

No, we're not all working for a bunch of psychopaths

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If you've ever worked for an impulsive or vengeful boss, these headlines may not seem so far-fetched: "CEO is the profession with the most psychopaths," or "1 in 5 CEOs is a psychopath, study finds."

Numerous headlines making similar claims caught the attention of Iowa State University and University of Alabama researchers who questioned if there may be more to the story. They started digging into the science and found such claims to be overblown. Contrary to public perception, they say the relationship between leadership and psychopathy is weak.

"We found people with [psychopathic tendencies](#) were somewhat more likely to become leaders, but nothing to suggest every executive suite is staffed by psychopaths. There is simply no evidence that is the case," said Marcus Credé, an assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State.

The researchers did identify some important distinctions that have implications in the workplace, even with a small effect size. Credé, Peter Harms, an associate professor at Alabama; and Karen Landay, lead author and graduate student at Alabama, analyzed 92 studies to determine patterns in leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness of people with psychopathic tendencies. The results of their meta-analysis are published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Men get away with it

The influence of gender was one point of particular interest to researchers. Women leaders who showed psychopathic characteristics were evaluated negatively, but men were not. The researchers measured leadership effectiveness using job performance ratings from supervisors, peers and subordinates as well as self-reports. Harms says this double standard is troubling.

"Men are getting away with it," Harms said. "There is a gender bias here and it's simply not fair. Women are being held accountable for their behaviors and men are not. We shouldn't be tolerating or excusing bad behavior from men."

The researchers say all managers and CEOs need to be held accountable regardless of gender. They say it's important to recognize that the rate at which people with psychopathic tendencies land management positions can be quite dramatic if organizations do not screen for these traits when hiring or promoting managers.

Better screening efforts

Although there's an immediate impression associated with the word psychopath, that is more consistent with a clinical diagnosis than the traits exhibited in the workplace, researchers said. In the workplace, where psychopathic tendencies are at subclinical levels (no signs or symptoms detectable in a clinical setting), there are three distinct elements typically associated with the psychopathic profile: boldness (interpersonal dominance), disinhibition (impulsivity) and meanness (lack of empathy).

The researchers say these characteristics are frequently found in leaders responsible for major corporate scandals and sexual harassment cases. Individuals who engage in such behavior continue to climb the corporate ladder because they are rarely punished for their actions. Too often, victims are reluctant to come forward. Instead they find a new job rather than blowing the whistle on the abusive behavior.

While screening potential managers and leaders is beneficial, researchers say 360-degree feedback also is valuable. Talking with a person's peers, subordinates and supervisors offers greater insight about a person's leadership style and personality, rather than basing promotions and management decisions on quarterly reports and numbers, Landay said.

"How leaders treat people in their organizations can have long-term implications. If leaders are aggressive or threatening, it's going to result in higher stress and turnover among workers," Landay said.

"Psychopathic leaders are ruthless, they lack empathy and they shouldn't be in charge."

More information: Karen Landay et al. Shall we serve the dark lords? A meta-analytic review of psychopathy and leadership., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000357](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000357)

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