

To explore how corporate psychopathic leaders undertake their roles and the implications for their leadership practice

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Citation:

LAWRENCE, Nicholas (2021). To explore how corporate psychopathic leaders undertake their roles and the implications for their leadership practice. In: BAM 2021 Recovering from Covid, 31 Aug 2021 - 3 Sep 2021. [Conference or Workshop Item]

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To explore how corporate psychopathic leaders undertake their role of leadership and the implications for their leadership practice.

Track 16: Leadership and Leadership Development
British Academy of Management - 2021 Conference

Summary

The aim of the study is to explore whether corporate psychopaths¹ are the destructive leaders so many researchers believe, or whether they can have positive impacts on business performance. To achieve the set objectives of the research a mixed-methods approach will be adopted using an online survey and semi structured interviews with owner/managers of small organisations. The research paper has the potential to make a theoretical contribution by expanding our understanding of corporate psychopaths in leadership roles, having a better understanding of these leaders will benefit organisations from an applied perspective.

Word Count: 1,868

¹ Psychopathic Leader, Dark Leader and Corporate Psychopath are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Introduction

Psychopathy as an area of research has been explored in psychology and criminology for more than “*seven decades*” (Leeper Piquero *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). However, it is still a relatively new area of study in business research (Walker and Jackson, 2017) and Babiak *et al.*, (2010) believe it to be an area of research that is underrepresented, furthermore, prior to 2004 very little research or theory development of psychopathic leadership had been completed and even less focused on owners/managers of small organisations.

According to Reilly (2020), 1% of the population are psychopaths, whereas Stout (2005) believes the number is closer to 4%, however, Hare believes that 1% of the population are Corporate Psychopaths alone (Boddy, 2005). Unlike their criminal counterparts, corporate psychopaths are ruthless, corporate careerists. Yet when we think of psychopaths we usually conjure up images of serial killers, such as Ted Bundy (Miller, 2008) or Joanna Dennehy (Wiest, 2016). These are the psychopaths we recognise, not our work colleagues, managers, or leaders. Though based on Reilly’s estimation and 2018 UK population figures (ONS, 2019), there could be as many as 665,000 psychopaths in the UK, and as Babiak and Hare (2007, p. xiv) believe not all of these are ruthless killers, “*psychopaths do work in modern organisations.*”

A review of contemporary literature identified that many studies conducted, focused on large organisations in North America, however, these studies did not take into consideration the impact the size of the organisation may have. Fuller-Love (2006) acknowledged there was a difference between smaller and larger organisations, and the leaders within these organisations. Furthermore, whilst there has been research on leadership in small organisations (Scott *et al.*, 1989; Fuller-Love, 2006), this has not focused on the area of corporate psychopathy. The latest figures published in January 2020 from the Department for Business, Energy, & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) estimate there to be 5.9million private sector business in the UK with 98.6% (5.82million) being small (0 to 49 employees) (BEIS, 2020). Based on these estimates, there could be as many as 5,820 psychopathic owner/managers of smaller organisations, however the situation internally within these organisations is relatively unknown due to a lack of research.

It can be argued that much of what has been written to date throws a negative view over this subject area, even the phrase ‘Corporate Psychopath’ brings with it many preconceptions, likewise “Destructive Leadership” (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007) and “*Dark Leader*” (Takala, 2010). However, these are all idioms used to describe a small percentage of leaders demonstrating a particular set of characteristics: fearlessness, lack of empathy (Boddy, 2005), courage, charisma, confidence and persuasiveness (Gudmundsson & Southey, 2011), yet many of these are the same characteristics that are considered to be the prerequisite to effective leadership (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991). Corporate psychopaths are not delusional or insane just opportunists that are fearless, lack empathy, and any consideration of the consequences their actions may bring. Furthermore, some organisations see the benefits of having such leaders (Sheehy, Boddy and Murphy, 2020), believing they can harness this darker side of leadership effectively (Cote, 2018).

The researcher therefore questions the relationship between corporate psychopathy and leadership effectiveness. If some organisations seek to engage with these so-called destructive leaders, then is it possible that some situations dictate that they can be more effective.

Research Question

What is the role of corporate psychopaths as leaders?

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the dynamics of corporate psychopathy using a qualitative framework.
- Explore why corporate psychopaths seek positions of power.
- To analyse how leaders undertake their role of leadership and the implications for their leadership practice.

Literature Review

The literature pertinent to Psychopathy, Leadership and Dark Leadership will be explored.

Psychopathy

Since being first defined in detail by Cleckley (1941), there has been a fundamental theoretical discussion on the variances between psychopaths (the traditional kind) and corporate psychopaths. We shouldn't assume psychopaths to be synonymous with violence or criminality because as Perri (2011, p.226) points out "*there are psychopaths who have not engaged in criminal behaviour*". So, what constitutes a corporate psychopath?

Coleman (2015, p. 363) defines a psychopath as "*A mental disorder equivalent to antisocial personality disorder, with emphasis on affective and interpersonal traits such as superficial charm, pathological lying, egocentricity, lack of remorse, and callousness.*" Furthermore, Mathieu et al., (2013, p. 288) state that it is a "*clinical construct*" outlined as a set of behavioural characteristics adding: "*grandiosity, deceptiveness, impulsivity, irresponsibility, and a predisposition to disregard or contravene social norms*".

