Elon Musk, Larry Page, Vinod Khosla Are "Psychopaths" say SXSW Experts

Crazy at the wheel: psychopathic CEOs are rife in Silicon Valley, experts say

Attributes of a psychopath can be good for running a business, says SXSW panel, but weak HR departments and investors can enable bad behavior

Studies show a high prevalence of psychopaths among high-level executives in a corporate environment, compared to the general population. Photograph: Allstar/LIONS GATE/Sportsphoto Ltd./Allstar

-

Olivia Solon

There is a high proportion of psychopathic CEOs in Silicon Valley, enabled by protective investors and weak human resources departments, according to a panel of experts at SXSW festival.

Although the term "psychopath" typically has negative connotations, some of the attributes associated with the disorder can be advantageous in a business setting.

"A true psychopath is someone that has a blend of emotional, interpersonal, lifestyle and behavioral deficits but an uncanny ability to mask them. They come across as very charming, very gregarious. But underneath there's a profound lack of remorse, callousness and a lack of empathy," said forensic and clinical psychologist Michael Woodworth, who has worked with psychopathic murderers in high security prisons, on Tuesday.

Uber's 'hustle-oriented' culture becomes a black mark on employees' résumés

Read more

"They have certain characteristics like fearless dominance, boldness and a lack of emotion. Many successful presidents have scored highly [on the psychopathy scale]," said Woodworth.

According to recent studies there's a high prevalence of psychopathy among high-level executives in a corporate environment: 4-8% compared with [1% in the general population](#).

This makes sense, according to [Silicon Valley](#) venture capitalist Bryan Stolle because "it's an irrational act to start a company".

"You have to have a tremendous amount of ego [and] self-deception to embark on that journey," he said. "You have to make sacrifices and give up things, including sometimes a marriage, family and friends. And you have to convince other people. So they are mostly very charismatic, charming and make you suspend the disbelief that something can't be done."

However, the positive attributes are accompanied by manipulation.

"One of the main things that makes them extremely difficult to organisations is their willingness to manipulate through deception," said Jeff Hancock, a Stanford social scientist who studies psychopathy.

"Psychopaths will handpick people they can use as lackeys or supporters, such as someone in HR they can have in their wheelhouse," said Woodworth.

> Because they are the founders and leaders they tend to get protected by HR. This reinforces the behaviour
>
> *Jeff Hancock, Stanford social scientist*

However, when a psychopath isn't getting his or her way, they lose their veneer of charm. "When things aren't happening the way they thought they were going to happen, they tend to completely flip and resort to bullying," said Stolle.

At that point, according to Hancock, their "mask of sanity falls off".

"Because they are the founders and leaders they tend to get protected by HR," added Strolle. "This reinforces the behaviour."

He cited Uber and the [allegations of sexual harassment made by former employee Susan Fowler](#) as an example of a company with an HR department that's "gone in the wrong direction".

It's not just HR departments that enable psychopaths, but investors.

"When you've made an investment in an entrepreneur, you protect them. Everything is riding on that person. You are tied to them and now you have to keep ignoring the behaviour unless it gets so terrible you can't," said Stolle.

Having a psychopath within a company can lead to poor employee retention, said Hancock, referencing [FBI research](#) that found that departments managed by psychopaths decreases productivity and morale in the team.

"Eight to 14 people could be lost because of one psychopath. That's the real cost of having something like that in your organization, especially if there's an HR coverup," he added.

Startup workers see sexual harassment on 'breathtaking' scale in Silicon Valley

Hancock has developed software to analyse the social media posts of public figures to see how they rate on the psychopathy scale thanks to identifiers in written language. "There tends to be an emotion deficit, they tend to use few words related to anxiety but a lot of hostile language," he said, adding that they write in a way that's disfluent and difficult to understand.

Psychopaths also find it difficult to modulate their language for different settings for example a private message versus a public post. Because they are more interested in themselves than others, they tend to refer to other people a lot less than non psychopaths.

This means that text-based communication is a much better way to communicate with someone you suspect is a psychopath, since it strips away their non-verbal distractors, such as charm and confidence.

"Text based communications improve your chances of not being manipulated as they are verbally not very skilled," said Hancock. "You can smoke them out in an online context."