Covetous Sociopathy: Implications for Organizational Leadership

A Brief Report

Viviette L. Allen

Fayetteville State University

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Viviette L. Allen, PhD, Assistant Professor, Fayetteville State University, Department of Psychology, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville North Carolina, USA 28301.

E-mail: vallen@uncfus.edu

Telephone: 910.672.1453

FAX: 910.672.1043

Abstract

This work explores implications of the 10th commandment for organizational leadership. At initial glance, covetous behavior seems somewhat innocuous; yet without conscientious control, it can act as a pathogen. The covetous psychopath, the primary model for this discussion, is a term developed by Millon and Davis (1998) to characterize a form of antisocial personality disorder marked by malicious longing for and the propensity to engage in limitless and even destructive effort to obtain that which rightfully belongs to others. Organizations, in their bid to compete for market share, can become oblivious to the costs of winning at all costs and the acquisition of pay, status, gratification, admiration, power, and control is a tasty lure for an opportunistic leader or employee. Thus, the seemingly commonplace human tendencies to envy and to want can seize control of the personality of organizations and their leadership.

Key Words: organizational leadership, covetous sociopathy, psychopath

Key Verse:

> *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.* Exodus 20: 17 (KJV)

Covetous Sociopathy: Implications for Organizational Leadership

A Brief Report

To covet is to wish for, to seek, or to actually take by guile, manipulation, deceit, or force that which belongs to someone else. This drive to possess can operate on an individual, corporate, or cultural level and, as is indicated in Exodus 20:17, can involve the yearning for physical property, relationship, labor, means of production, or any other thing. It can be cloaked in pro-organizational or prosocial motives such as healthy competition, expansion, development, merger, promotion, ambition, goals, or profitability. The difference between coveting and industriousness rests in motive and limit. Coveting is self-oriented, lacks empathy, and knows neither boundary nor limit. It is not easily appeased in that it relentlessly demands gratification. It does not act in the service of meaningful and ethical work, effective and caring leadership, or fair practices. It does not seek to coexist or to admire the achievements of others; it seeks to rob and to conquer and its primary aim is personal gratuitous gain, at any or all costs.

This discussion briefly explores literature on the effects of unbridled covetousness in organizations and their leaders. While it is well within human nature to notice differences, to make comparisons, to desire more, and to compete, some organizations and their leaders have taken this natural striving to inordinate and destructive lows. Such is the case of covetous psychopaths (or in more current terms, covetous sociopaths); those whose jealous, hostile craving compels them to engage in surreptitious or overt actions to gain control over the property and affiliations of others, often with the collateral intent to inflict unwarranted harm or injury (Cangemi & Pfohl, 2009; Goldman, 2006; Millon & Davis, 1998; Murphy & Vess, 2003; Parker, et al, 2002; Stout, 2005; Widiger & Lynam, 1998).

Covetous Sociopathy in Organizational Leadership

Sociopaths comprise approximately 4% of the general adult population in the United States (Millon & Davis, 1998; Stout, 2005), therefore any organization, regardless of mission or type, should expect to find them within its constituency, bringing with them their exploitative and divisive propensities. Leadership shapes the personality and health or pathology of organizations and it is possible that sociopaths may be found in even greater concentrations in the upper echelons of business because that is where the perks are to be had (Goldman, 2006; Hart & Hare, 1994). Leaders can be vulnerable to failure (Slocum, Ragan, & Casey, 2002) and leadership has the potential to become a vehicle for unethical, immoral, and even criminal behavior, exacting significant social, spiritual, and financial costs (Heath, 2008; Miceli, 1996). Stevens, Deuling, and Armenakis (2012), observed that sociopathy among high level leaders is not only often overlooked but actually tolerated and even rewarded, propelling them into ever advancing positions that lend opportunity for frequently unethical decision-making.

According to Babiak and Hart (2007), many of the traits preferred in leaders, such as persuasiveness, charisma, risk taking, determination, and calmness under pressure, have a high correlation with sociopathy. Cangemi and Pfohl (2009, p. 86), documented the following characteristics of sociopathic leaders: "their focused behavior, their desire to destroy a competitor, their delight in inflicting damage and pain on another, and their remorseless willingness to do whatever it takes (unethical, immoral, or illegal) to get what they want." As they warned, such individuals can exude such an air of expertise, intellect, skill, confidence, seductive charm, friendliness, charisma, or pathos that even seasoned administrative, resource management, and behavioral experts can be deceived into trusting.

Often while envying or taking advantage of those whom they covet, organizations and individuals develop a distain for their victims, unleashing harsh and unfounded criticisms or predatory damage that can in turn not only take from them their possessions but their very means of livelihood (Cangemi & Pfohl, 2009; Stout, 2003). In other words, covetous sociopaths are rarely satisfied with mere acquisition; domination and elimination of rivals are their actual underlying goals. They do not hope to be equal to; they must be greater than. Covetousness turns colleague or neighbor into adversary or prey and followers into manipulable tools. Under the shadow of covetousness, leadership deteriorates to largely image or impression management and a pantomime of passive-aggressive or antagonistic power plays and as a result, employees suffer (Boddy, Ladyshewsky, & Galvin, 2010).

Coveting creates a disquieting restlessness because, once something has been gained, it easily loses its value, it becomes boring or empty. The sociopath derives energy from the game of seeking more. Therefore, they have little interest in many of the hallmarks of healthy organizations such as sustained effort, stability, harmony, loyalty, prudence, integrity, teamwork, or respect for boundaries of person or office. They may feign submission, cooperation, or social interest but that is only to conceal their privately thrilling fantasies of power and wealth. "Sociopaths feel that the easy scheme, the one-shot deal, or the clever ambush is much preferred over day-to-day commitment to a job, a long-term goal, or a [selfless] plan (Stout, 2005, p. 189).