What we consider the conventional psychopath; has no respect for rules or bureaucracy, does not play well with others, and does not have a good work ethic, whilst the corporate psychopath cons and manipulates themselves in positions of high power (Leeper Piquero *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, Babiak and Hare (2019, p.101) state that corporate psychopaths have an "*entrepreneurial bent and the charisma and social skills to fool many people. Like all predators, psychopaths go where the action is, which to them means positions, occupations, professions, and organisations that afford them the opportunity to obtain power [and] control.*"

Leadership

So, what is a leader? Soanes and Hawker (2008, p.577) believe it to be "*a person or thing that is the most successful or advanced in a given area*", whereas Grint et al., (2017) believe a leader is linked to change, movement and persuasion. Alternatively, it is often cogitated that a leader is a person that another follows, someone in possession of certain characteristics and or qualities. Winston and Patterson (2006), believe that leaders can be single or multiple people whom choose, Influence, train and equip one or more followers that are in possession of a diverse set of abilities, skills and talent, then focusing their efforts. This causes the followers to enthusiastically expend physical, emotional and spiritual energy willingly towards the organisation's goals and mission in a concerted and coordinated manner, this is reinforced by Silva's (2016 p.4) definition that a leader is someone "*people accept as their leader to achieve common goals.*" In defining what a leader is, we highlight the main discussion of the difference

between effective and dark leadership. Many believe that the dark leader rather than inspiring their followers to perform for the good of the organisation, invariably manipulate their followers in to fulfilling their own objectives (Einarsen et al., 2007, p. 208).

However, Zaccaro (2007) believes that there is a situational element to the effectiveness of a leader. That the skills and expertise required by an effective leader are going to be constrained and closely bound by the situational requirements. An effective leader in one situation, may not be so effective in other situations, it is therefore not unreasonable at this point to conjecture that there could be situations that a dark leader could be good for the organisation.

Dark Leadership

It can be argued that leadership when utilised effectively can be *“instrumental in promoting good”* (Clements and Washbush, 1999) and conversely, when utilised ineffectively it can have destructive consequences as demonstrated in Enron (Clements and Washbush, 1999). If we look closer at the leadership of Enron we can see distinct signs of dark leadership at work (Allio, 2009; Gudmundsson and Southey, 2011) Johnson (2003, p.45) writes, the senior management team *“abused their power and privileges, manipulated [people], put their own interests above all else and refused to take responsibility for their actions”*. The destructive power of their greed and pride, was further amplified by the organisations culture of risk taking, these are all fundamental characteristics of a corporate psychopath (Einarsen et al., 2007). However, Albert J Dunlap was considered by many to be a corporate psychopath, (Cherry, 2004; Hatfield and Webb, 2011; Klarskov Jeppesen and Leder, 2016) yet he was responsible for the turnaround of eight large US organisations, such as Scott Paper (Ettorre, 1995; Calandro, 2011), indicative that dark leadership effectiveness of corporate psychopaths could be situational.

It is more commonplace in academia that the focus of leadership research is on the associated factors of ‘effective leadership’ and that the unspoken theory is that ineffective leadership is moreover the absence of ‘leadership’ (Einarsen et al., 2007). Yet research in to dark leadership shows that there are a distinct set of characteristics and that it is not just the *“absence of effective leadership behaviour”* (Einarsen et al., 2007). Evidence points towards the idea that negative events have a stronger influence over dark leaders than positive ones. Therefore, if we have a better understanding of dark leadership, measures can be implemented to prevent their destructive characteristics and enhance their positive aspects (Einarsen et al., 2007). Furthermore, McIntosh and Rima (2001, p.22) believe that dark leaders are unaware of these characteristics that influence them, and whilst it sounds menacing or evil, the dark side is essentially *“a natural result of human development”*.

Literature Review Summary

The discoveries made during the literature review imply that both dark-side (psychopathic) and bright-side (effective) leadership could be suitable and differential predictors of the different leadership styles particularly at the CEO level (Resick et al., 2009). It is therefore the aims of the researcher to explore further whether corporate psychopaths have the potential to be effective leaders and increase the level of understanding of the darker side of leadership.

Data Collection Methods

Contemporary research into (dark) leadership has predominantly adopted a positivist approach utilising quantitative methods to collect data via surveys (Page, Bergner and Willis, 2017). Examples including the Hogan Development Survey (Hogan and Hogan, 2009) and dirty dozen scale (Jonason and Webster, 2010). A weakness of utilising self-reporting surveys is that those answering the questions need to possess self-awareness, this is not always the case with corporate psychopaths (Jonason, Slomski and Partyka, 2012; O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012) and there is also the possibility that those completing self-reporting surveys have a level of intellect that allows them to fake it (Walker & Jackson, 2017). Considering the exploratory and statistical nature of the proposed study the researcher aims to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Stage One

In the first instance a quantitative online survey will be conducted enabling participants to rate their owner/managers in a workplace setting. The data collected from the online survey will be analysed using a descriptive statistical approach and provide a foundation for the questions to be formulated for stage two. Appropriate tools will be researched though the researcher welcomes suggestions at this stage.

Stage Two

The online survey will be followed by a qualitative interpretative approach by interviewing owner/managers using a semi-structured technique. The researcher will adopt a thematic analysis approach for the data collected from the interviews. This approach will allow the researcher to explore key issues and areas identifying patterns that emerge from the survey stage (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013).

Sample

It is envisioned at this phase that local small organisations will make up the sample (c. 15) taken from different economic sectors. Owner/Managers will be approached with details of the study on a rolling 5 company basis until the required number has been reached. These will be acquired via the business network of the researcher.

What next

Online surveys and interview questions will be constructed based on findings from the literature review. Identify local small organisations to build the sample group in preparation for data collection.

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