

# Dangerous liaisons

Are you sitting next to a narcissist? Is the office manager a little too Machiavellian for your liking? Did that colleague giving a PowerPoint presentation the other day seem a bit psychopathic? **Holly Andrews** and **Dr Jan Francis-Smythe** examine the negative consequences of people with extreme personalities

There is often a fine line between self-confidence and grandiosity, persuasiveness and manipulation. Those that border on the extreme in this way tend to thrive in fast-paced, transitional organisations with low levels of bureaucracy where they can more easily mask their narcissism, Machiavellianism or psychopathy\* – or all three forms of personality dysfunction\*\*.

The current economic climate is ideal for such personality types and they may be more difficult to spot amongst all the change that is taking place in organisations due to the recession – but this just makes them even more of a potential threat.

## Who are these people?

At the heart of psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism is a willingness to exploit other people for personal gain. See chart for the relationship between the three dysfunctions:

- Narcissism is defined by traits including fantasies of power, exaggerated sense of self-importance, entitlement, need for admiration and power, lack of empathy, and exploitation of others (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)
- The concept of Machiavellianism has developed from the writings of Machiavelli, an Italian Renaissance diplomat and writer. More recently, the concept has been reinvented as a personality orientation. Christie & Geis (1970) define somebody who 'views and manipulates others for his own purpose' as being of Machiavellian character
  - Psychopathy is a constellation of interpersonal and lifestyle traits including lack of empathy and remorse, superficial charm, grandiosity, irresponsibility, egocentricity, pathological lying, inability to delay gratification, failure to

learn from punishment and reckless behaviour (Hare, 1991).

Outside of clinical settings, people can possess these traits to varying degrees. A small tendency towards these traits may be considered 'normal' or even beneficial to success in the business world. The greater the degree, the greater the potential problem for organisations, as evidence suggests people possessing high levels of these traits may have a negative impact on organisational performance and create interpersonal difficulties in the workplace.

## How do they get hired?

Organisations often actively recruit for people who possess the desirable side of these traits. For example, the desirable trait of charisma maps onto the negative trait of superficial charm (see chart with list of desirable and corresponding undesirable traits). A key problem for recruiters is that undesirable traits are not particularly easy to spot. For example, psychopathy was dubbed 'the mask of sanity' by Cleckley (1976), in reference to the observation that psychopaths often appear perfectly 'normal'.

Research has shown that extremes of these desirable traits can lead to poor performance and managerial derailment. Recruiters may therefore be fooled into thinking that they are hiring a very desirable candidate when they are actually recruiting an individual with too much of a good thing. Given the traits associated with these kinds of dysfunction, recruiters may also find themselves manipulated by the candidate, further complicating the problem.

Certain types of organisations and industries are predicted to be more attractive to those with personality dysfunction than others. Occupations that offer opportunities to exploit people and gain power and rewards, combined with a lack of bureaucracy and a fast-paced environment, are predicted to be particularly attractive (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Research has found higher levels of dysfunctional traits in those employed in

sales, law, psychiatry, politics, finance and science, for example.

Babiak & Hare (2006) outline some of the main ways recruiters can avoid attracting an individual with a personality dysfunction and ensure the selection of a candidate who can perform well:

- Take care in the wording of your advertisement. Words such as ‘visionary’, ‘persuasive’ and ‘influential’ are green lights for psychopaths, narcissists and Machiavellians
- Employ structured selection processes
- Avoid a single interview with one interviewer. This is the situation that gives maximum opportunity for manipulation
- Consider using psychometric tests designed to identify negative characteristics
- Check all references thoroughly.

### How do they perform on the job?

Research has found evidence of individuals with high levels of traits associated with all three kinds of dysfunction working within organisations. Their success appears to reside in an ability to appear as a good employee, regardless of actual performance.

Psychopathic individuals perform as little work personally as is possible, preferring to exploit colleagues to accomplish tasks. Narcissistic and Machiavellian individuals appear to be able to perform conceptual, task-related elements of a job (if they choose to) but not contextual elements. Lack of performance is covered by a superficial façade that is presented to those who have influence. Narcissists and psychopaths, in particular, make use of their charm and charisma to convince others that they are loyal and hard working employees.

Because of their appearance of competence, they are often identified as having high potential or as future leaders and promoted into such roles. This can be detrimental to an organisation, as they are not actually good performers nor do they have the personal skills necessary to successfully lead a team.

