

## Mad about the job

**By Stuart White**  
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If you want to stir up a debate at a psychologists' dinner party throw Alice Miller's thesis that "Hitler was bad because he was spanked as a boy" into the conversation and stand well back. In her 1980 book 'For Your Own Good', she proposed that Hitler's father traumatised the young Adolf with beatings and verbal abuse and taught him to despise himself and Jews. Apparently Hitler was in fact savagely beaten every day of his early life, and that was just one of the elements she examined from his upbringing when she attempted to draw conclusions about what produced such a megalomaniacal, cold, cruel personality. Ok, that somewhat simplifies her theory but it certainly creates debate and controversy especially as other historians suggest the Nazi dictator's personality was not so easily explained I think we are all slightly mad – the extent is plotted on a continuum. Some of us are exclusively barmy and on the other side just a tad nutty – but sure as a Tory win in the UK next week, there is a trace of psychosis in us all - psychosis is simply one aspect of being human.

Anyway to put this all in perspective, this was the subject under debate at HRMC this week. We had started analysing the effect of training, and waffled on to discussing its effectiveness i.e. what works, what doesn't – and does it really get the desired result to merit such great expense in money and effort. Playing devils advocate I asked if companies would get better results from exposing everyone to therapy sessions as opposed to training. How would every individual perform if he/she was healthier mentally? Although that in itself started another debate which was that therapy as we know it and how it is traditionally executed has such a poor track record – hence the reasons why most of us (yes I admit to having been there a few times) are in therapy 'for life' or at least should be.

But running with Miller's theory for a minute, if Hitler's leadership style was so influenced by his early childhood – how much of leadership that we experience not just in government, but work and society is influenced by early nurturing or lack of cuddles from Mommy and Daddy? And not just leaders, how many of the people we work with are actually mentally ill – psychopathic, even - which might explain why you don't understand why certain people behave the way they do.

It's probably a more common condition than you think. Whilst the idea of working with psychopaths may conjure up images of crazy-eyed Jack-The-Ripper type fiends who come to work one day with a chip and An AK47 on their shoulder, according to the book "Snakes In Suits – When Psychopaths Go To Work" by Paul Babiak and Robert Hare, many psychopaths don't maim or murder people, they just lack accepted morals and are on a quest for money, power, fame, or simply a nice car. Despite thinking they are lurking in dark alleyways they are actually in plain view in our corporate hallways - a dime a dozen in the corporate world. According to organisational psychologist, Robert Hare, a psychopathy expert who has studied office psychopaths, "the modern, open, more flexible corporate world, in which high risks can equal high profits, attracts them. These office psychopaths can be amusing but exasperating — and, frankly, narcissistic and untrustworthy.

They may seem like superstars and corporate saviours, sometimes but they can alienate other employees and leave companies in shambles". He purports that some of the worst accounting scandals in recent years could have been avoided if all chief executives were screened for psychopathic tendencies. He has been quoted everywhere, on this sensational implication that some of America's best-known companies had been run for most of the 1990s by people with a major mental disorder. Are we any different here at home?

The central qualification for being a psychopath is to show no conscience; to fail to empathise. As reported in the Times Online, an international study conducted by Hare in the 1990 s revealed that psychopaths are everywhere. 'Most are non-violent, but all leave a trail of havoc through their families and work environments, using and abusing colleagues and loved ones, endlessly manipulating others, constantly reinventing themselves'. Hare puts the average North American incidence of psychopathy at 1 per cent of the population, but the damage they inflict on society is out of all proportion to their numbers, not least because they gravitate to high-profile professions that offer the promise of control over others, such as law, politics, business management ... and journalism.

So here are my thoughts – will therapy psychoanalysis and couch counselling play a bigger role in selection, mentoring and performance management for the future and should they? Should we be screening for psychotic tendencies before hiring or will that be an invasion of privacy? We test for competencies, skills abilities, integrity – why not mental health? Should we be made more aware of it at management level or should we just hide behind the taboo of mental illness hoping if we don't mention it it will cease to exist? How many blunders would be avoided if the guys at the top were not raving lunatics? And if genius is part madness, how can we distinguish between those who are mad and bad and those who are nutty and nice?

Getting back to Miller she posed that experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle with mental illness (and we are all mentally ill in a little way to some degree or other): the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of our childhood....perhaps if Hitler had had psychiatric help there would have been no Holocaust, or maybe he was born bad and made worse? Okay, his is an extreme case but it does make a powerful argument for putting our potential managers and leaders under the mental microscope and maybe on the couch so that when they make the big decisions, they're properly prepared and doing it for all the right reasons. And we need to remove any lingering stigma about the idea of psycho-therapy being only for members of the raving loony party. Leaders in all walks of life should be not just mentally fit but mentally healthy, even if, as the old joke goes, it takes a certificate to prove it – something else to add to the CV, perhaps? And let's make sure when we advertise and interview, that when a candidate claims to be mad keen, they don't mean it too literally.

Agree or disagree with this? Don's twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to [http://twitter.com/Stuart\\_Botswana](http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana)

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