

Are psychopath leaders stifling sustainability and business transformation?

Amid the growing need for businesses to focus on the 'drive for success', individuals with a willingness to employ high-risk strategies and fast-paced organisational growth are being actively recruited to senior roles. Colleagues turn into strangers with behaviours that echo psychopathic personality disorders.

However, it is essential for workplaces to transform in a sustainable way and move away from socially toxic forms of business management. Enlightened organisations emphasise a more internal and shared shift away from amoral management, an integration of ethics into systemic thinking, and a wider spiritual sense of self-awareness.

Adapted from a paper by



Professor K Akrivou
Henley Business School



Dr S Bulkan
Henley Business School



Where business comes to life

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Sustainability has been defined as: 'avoiding compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, by the way we act now.' As it was first rooted in the environmental movement, earlier and more mainstream references to business sustainability, naturally, emphasised ecological concerns. But things have moved on.

Now, talk about sustainable business and transformation has broadened to include not just economic and environmental concerns but also social, with an emphasis on humanistic and ethical values, and shifts in mindsets.

The focus of these shifts can range from macro issues, such as global social inequalities in less developed societies (for example, poverty, water quality, hunger) and even social welfare needs in developed societies (for example, gender equity, quality healthcare, education and wellbeing). Enlightened organisations emphasise a more internal and shared shift away from toxic and amoral management, an integration of ethics into systemic thinking, and a wider spiritual sense of self-awareness.

However, some disturbing old habits continue to have a negative impact.



The lingering presence of the psychopath-style manager

A characteristic of psychopathy is management with a profound lack of concern for others. While it may sound extreme to refer to business leaders using a term that usually applies to callous and violent criminals, like psychopaths, a significant number of managers still demonstrate a lack of empathy and deficient emotional responses. Couple this with a lack of self-control in behaviour, and it leads to actions and decision-making with dehumanising and anti-social effects.

We may all recognise managers whose style shows similarities to a psychopathic personality disorder. Perhaps you have experienced a leader who treats others purely as a means to an end, without any concerns for wellbeing or growth? Or who shows a lack of self-restraint, inner questioning and an absence of shame or remorse? We know that this has a negative affect on stress levels and the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals, and often entire teams.

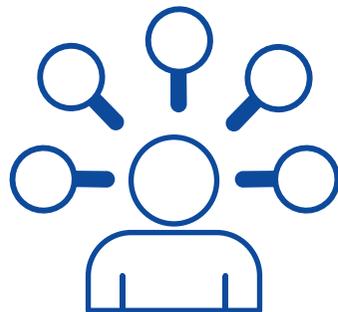
The pressure to gain a competitive edge encourages the psychopath



Amid the growing need for businesses to focus on the 'drive for success', individuals with a willingness to employ high-risk and fast-paced organisational growth strategies are being actively recruited to senior roles. This is deemed by some a acceptable price to pay for short-term commercial advantage.

In this context, it is easy to understand why psychopathic traits and behaviours can become normalised, tolerated and even valued by organisations that pursue fast growth. However, employees and the organisation eventually suffer in a variety of ways, damaging the sustainability of the business. For example, committing risky or unwise ventures can lead to an adverse impact on productivity and financial performance, talented employees are unsupported, and the formation of teams problematic. Psychopathy, as a trait, can encourage a burn-out culture and even 'white-collar' crimes. It can cause people to engage in relational aggression, which eventually affects the business sustainability and sustainable development, and pushes others to have negative emotions towards the organisation and engagement.

In real life, we would rarely meet a colleague or boss with a true psychopathic personality, but psychopaths are known to be attracted to power, prestige, financial gain and positions of influence.



Are commercial pressures distracting us from the real purpose of work?

Increasingly, workforces face demanding, dehumanising work environments and a continuous pressure to increase productivity as a result of a locally and globally competitive business world. Also, add to this various economic crises – which have worsened since COVID-19.

In this landscape, it is not unusual that the culture at the top of organisations pushes management for a more aggressive and competitive performance. Such environments can often slowly degrade the very core purpose of work, which is as much about organisational, societal and wider prosperity as it is about human beings and the growth and development of their relationships.

Toxic organisations and dehumanising management structures can turn leadership into merely a force for imposing aggressive growth business models, without proper concern for resourcing them fairly. In other cases, leadership can become amoral, moralistic or irrelevant, paying lip-service to goodness and niceness but without proper action.

Over time, this creates an unsustainable work culture in which increasing pressures and processes accumulate to destabilise trust, weaken wellbeing and personal dignity, and instil doubt in human relations. In turn, this can transform colleagues into strangers with behaviours that echo psychopathic personality disorders: they show a heightened capability for success, use superficial charm, manipulate colleagues or subordinates through gossip, and constantly seek praise. These are all characteristics of psychopathy and can be mistaken as indications of strength.

This is why sustainability-inspired businesses require deep transformations to include not only a wider positive environmental and social impact, but also a profound focus on empathy and attention to the value of human beings as more than just their skills, actions or competences.

The social-relational side of work and the need to move away from socially toxic forms of business management (even if they are profitable), are significant and must be given greater priority to transform our workplaces in a sustainable way.

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This article is one of a series exploring the challenges of business transformation. Visit [hly.ac/improvement-leader](https://henley.ac.uk/improvement-leader) to read more and discover how Henley's apprenticeships can drive strategic change and improvement.

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For more information, please contact:

Henley Business School

Greenlands campus

Henley-on-Thames

RG9 3AU

henley.ac.uk

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