The traits that lead them to be identified as leaders, such as self-confidence, may become weaknesses when in a position of leadership. For example, narcissists, who are likely to overflow with self-belief, have this reinforced when given power. This may result in the narcissistic leader becoming increasingly self-involved, believing only in his or her own ideas and implementing them without careful evaluation.

In general, psychopaths, narcissists and Machiavellians are not good people managers, disliking competition from any bright subordinates. They may choose to favour only those that pose no threat or support them unquestioningly. They may also limit the development opportunities available to their team to reduce competition. They are likely to claim any team success for themselves whilst blame for failure will be apportioned to other team members.

Despite such negative behaviours, research suggests that those with personality dysfunction remain rarely challenged in the workplace. Their negative behaviours are covered not only by their charm but by their ability to manipulate co-workers and organisational systems. Conflict is created between peers to reduce communication,

Desirable	Undesirable
Charismatic	Superficial charm
Self-confidence	Grandiosity
Ability to influence	Manipulation
Persuasive	Exploitative
Visionary thinking	Fantasies of power
Ability to take risks	Impulsive
Action oriented	Poor planning
Ability to make hard decisions	Lack of effect

(Chart adapted from Babiak & Hare, 2006)

ensuring the full extent of the dysfunctional individual’s behaviour is not known. Those who may speak out against the individual may have their reputation undermined so any concerns raised are not heeded.

The current economic climate may provide further cover for negative behaviours. The credit crunch has forced many organisations into a period of rapid change and turbulence. Such organisational chaos allows individuals with personality dysfunction the maximum latitude to cover their negative behaviours. For example, organisational structures may change quickly allowing the dysfunctional employee to move from one group of co-workers to another before the extent of their manipulation and lack of productivity is discovered.

### What happens next?

The impact of working with an individual who possesses a personality dysfunction can be immense. Psychopaths, in particular, can have an extremely negative impact upon co-workers. As previously mentioned, those who threaten the psychopath may have their reputation undermined and their career derailed.

Managers may also find themselves superseded by the psychopathic subordinate. Working with someone as exploitative and manipulative as a psychopath can have an impact on a co-workers’ mental health as well as their career. Individuals have anecdotally reported stress, anxiety and depression as a consequence of working with someone who appears to possess a dysfunctional personality.

The impact of an individual with a personality dysfunction may not be limited to unpleasant experiences for co-workers. Narcissism has been linked to counter-productive work behaviour, risky decision-making, resource destruction and even white-collar crime (see Brunell et al, 2008).

Babiak (2000) suggests that employing a psychopath may lead to a “breakdown in team work, a decline in departmental morale, and a general disintegration of the work unit...” (p.303). He suggests this may have a negative impact on productivity, quality, customer service and retention of talented staff, although it is difficult to establish clear cause and effect relationships.

Despite this difficulty there is no shortage of anecdotal and theoretical support for the relationship of personality dysfunction to poor organisational outcomes. Many examples of organisational corruption and collapse, such as that of Enron, have been speculatively linked to some kind of personality dysfunction in the organisation’s

leaders. The theory is simple to understand; the individual with narcissistic, psychopathic or Machiavellian tendencies will only perform actions that benefit him or her. If these actions do not benefit the organisation, well so be it.

### How do you manage such employees?

Once hired, it is difficult to identify and manage an individual with personality dysfunction. 360 degree appraisal systems may reveal if there are inconsistencies in how an individual is seen by peers, subordinates and managers. Inconsistent evaluations are commonly found when an individual is high on dysfunctional traits.

If an individual with dysfunctional traits is discovered within the organisation, one way to manage the situation is to employ a 'side-kick' to counteract the negative traits of that individual (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Organisational systems and procedures may also be used to mitigate the potentially negative effects of individuals with such dysfunctions.


Those with high levels of psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism thrive best in fast-paced, transitional organisations with low levels of bureaucracy. Consistent enforcement of organisational policies, thorough appraisal systems and careful succession planning, may help to stop the individual with personality dysfunction from manipulating the organisation to their own end.

Organisational culture may also act as an important shield to the effects of personality dysfunction. Cultures that promote openness and honesty can reduce the ability of those with personality dysfunction to manipulate others or create conflicts.

In short, individuals with personality dysfunction may pose a significant threat to organisations if not correctly managed. The willingness to exploit others, that is a core trait of psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism, leads them to abuse co-workers and the organisation that employs them.

