and detect dysfunctional behavior before it has graver consequences. Because SOBs are often included among high potentials, organizations should be on their guard

for incongruities at an early career phase and insist on rigorous crosschecking with other colleagues.

Furthermore, a red flag should go up if there are glaring discrepancies between how direct reports and junior employees perceive an executive, and how their peers or boss perceive them. Lower-level employees are often on the receiving end of an SOB's psychopathic behavior and usually spot a problem much sooner than senior management. Organizations should ensure that they have clear means of communication for signaling inappropriate behavior—for example, the presence of an ombudsman, an anonymous tip line, or specific whistleblower provisions. One very straightforward indicator that something is wrong is a worrying exit rate of good people from a specific project group, department, or division. This denotes the need for a closer look at that part of the organization. Another obvious signal is converging complaints received by HR.

If you have got an SOB boss, get out while the going's good—unless you think you can beat them at their game. And that's unlikely—you are dealing with a professional. If you do decide to stay, you will need to find an ingenious way to manage the culprit out, which is generally unsuccessful. One would be to document every incident of inappropriate behavior and take it to someone higher up the organization than your boss. You should be prepared for the consequences of this, which may well rebound on you, such as being managed out or made redundant yourself. Of course, the worst possible scenario is to have an SOB as CEO. In that situation, your best option is to take your career in your own hands, cut your losses, preserve your self-esteem, and move on to another organization.

Personal Change: a Losing Battle

Until now we have concentrated on how to identify and get rid of psychopaths. But this begs the question whether anything can be done to make these people change? Unfortunately, in most instances the psychopathic personality is carved

in stone, and the psychopath "heavy" impervious to change. They don't fit the basic assumption of psychotherapy or coaching, which is that the client wants to find a way of dealing with distressing or painful psychological and emotional problems. Psychopaths are completely unaware that they have any psychological or emotional problems. They are quite satisfied with themselves and their inner landscape. They see no reasons to change their behavior to conform to what they see as laughable social standards. They just think they are smarter than the rest of us and that anyone else in their place would behave the same way.

Psychopaths' inability to develop compassion, guilt, and remorse makes them incapable of establishing any form of working alliance with a therapist or coach. On the limited occasions when they do restrain their antisocial impulses, it's not their conscience kicking in, but because doing so suits their purpose at the time. Interventions with psychopaths are rarely effective; indeed, mental health professionals consider clinical psychopathic personality disorders untreatable. Patients may claim improvements, but often their only goal in undertaking therapy is to obtain a "good report" from the therapist or coach. Once they have that, it's back to business as usual.

There may be more hope, however, for people at the other end of the spectrum— the psychopath "lite," the SOB. Here we find the daring, adventurous, unconventional people who learned to play by their own rules early in life; the people who can't resist temptation, and get into trouble. If they see others like them benefiting from treatment, these individuals, may be persuaded that there's something to be gained in asking for help. If they can build up a relationship with a therapist or coach, there is some hope that something can be done. However, changing these people's behavior patterns will not be easy.

When SOB executives seek treatment (often imposed from the outside or through exhaustion from the "theatre" in which they are engaged)—their relationship with the therapist or coach can take one of two forms. Either the executive will try to enlist the therapist/coach as an ally against the people who "forced" him or her to look for treatment; or he or she will try to impress the

therapist/coach to gain some advantage, usually of a legal nature.

Whichever form it takes, therapists and coaches find working with these people extremely exasperating and frustrating. SOB executives play masterful mind-games with their psychotherapists or coaches. They always find new excuses for their own behavior, and new insights into others' vulnerabilities. In many instances, these interventions only help them to become more effective at manipulating people. It's not unusual for them to become active readers of therapeutic/coaching literature, and acquire a language to rationalize why they do what they do. Some will mirror the wishes of the therapist or coach, and claim they have seen the error of their ways. They may express remorse, then contradict themselves through their words or actions. And in the rare cases when psychotherapy or leadership coaching does have some effect, it doesn't take much for them to turn against the person who is trying to help them. Whatever working alliance is established, it will always remain a very fragile one.

Conclusion

SOB executives may have an intellectual appreciation of what is immoral but simply don't have a feeling of immorality about it. As I have described it here, their personality makeup has a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde quality to it—they are remorseless, vicious and vindictive in private, but can be innocent and charming in public, making it hard for many to believe that their real nature is so different. The Dr. Jekyll side is viewed as "charismatic," "stimulating," and "energizing," convincing enough to deceive most people in the organization, while the Mr. Hyde side is a stealth pattern, heavily disguised. Mr. Hyde, however, is the real person, while Dr. Jekyll is engaged in a role-play. Only the people who are to the victims of their machinations can see them for what they really are.

SOB executives in senior leadership positions can significantly alter the makeup of the organization; their divisive dysfunctional behavior can permeate

organizations like a cancer. If we take the financial sector as an example, we can see how the immoral actions of a relatively small number of SOBs can wreak catastrophe on the effectiveness of organizations, the profitability of industry, the performance of the economy, and the prosperity of society. The greater their power, the more dangerous the abuse.

To be able to identify the presence of SOBs in an organization, we need to move beyond a purely cognitive-rational approach to organizational and individual analysis, to a more clinical one (Kets de Vries, 2011). Taking a psychodynamic-systemic perspective will provide insights into the unconscious emotional and psychological dynamics that are barriers to organizational effectiveness, creating the kinds of interventions that reduce the negative impact of individual pathologies. The clinical paradigm brings to the surface a Dorian Gray-style portrait of what is happening. Skillful application of this knowledge will show how things really are—what damage some people can inflict on others. Maintaining people's mental health should be a key value in all organizations; but SOB executives are masters at chipping away at that. A zero-tolerance policy for SOB behavior is a given for any organization.

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