Safeguarding Organizations against Covetous Sociopaths

Standard operational processes are usually ineffectual to sieve out covetous sociopaths seeking to insinuate themselves into positions of power. There is profound truth in the cliché, "appearance is deceiving." Credentials can be fabricated but even when genuine, it is important to be mindful that credentials do not always reflect character. References can be coerced or

falsified and even earnest responders can have been deluded or guilted into giving glowing reports. The generation of honest or balanced evaluations of self is an ability that is beyond the capacity of some (Abramovitz, 2000) so disclosure in an interview or self-statement could be suspect and transparency in speech could be counterfeit. According to Stout (2005, p. 104), "apart from knowing someone well for many years, there is no foolproof decision rule or litmus test for trustworthiness."

While prevention and detection are neither easy nor sure, Miceli (1996) suggested that transparency, avoidance of isolation, recognition of egoism, care to avoid rewarding wrongdoing, strengthening the role of objectors or whistle-blowers, and valuing long range and ethical practices over façade and expedience are excellent preventive measures. While Stout offered the following practices or habits of mind as safeguards: (a) acceptance that sociopaths do exist and that it is not uncharitable, judgmental or prejudicial to be more discerning; (b) understanding that appearance and titles can mask true intentions; (c) refusal to accept a pattern of immoral, unethical, or risk-taking behavior; (d) courage to question the decisions and influence of the collective and of those in authority; (e) maintenance of healthy skepticism of flattery, gossip, and bids for pity, rescue, or special exceptions; and (f) resistance against unexamined giving, being manipulation, personal investment, seduction, or emotional self-blame. Nell (2006) concluded that prevention must be proactive and must take into account the startlingly realistic view, that cruelty, exploitation and even violence are gratifying to perpetrators.

Conclusion

The consequences of organization run or led in a covetous manner in are immeasurable because often it is long after damage has been inflicted before victims realize that a trespass has

taken place. Sociopathic institutions and individuals are adept at appearing benign. This allows

them the advantages of proximity, appeal, and trust. Often it is only in hindsight that actions

seemingly designed for the benefit of stakeholders are determined to have ultimately been for the

enhancement of personal aggrandizement or wealth. Delayed detection affords greater the

damage. Sociopaths do not generally feel true remorse instead they feel deserving of that which

they seek and more (Murphy & Vess, 2003). Organizations therefore must assume a posture of

vigilance (Abramovitz, 2000) and prudent stewardship that it not too fearful, naïve, self-

interested, or lackadaisical to construct careful and comprehensive systems of oversight in areas

of: ethics, personnel selection, promotion, compensation, leader accountability, interpersonal

relations, grievance and conflict resolution, harassment prevention, reputation or brand

management, and resource control.

References

Abramovitz, A. (2000). On becoming acquainted with history's coercion specialists. *Ethnicity & Health*, *5* (3/4), 273-281.

Babiak, P, & Hare, R.D. (2006). *Snakes in suits: When psychopaths go to work.* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Boddy, C.R., Ladyshewsky, R.K., & Galvin, P. (2010). The influence of corporate psychopaths on corporate social responsibility and organizational commitment to employees. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *97*(1), 1-19.

Cangemi, J.P., & Pfohl, W. (2009). Sociopaths in high places. *Organization Development Journal*, *27*(2), 85-96.

Goldman, A. (2006). Personality disorders in leaders: Implications of the *DSM IV-TR* in assessing dysfunctional organizations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *21*(5), 392-414.

Hart, S.D., & Hare, R.D. (1994). Psychopathology and the big 5: Correlations between observers' ratings of normal and pathological personality. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, *8*(1), 32-40.

Heath, J. (2008). Business ethics and moral motivation: A criminological perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *83*(4), 595-614.

Miceli, N. S. (1996). Deviant managerial behavior: Costs, outcomes and prevention. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *15*(6), 703-709.

Millon, T., & Davis, R.D. (1998). Ten subtypes of psychopathy. In T. Millon, E. Simonsen, M. Birket-Smith, & R. Davis (Eds.), *Psychopathy: Antisocial, criminal, and violent behavior* (pp. 161-170). New York, NY: Guilford.

Murphy, C., & Vess, J. (2003). Subtypes of psychopathy: Proposed differences between

    narcissistic, borderline, sadistic, and antisocial psychopaths. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, *74*(1),

    11-29.

Nell, V. (2006). Cruelty's rewards: The gratifications of perpetrators and spectators. *Behavioral*

    and Brain Sciences, *29*(3), 211-257.

Parker, G., Both, L., Olley, A., Hadzi-Pavlovic, D., Irvine, P., & Jacobs, G. (2002). Defining

    disordered personality functioning. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, *16*(6), 503-522.

Slocum, J.W., Jr., Ragan, C., & Casey, A. (2002). On death and dying: The corporate leadership

    capacity of CEOs. *Organizational Dynamics*, *30*(3), 269-281.

Stevens, G.W., Deuling, J.K., Armenakis, A.A. (2012). Successful psychopaths: Are they

    unethical decision-makers and why? *Journal of Business Ethics*, *105*(2), 139-149.

Stout, M. (2005). *The sociopath next door: The ruthless versus the rest of us*. New York, NY:

    MJF Books.

Widiger, T. A., & Lynam, D. R. (1998). Psychopathy and the five-factor model of personality. In

    T. Millon, E. Simonsen, M. Birket-Smith, & R. Davis (Eds.), *Psychopathy: Antisocial,*

    criminal, and violent behavior (pp. 171-187). New York, NY: Guilford.