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Screen CEOs to weed out psychopaths, says expert

By Michael McDonald
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ST. JOHN'S, Nfld. At the conclusion of a sobering presentation littered with photos of Mafia hit men and sex offenders, Canadian researcher Robert Hare turns his attention to a little-known subset of psychopaths: the corporate kind.

Hare, a world-renown expert on psychopaths, then makes the provocative suggestion that some of the recent, blue-chip accounting scandals could have been prevented if all chief executives were screened for psychopathic behaviours.

"Why wouldn't we want to screen for them?" he said Wednesday after a speech to 150 members of the Canadian Police Association. "We screen police, teachers. Why not people who are going to handle hundreds of billions of dollars?"

The problem is corporate head hunters rely on resumes and standard face-to-face interviews, which reveal little about a candidate's psychological profile.

"The average psychopath has no trouble moving through that process," said Hare, from the University of British Columbia. "That's not even a hurdle." Hare estimates about one per cent of the population — about 300,000 people in Canada are clinical psychopaths.

PSYCHOPATH TRAITS:

Emotions: Glib, superficial, arrogant, narcissistic, egocentric, ruthless and short-tempered with a distinct lack of empathy and no conscience or sense of remorse. **Relationships:** Few close relationships and deceitful, but can be incredibly manipulative and charming despite shallow emotions.

Lifestyle: Irresponsible, impulsive and sensation seeking but quite rational and able to act in real world. Early social problems often develop into anti-social behaviour later in life.

Not rare: Estimated two million psychopaths in North America.

Causes: Not scientifically known. Studies suggest a combination of nature and nurture, including abnormal brain functioning. No effective therapy.

Source: Without Conscience, by Robert Hare, 1999

Deceit: No hint of a conscience

That's why he's working on something called the B-Scan, a rough checklist to help recruiters quickly spot psychopathic character traits among potential employees.

It will be loosely based on a 90-item checklist called a P-Scan, which Hare developed for police officials, prosecutors, corrections personnel

and hostage negotiators. Through his research, Hare has found psychopaths possess a cluster of personality traits, which are reflected in their relationships, emotions and lifestyle.

Aside from having no hint of conscience, psychopaths have a barren emotional life with few close relationships, impulsive behaviour and an inflated sense of self. They are deceitful, short-tempered and display early behavioural problems that later become anti-social. They crave excitement and are irresponsible.

"They are the central star in their universe," Hare told the crowd as photos of well-known executives flashed on a big screen behind him. Most of the pictures were taken from recent newspaper articles related to the collapse of energy trader Enron Corp. and telecom giant WorldCom Inc.

The deceptive accounting practices and fraudulent dealings of these and other companies in the United States and Canada have led to huge losses on the stock market, massive layoffs and a string of court cases. "These are callous, cold-blooded individuals. They don't care that you have thoughts and feelings. They have no sense of guilt and remorse."

That's why the arrogant, manipulative behaviour of psychopaths often make them prime candidates for promotion within large corporations built on ruthless competition.

As well, psychopaths have been known to excel as politicians and lawyers, Hare says, drawing a round of laughter from the crowd at a downtown hotel. "They have to make decisions very quickly, and they can't worry too much about the potential impact on individuals," Hare said afterward.

More importantly, their utter lack of empathy makes them perfect for carrying out budget cuts and layoffs. "That's when the psychopath moves in: rightsizing, downsizing, upsizing. When there's chaos, when the rules no longer apply, enter stage right the psychopath."

Still, identifying a psychopath isn't easy. Even a checklist isn't much use unless the interviewer has access to the candidate's family, friends and colleagues.