Tackling psychopathy: a necessary competency in leadership development?

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In the second of his two reflections on the Francis Report, Dr de Silva discusses the culture of workplace bullying and the role of a leader in addressing associated psychopathy in the National Health Service.

Following the public inquiry into events at Mid Staffordshire National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust in 2013, the Francis Report described a culture of endemic bullying, where whistle-blowers were persecuted by management, whose focus was on achieving Foundation Trust status instead of patient safety and quality of care. Francis also suggested that this culture probably existed across the NHS.

These comments are consistent with a previous national survey in 2007 of trainee doctors and the opinions of Sir Ian Kennedy on leaving the Healthcare Commission in 2009, including his reflections on the Bristol heart surgery scandal. Sir Ian described bullying as the ‘biggest untalked of problem in the delivery of good care to patients’. The NHS staff survey of 2009 reported that 8% of respondents described bullying, harassment or abuse from a manager or team leader. This had risen to 23% by 2013.

Corporate literature describes workplace bullying being associated with psychopathic behaviour of a relatively small number of senior staff in hierarchical organisations, with associated costs involving safety lapses and lost productivity. Financial costs include ill health and severance payments, litigation following accidents, and damages awarded by industrial tribunals.

Description of psychopathy
Psychopathy was described initially by Cleckley in 1941. Core features (Table 1) as defined by Hare include a tendency to manipulate others, being unable to empathise with other’s feelings, having no remorse, and being unable to say sorry despite clear evidence of wrongdoing or distress to others. Other authors have described lifelong psychopathic traits only evident when the individual is under pressure to perform in a social or workplace setting. A concept of a ‘proto-psychopath’ has also been described: someone who exhibits psychopathic behaviour only in a work setting. These behaviours could be modelled on a psychopathic individual further up the hierarchy, who appears to thrive in the organisation.

Most epidemiological surveys utilising operational criteria of psychopathy have suggested that the overall rate of this condition is less than 1% of the population. However, it is recognised that this is an underestimate of prevalence in organisations, with rates up to 1 in 25 among managers and senior employees. Therefore, most adults would have worked with – or been supervised by – a psychopathic line manager or senior, safety warnings can go unheeded. Careers of individuals expressing disquiet or ‘whistle-blowing’ about conduct within a department are also at risk. Psychopaths in health care can cause lost productivity due to low morale, sickness and safety failures. Patients lacking in capacity could suffer due to rash treatment. If junior staff lack the courage to question a psychopathic line manager or senior, safety warnings can go unheeded. Careers of individuals expressing disquiet or ‘whistle-blowing’ about conduct within a department are also at risk. Psychopaths in health care can cause lost productivity due to low morale, sickness and safety failures. Patients lacking in capacity could suffer due to rash treatment.

TABLE 1. Psychopathy checklist

- Interpersonal (superficial, grandiose, deceitful)
- Affective (lacking remorse, failure to accept responsibility for one’s actions)
- Lifestyle (impulsive, lacking goals, being irresponsible)
- Antisocial (poor impulse control, adolescent or adult antisocial behaviour)
- Other items (multiple marital relationships, sexual promiscuity)

How to spot a psychopathic individual at work
Workplace bullying by a senior colleague is probably the best indirect...
indicator of psychopathy, although care needs to be taken as this might also reflect failings on the part of the ‘victim’. Another indirect indicator would be sickness rates, although inadequate resources to carry out the work need to be kept in mind.

Within the workplace, psychopathic individuals tend to be ‘puzzling people’ due to their inconsistent approaches towards colleagues. The term ‘a Jekyll and Hyde character’ has been used to describe the affective instability and lack of remorse about hostile behaviour. These individuals tend to ‘scan’ for others in social situations while conversing with a person. Often such an individual would be superficially charming and use his or her past life experiences to evoke sympathy.

Implications for leadership
The problem for leadership development is that psychopathic individuals can achieve most of the key competencies including getting others to follow them, being politically astute, relating to senior colleagues with charm, and possessing excellent communication skills. If the person can muster sufficient ‘charisma’ and achieve set targets (for example, in cost cutting), affective instability and the tendency to damage others could be overlooked by organisations.

