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Psychopathy need not be a disadvantage

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Persons with high psychopathy values are egotistic, scheming, and sabotage their colleagues unscrupulously to look better themselves. For employers they are a super-meltdown - but is that really true? A study by the University of Bonn shows that some people with psychopathic traits are seen by their colleagues as quite helpful and cooperative. One of the prerequisites for this, however, is that they possess marked social skills. The analysis is already available online in the prestigious "*Journal of Management*"; the print version will be appearing soon. A short version will be published at the end of June in the journal "*Wirtschaftspsychologie aktuell*".

Persons with marked psychopathy are considered callous, cold, unrepentant, dishonest, and impulsive. At work, therefore, they can endanger the success of their entire team - at least that is the popular conception. But some people with psychopathic traits can also be different; this is shown in an analysis by scientists at the University of Bonn. Because not all "psychopaths" are the same. Instead, at least two different facets of personality come together in psychopathy. They can occur together, but do not have to.

"We speak of independent personality dimensions", explains Nora Schütte of the Institute of Psychology of the University of Bonn. "The first is referred to as fearless dominance. People with this character trait want to get their way, have no fear of the consequences of their actions, and can withstand stress very well. We also speak of primary psychopathy. The second dimension is self-centered impulsivity: Persons with high values here lack an inner brake. Their self-control is thus

weak, and they therefore do not have any consideration for others. They are referred to as secondary psychopaths".

Cooperation and helpfulness also possible with psychopaths

Schütte was able, together with her doctoral supervisor Professor Dr. Gerhard Blickle, to show that fearless-dominant employees can be completely inconspicuous in the social area. The study included 161 persons. Among other things, they answered questions about their personality, their social skills, and their work performance. In addition, they were supposed to name two colleagues who in turn would assess the performance of the respective participant and the participant's behavior in the workplace.

Result: Participants whose questionnaires indicated a high level of fearless dominance were nevertheless sometimes described by their colleagues as helpful, cooperative, and pleasant associates. "But that was true only when these primary psychopaths also had marked social skills", says Nora Schütte. "Above all that included skills that are generally important at work - such as the gift of making others feel well".

For employees with great self-centered impulsivity, the study showed a completely different picture: Their colleagues consistently described them as destructive in their dealings, not very helpful, and weak in performance - regardless of their social skills. "These persons with high values in secondary psychopathy thus really do have the postulated negative effects upon their work environment", emphasizes Schütte. "And to a much greater degree than when we examine both groups together".

"Schütte and Professor Blickle therefore plead for a differentiated view

of the personality disposition "psychopathy". "Even persons with marked psychopathic traits do not necessarily exhibit antisocial behavior", says the occupational psychologist. From her perspective, even the term "psychopathy" - meaning something like "disease of the soul" - is misleading. Professor Blickle adds: "Persons with a high degree of fearless dominance can even be selfless heroes in everyday life, such as life-savers, emergency physicians, or firefighters".

More information: N. Schutte et al. The Role of Interpersonal Influence in Counterbalancing Psychopathic Personality Trait Facets at Work, *Journal of Management* (2015). DOI: 10.1177/0149206315607967

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