

Troubled economy proves rich pickings for psychopaths

By Paul Fisher

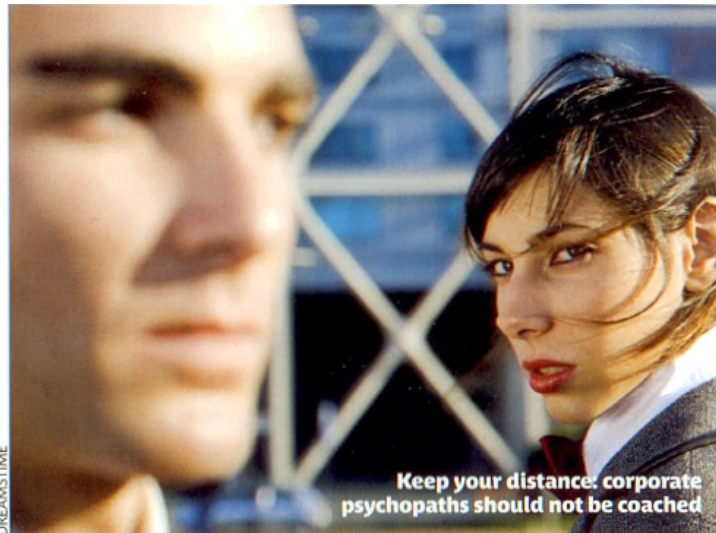
The economic slowdown is creating a fertile environment for corporate psychopaths, an industrial and organisational psychologist has revealed.

Paul Babiak, co-author of *Snakes in Suits – When Psychopaths Go to Work*, issued the stark warning to business coaches at the 2008 Meyler Campbell annual lecture on 12 November.

Psychopaths thrive on chaos, he said, and the frenzied nature of modern business, with downsizing and reorganisations, is perfect for them.

Psychopaths may enter companies as corporate saviours but before long will inflict considerable damage including low morale, ill-informed decision-making, increased risk and reduced productivity.

But identifying corporate psychopaths is difficult. Like good leaders they are also charming, charismatic and larger than life. They look



and dress the same way as most business people, are fun to be around and, at first glance, seem to demonstrate strong leadership skills.

In reality they are unable to build teams, have no respect for individuals, lack integrity and wisdom, and are only interested in their own success – not that of the company.

Babiak said psychopaths believe in their own superiority over other people and over the law. Blame always lies with the next

person.

In research by Babiak and Robert Hare among 200 executives from eight international companies, 3.5 per cent were found to have psychopathic tendencies.

Ideal environments for psychopaths include flat, non-hierarchical organisations; ever-changing roles; inadequate performance measurement systems; fast career moves and risk taking all of which have been prevalent in some businesses over the past few

years.

He outlined Hare's Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), a psychodiagnostic tool built on criminal data that provides a clinical rating scale for 20 characteristics of psychopaths.

Using the Psychopathy Checklist as a basis, he described how he and Hare have developed the 'B-Scan', a non-clinical tool rooted in business language that can assess corporate managers, identify potentially destructive individuals and contribute to selection, management development and succession planning.

It is based on four features: personal style, emotional style, organisational effectiveness and social responsibility.

In a question and answer session following Babiak's presentation, a number of questions focused on the implications for coaching the corporate psychopath.

The general agreement was that one should not coach psychopaths. The key question, however, was how to identify such people.

KEY STAT

53%

THE LEVEL OF FIRMS THAT SAY COACHING BY LINE MANAGERS IS THE BEST LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Source: CIPD Learning and Development Survey 2008

Coaching brings 'greater co-operation' to John Laing

John Laing Integrated Services is using solution-focused coaching to help its leaders cascade responsibility.

The public sector facilities management company's managing director Tim Grier said that since introducing coaching, there have been "significant improvements", including greater co-operation.

"In the past, our people have tended to address any errors rather than making the successes more positive. Now, when we have a management meeting, we start off talking about successes and achievements."

Coaching consultancy The Solutions Focus ran a two-day workshop on coaching, facilitation and management skills, with one-to-one coaching to the business's eight leaders who gained practical experience by coaching two people from outside their teams. Additional skills building and review workshops were delivered to discuss progress, further develop coaching expertise and enable them to share experiences.

The Solutions Focus is now rolling out a similar programme to a further 12 managers, including regional managers.