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PSYCHOPATHIC CEOS: FACT OR FICTION?

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Character & Context:

<https://www.spsp.org/news-center/blog/landay-harms-psychopathic-ceos#gsc.tab=0>

What's your impression of the average CEO? Is he (and it's usually a *he*) a good person? Or is he greedy, ruthless, and deceitful? Maybe even a psychopath? If you follow media accounts of fallen or disgraced corporate leaders, it is sometimes difficult not to believe that many, if not most, CEOs are either psychopaths or are, at the very least, prone to serious moral lapses.

But simply engaging in bad behavior does not necessarily mean that the label "psychopath" is appropriate. What exactly do we mean by that term? Are we talking about sadistic, violent people we love to hate, like Joffrey from *Game of Thrones*? Although Joffrey is a great example of classical conceptions of psychopathy in the clinical literature, psychopathy in business is often much more subtle and much less violent. Psychopathy among business leaders combines negative characteristics, such as impulsivity and a lack of caring or empathy for others, that makes people toxic to be around, with positive characteristics, such as boldness, that can make leaders highly attractive to others nonetheless. Think of television characters such as Dr. Gregory House (*House*) or Frank Underwood (*House of Cards*).

But are these insidious individuals really taking over corporate leadership? To find out, we compiled all research studies on this topic to conduct a **meta-analysis**—a summary study that combines data from many different studies on a specific topic to draw general conclusions.

We found that, although people with psychopathic tendencies are slightly more likely to become business leaders, this modest tendency was nowhere near the level suggested by the media. We also found that leaders with psychopathic tendencies were

slightly *less* effective at their jobs in terms of fostering productivity. When leaders did have psychopathic tendencies, their employees really, really disliked them. Of course, the fact that people hate working for mean and impulsive bosses shouldn't come as a surprise!

However, further analysis of the many studies we examined suggested that there may be an optimal level of psychopathic tendencies for leadership effectiveness. That is, too much is obviously a bad thing, because recklessness and nastiness are likely to produce fear rather than motivation, productivity, and business success. But too little is apparently also a drawback. The boldness associated with psychopathic tendencies may manifest in a leader who is able to make difficult decisions or act in times of uncertainty—when other people are more constrained by fear.

Our work uncovered one final element of interest. When we split the results by leader gender, men with psychopathic tendencies were *more* likely to become leaders. On the other hand, women with psychopathic tendencies were *less* likely to be rated as effective leaders. So at least when it comes leadership, men are sometimes *rewarded* for displaying psychopathic tendencies, but women are *punished* for the same behaviors.

What does this tell us? The gender double standard is alive and well. Stereotypically “bad” behavior isn't just tolerated in men. It may even be encouraged. Men are “just boys being boys,” and many people seem to chuckle and look the other way when men are mean-spirited. Women, however, are often advised to emulate the behavior of men in order to get ahead. Yet, our results suggest that this is a bad idea. As has been the case for decades, women acting in stereotypically “male” ways are actually penalized for it.

Back to the original question: Is the average CEO a good person? There's no way to know for sure, but it's unlikely that he or she is truly a psychopath. **That said, our results suggest that we aren't doing a very good job of screening out potentially dangerous and destructive individuals with psychopathic tendencies when selecting leaders. In fact, we are failing to do so at all, at least when it comes to**

male leaders. And given the amount of power that is invested in corporate and political leaders, that is a real concern.