

Sometimes, the boss really is a psycho

BUSINESS NEWS

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The bully, the narcissist, the know-it-all, even the psychopath.

We may not like them, or want our children to be like them. But chances are, almost everyone who has worked long enough has a horror story about a superior who generally behaved like Homer Simpson's boss, Mr. Charles Montgomery "Monty" Burns.

A growing number of researchers are looking into what makes a real-life Mr. Burns, and what they are finding isn't always pretty.

(*Slideshow:* [Bad bosses from TV and film](#))

"There are whole climates and cultures of abuse in the workplace," said Darren Treadway, an associate professor at the University at Buffalo School of Management. His [recent research](#) looks at why bullies are able to persist, and sometimes even thrive, at work.

He said many people have either seen or experienced bullying at work because some bullies are skilled enough to figure out who they can abuse to get ahead, and who they can charm to get away with it.

(*Read more:* [Working from home? Your boss may be spying on you](#))

"The successful ones are very, very socially skilled," he said. "They're capable of disguising their behavior."

Both popular culture and real life are rife with examples of alleged bullying. Just this week, San Diego Mayor Bob Filner [was accused](#) by his communications director, Irene McCormack Jackson, of harassment including dragging her around in a headlock and whispering sexual advances. Filner has rejected the claims.

2 in 10 workers: Boss hurt my career

Experts say a good boss can really help your career, but a bad boss can be devastating. A survey of 2,000 adults released earlier this year by Glassdoor found that about 2 in 10 workers say a manager [has hurt their career](#).

Smart bad bosses can be hard to spot, some experts say, because they are extremely good at manipulating and charming some people, while abusing others.

Industrial organizational psychologist Paul Babiak first grew interested in studying psychopaths at work after he was called in to consult for a dysfunctional team. He found an abusive, lying boss—and a team that was staunchly divided into two camps.

"(There was) a subset of the team that really loved this guy— idolized him—and then there was another group of people who thought he was a snake," Babiak said.

(*Read more:* [Workers over 60 make more than younger colleagues](#))

Very few companies will admit that they want a bad boss in their corporate ranks. But experts say that bad bosses do have some aspects of American corporate culture working in their favor.

That includes the results-at-all-costs mentality that pervades many publicly held companies and the stereotype that a good boss should be aggressive and bold.

When Babiak presents the first part of his research on corporate professionals who are psychopaths, he said he often hears from senior leaders who wonder why psychopaths are so bad. That's because they would actually like to have a manager who comes across as strong, decisive and aggressive.

(Read more: [Why bad bosses are bad for business](#))

The allure is often short-lived.

OK, they're not actual psychopathic patients

"Usually by lunchtime they realize ... that you can't pick and choose the traits that you want," he said. "If you are hiring a psychopath you will get pathological lying. You will get grandiose sense of self."

By contrast, he said the initial response he usually gets from lower level workers is, "Oh my God, you're describing my boss."

Of course, most bosses aren't horrendous enough to deserve an actual diagnosis of psychopathy.

"At first, the tendency is to see (a bad) boss as a psychopath," said Sigrid Gustafson, an industrial organizational psychologist who runs the consulting firm Success Exceleration. "There are a lot of ways to be a jerk, and there are a lot of ways to be a bad boss."

(Read more: [Want to get more done? Get out of the office](#))

Babiak said about 4 percent of the 203 executives he studied were diagnosable psychopaths, compared to about 1 percent of the broader population. A person is considered a psychopath if they score very high on an evaluation that looks at four factors and finds that they are particularly manipulative, without remorse or empathy, live a deviant lifestyle and are antisocial.

It's more likely that the boss you dislike is just not very good at supervising employees. Babiak said the most common type of boss is what he calls the unskilled boss.

"The not-so-nice name is the abusive boss," he said. "They tend to be offensive because they're not polished."

These are the bosses who scold people in public, don't handle stress well and aren't always fair. That's in contrast to the two other types of bosses he's identified: The good, predictable, tough-but-fair boss and the really bad, psychopathic boss.

Nice people are less likely to emerge as leaders

In general, Timothy Judge, a management professor at the University of Notre Dame, said [his research](#) has shown that agreeable people—those who are cooperative, nice and gentle—are less likely to emerge as leaders than disagreeable people. That's even though agreeable leaders tend to do just as good a job as disagreeable people, he said.

More generally, Judge's data also has shown that being agreeable can harm many aspects of career success, including salary negotiations, occupational prestige and career attainment.

"We have this quality that we say we really want in people, and yet if you look at the labor market it really punishes that," Judge said.

The extremely bad bosses, such as the "[aberrant self-promoters](#)" Gustafson has identified, aren't necessarily more prevalent in the upper ranks than any other type of personality, she said. However, these truly bad bosses are more memorable because they wreak so much havoc.

"They have more influence and they're more likely to bully and intimidate and ruin other people," she said.

Taking credit for others' work

That kind of charming, risk-loving personality can sometimes help a company achieve great things—although Gustafson said that's usually by getting their loyal workers to do the work, rather than doing it themselves. But Gustafson said their weaknesses often mean that companies find the success is short-lived.

"In the end, they will find that something has gone really badly amiss," she said.

She was recently called in to consult for a company that was lulled into hiring a destructive boss, and asked her to evaluate the person that had replaced the bad boss, to make sure they didn't make the same mistake twice.

Many experts say it can be hard, at first, to distinguish the gifted leader from the narcissist or the bully. That's partly because some of the attributes we admire in leaders—such as the boldness and attention to detail so coveted by the likes of the late Apple executive Steve Jobs—can also turn darker.

Bill Wales, professor of management at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., said [his research](#) has shown that narcissistic chief executives tend to lead more entrepreneurial companies.

That doesn't mean that they are more successful, he notes. It just means that they are much more likely to take big risks or make bold moves, which may end up being major coups or miserable failures.

"You're getting both bigger wins and bigger losses," Wales said.

Do you have a bad boss story to share? Tell us about it in the comments section below or send us [an email](#).

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