The NHS Leadership Academy describes nine dimensions of leadership behaviour, but does not mention competency to tackle workplace bullies or psychopathic individuals. Furthermore, the common styles of leadership utilised in health care, namely ‘engaging leadership’ and ‘value-driven leadership’, do not specifically address how psychopathic behaviours could be tackled.

Managing psychopathic behaviour: use of challenge
This is the commonly used technique, and involves a discussion between the leader and the individual, with the actual behaviour, the feelings elicited in others and potential repercussions if the behaviour is repeated being discussed. Psychopaths (like other people) are naturally protective of their careers, and might take heed without actually accepting fault. However, this approach could backfire on the leader due to the psychopath planning revenge-based attacks, including complaining of bullying. Therefore rehearsal of the interview, utilising a mentor with knowledge of organisational politics, would be a good idea.

Avoidance and escape
The standard advice on dealing with psychopaths with a power advantage would be to avoid all contact following challenge. This is because of a high likelihood that the psychopath will retaliate, and blame the leader for his or her downfall in order to elicit sympathy, and as a means of gaining revenge. Therefore, the leader needs to have a ‘Plan B’ to execute, including moving jobs either within or outwith the organisation. This might be considered iniquitous, but is the wiser option in organisations which condone psychopathic behaviour, as there is a bigger loss to be incurred in losing leadership potential for the future.

Gas lighting
A technique called ‘gas lighting’ is a common unconventional approach used by organisations to manage employees who cause difficulty by raising concerns, often used before embarking on the more conventional path of the disciplinary process. The term was coined after a film in 1938 called ‘Gas Light’ where the wife (the victim) was made to doubt her sanity by her husband by contradicting her factual observations. Either an individual supervisor or a circle of managers can enact this technique, leading to the employee doubting their perceptions, losing self-confidence and, hopefully, leaving the organisation. The way for a leader to manage this would be to check one’s perception about events with a mentor who is independent of line management, ideally from outwith the organisation.

Organisational implications
Even in large organisations most staff will be aware of true psychopaths, commonly described – sometimes with admiration – as ‘evil’. Leaders need to have an ‘ear to the ground’ to identify such individuals, and use opportunities to ‘ease them out’ for the ultimate good of the organisation. In terms of discrepancies between conduct of senior employees and stated organisational values, an anonymised reporting system could be a valuable investment, alongside a training strategy for new entrants utilising a video with discussion. The use of psychometric tests (for example, PCL:SV [Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version]) to guide interview questions for senior entrants is worthy of consideration.

Psychopathic behaviour is most commonly seen in organisations which are planning to integrate or merge. There is jockeying for influence among senior staff, mainly to gain more power. Unfortunately, staff below them can get used (and damaged) in this process. An effective leader would protect vulnerable individuals, and try to maintain the organisational values during this period of ‘change’.

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Psychopathic behaviour – arising as a result of organisational culture or due to psychopathic individuals in positions of power – can have a major impact on employees. This results in low morale, sickness and safety failures. Challenging psychopathic behaviour can be a perilous activity, as there is a high risk of retaliation either directly by the person being challenged, or indirectly by the organisation.

Despite attendant risks, leaders need to tackle psychopathic behaviour in the workplace if they truly wish to improve quality and safety. Use of a leadership mentor – ideally in a position of influence – is essential to maintain resilience, and learn the art of managing psychopathic individuals in order to change organisational culture for the better. The use of pre-employment screening needs to be considered.

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**Summary**

Psychopathic behaviour – arising as a result of organisational culture or due to psychopathic individuals in positions of power – can have a major impact on employees. This results in low morale, sickness and safety failures. Challenging psychopathic behaviour can be a perilous activity, as there is a high risk of retaliation either directly by the person being challenged, or indirectly by the organisation.

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**Declaration of interests**

There are no conflicts of interest declared.

**References**