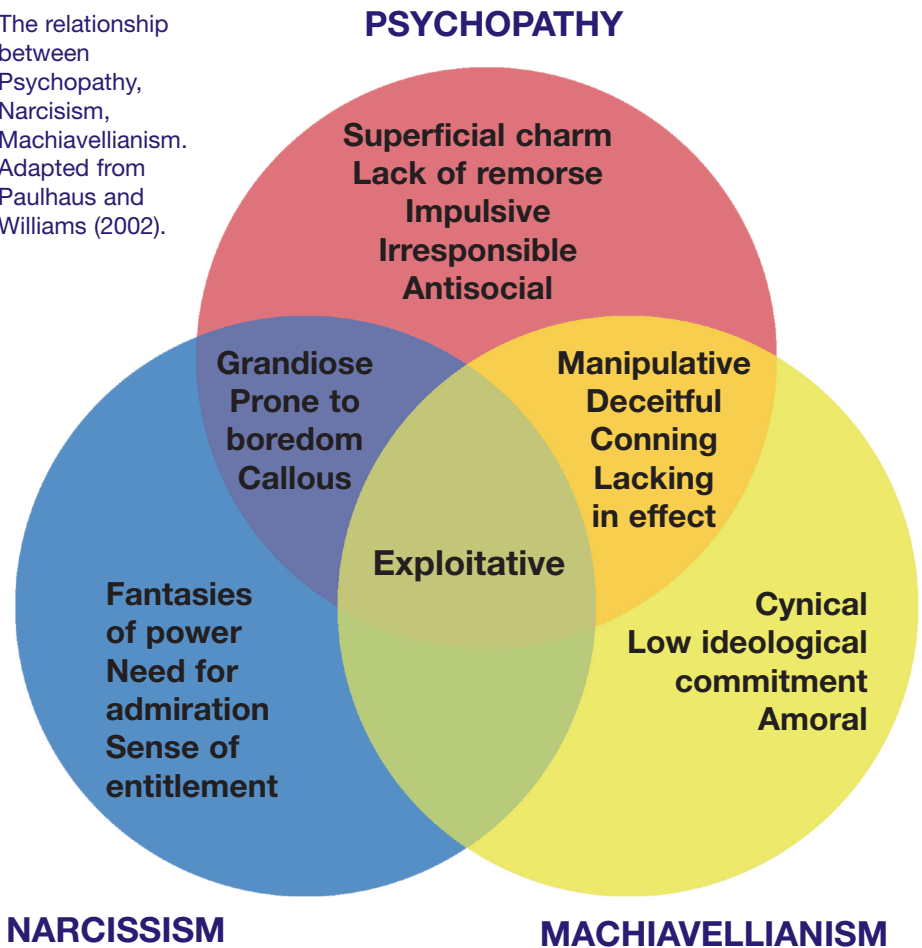
Despite this negative behaviour, evidence suggests that these individuals enjoy success in organisations including promotions, bonuses and salary increases. The success of the dysfunctional individual may be at the expense of the careers of co-workers and the key performance indicators of the organisation, such as productivity, customer service and retention of talent.

Awareness of these individuals is a key part of an organisation's ability to protect itself and its staff from exploitation. This may not be sufficient however as manipulation and impression management are traits also associated with these kinds of dysfunction.

In today's economic climate, vigilant selection and management procedures are needed to ensure the right people are recruited and that they do their job well. 

*Holly Andrews is a lecturer in Worcester Business School, with previous experience within recruitment and training. Holly is currently completing a PhD in Occupational Psychology as well as working towards Chartered status with the British Psychological Society. She is Secretary of the West Midlands Branch of the British Psychological Society and a member of the Division of Occupational Psychology. She has written articles for both academic and professional journals.*

The relationship between Psychopathy, Narcissism, Machiavellianism. Adapted from Paulhus and Williams (2002).



*Dr Jan Francis-Smythe is an Occupational Psychologist (HPC Registered), Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. She is the Director of the Centre for People at Work ([www.worc.ac.uk/cpaw](http://www.worc.ac.uk/cpaw)) in the Business School at the University of Worcester.*

## References

\* The terms psychopathic, psychopath, narcissistic, narcissist and Machiavellian are used to refer to individuals possessing high levels of traits associated with these disorders, not a clinical diagnosis.

\*\*The term "personality dysfunction" is not intended to reflect clinical diagnoses in this context. In this article, the term is used to describe individuals who possess the extreme personality traits associated with psychopathy, narcissism or Machiavellianism. The degree to which the traits are present may not be sufficient to warrant a diagnosis, but could still impact upon organisational performance.

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