



# VIEO

Phone: 0431 025 564

E-mail: [angela@vieo.com.au](mailto:angela@vieo.com.au)

Web: [www.vieo.com.au](http://www.vieo.com.au)

*It could be your boss, an employee or a peer. They are the Workplace Psychopath. This Guide addresses how to deal with them and how to minimise the chance of them joining your organisation.*

## Dealing with the Workplace Psychopath

John Clark, who wrote *Working with Monsters – how to identify and protect yourself from the workplace psychopath*, describes the psychopath as a remorseless human predator who stops at nothing in his/her never-ending hunt for power and control.

Sounds like a serial killer or stalker but their behaviour in the workplace can include bullying, intimidation, impulsive outbursts, manipulation and sexually predatory actions. They are different from most as they don't feel any remorse, and in fact get a great deal of satisfaction from their actions and the results, no matter what pain they have caused their victim or the organisation.

There are four types of psychopath in the workplace:

- **Organisational:** take pleasure in the chaos they cause - confusion, conflict, undermine, character assassination, blackmail, etc – and utilise it to rise to the top to gain \$ and power.
- **Corporate:** use profession for financial

or power related benefits – fraud, cons, identity theft, stealing, etc – and are not worried about getting caught.

- **Occupational:** don't want to climb higher, just want to feel powerful, in control and avoid punishment. Often use laws, regulations or organisational systems that are part of their job to control.
- **Violent:** from an organisational point of view, usually only become aware of behaviour if it is perpetrated against someone met at work. The problem with violent criminals is that the organisation often only finds out after the act/s have been committed.

The psychopath has a *toolbox of behaviours* that assist them to become part of any organisation and rise to the top:

- Lie and manipulate the truth, often telling people what they want to hear.
- Divide and conquer - play people off against one another.



- Exploit the *weak* employee/s within the work group.
- Take credit for others work and/or achievements.
- Manipulate others via threats or sympathy to get them to complete work.
- Threatens disciplinary action or termination or loss of work for a contractor to get what they want.



- Run down direct supervisor and targeted employees to higher-level managers and hr (back up in case these people complain about psychopath's behaviour at a later point).
- Spreads rumour and encourages employees to harass a particular employee.
- Sets up others to fail – not delivering what they need to finish a task, not allowing others to help, setting the goal too high (timeframe, output, etc), etc – then ensuring disciplinary action is taken or the issue is publically aired.
- Develop friendships with employees with influence and/or power that may aid them get a promotion or help them with any of the above points (think Executive Assistant to the CEO, the HR Manager).
- Promise clients things that cannot be delivered (and then often blame others for non-delivery).

Typical characteristics may include:

- Glossed public personality, plays to the crowd and appears knowledgeable in a number of areas (if caught out, will change topic or engineer an exit).
- Unethical behaviour, including going through others work area and e-mails.
- Easily bored, with a strong dislike for dealing with day-to-day issues.
- Drama queen/king, manufacturing unnecessary drama or a crisis to create excitement.
- Multiple sexual relationships with others in the workplace.
- Unpredictable behaviour that leaves people wondering what mood they will encounter, with tantrums a regular feature.
- Delegate all of their work.
- Not taking responsibility for behaviour, output, etc.
- Avoids meetings.

- Abusive, condescending and/or ignorant to anyone that challenges them, especially if done publically at a forum like a meeting where senior managers are present. Often involves shouting.

They can be the boss, an employee or a peer. Many of these psychopaths are in senior positions or positions of high influence within the organisation.

They are the masters of charm and at an interview they will present as the *perfect candidate*. They will often disclose information that is hard to verify (e.g. sales results) and love the challenge of psychometric testing. See *Detection and Diagnosis* section below for more detail.

The psychopath will spend the initial employment period understanding the power structure of the organisation. Typically, they will choose a senior manager to be-friend; all of a sudden, they have the same hobby, start and finish at the same time, and the like, thus developing a rapport that allows for unquestioned inappropriate behaviour.

The psychopath treats his/her peers well during the settling in period so that reports to the more senior manager mirror their growing relationship.

Then the games begin. Chaos, intimidation, bullying, and a combination of the other behaviours and characteristics are enacted in earnest.

As a supervisor, they have a cycle of befriending and gaining trust of employees, then start to take credit for work/ideas, dish out public humiliation for non-achievement, portraying that employees are not up to standard, discouraging ideas and the like.

Often these actions are combined with backstops such as putting in complaints with hr, file notes on employee files, starting rumours or planting enough information for people to question the validity of eventual complaints about the psychopath.

### Victims

Victims are usually targeted because of perceived *weakness* or removing or marginalising them will allow greater power. A victim will often feel like they have lost control of their life, experiencing anxiety, mental illness, sleep problems, relationship problems, disbelief (that they could be treated this way), anger, embarrassment, and the list goes on.

Some suffer in silence. Others become outraged at how they are being treated and/or everyone else is being manipulated. They make a complaint to a more senior manager or hr, but usually because of the background work done by the psychopath, the victim is viewed as a complainer, bludger, or something similar. This perception increases the longer the issue continues.

In the case of a corporate criminal, it is a longer process, working their way into a position where they are trusted and are not directly accountable to anyone for financial decisions or processes. They often work long hours so they can go about their plan without visibility, resist being promoted and rarely if ever take leave.

### Ramifications for hr and managers

You must meet your duty of care. Investigations must be completed, regardless of whether a formal complaint has been received or not. See *Detection and Diagnosis* section for further detail.

If you hear rumours that are untrue, you must address them promptly – publically correct (e.g. get the work area together, or at a toolbox/pre-start meeting, talk to all employees involved one-on-one in a defined period of time, etc; better than doing it via a memo or e-mail in most cases) and privately talk to the person who cultivated it in the first place.

If an employee, peer or manager is displaying inappropriate behaviours, an action plan must be enacted. For example, if someone regularly has a temper tantrum or outbursts at meetings, they must be spoken to, cautioned and if the behaviour continues, disciplinary action taken, which may lead to termination. Confront, set the example and follow through.

If an employee is being stalked or receiving unwanted attention (violent psychopath), the organisation and the employee should contact the police immediately and the organisation should gain professional advice from a Forensic or Organisational Psychologist.

Employees, contractors or other victims in the case of a psychopath, will be reluctant to say any thing to an internal investigator for fear of increased targeted behaviour or losing their job/work. In many cases, other employees may privately support victims, but these employees do not want to speak up for fear of they themselves becoming a target



for the psychopath. An external investigator may be required.

### **Detection and Diagnosis**

So, I hear you thinking, these people should be easy to spot. No way. All of these characteristics and behaviours are common but the combination or results are often only seen in hindsight. Also, someone with poor interpersonal skills, low self-esteem or a short temper, might exhibit the behaviours.

There are many general issues that help detect a psychopath. Decline in employee work performance, increased absenteeism, changes in employee behaviour and/or general outlook (irritability, tiredness, loss of sense of humour, lack of concern about work, etc), groups of people leaving or wanting a transfer from a particular work area, formal complaints, increased contacts for the equity referral officer if one exists in your organisation, rumours and hearsay about an employee/supervisor/manager behaviour, continuous non-compliance with internal processes or system by the employee.

In the case of a corporate psychopath, co-workers might start to notice the purchase of personal items (e.g. cars, houses, jewellery, electronic equipment, boats, holidays, etc) that are not explainable. Systems records might be altered and physical records are missing. The employee might have an overly close relationship with a client or a supplier.

In the case of an occupational psychopath, they are usually employed in an institution where position and authority is legislated (e.g. police, safety inspector, etc) and they will start breaking minor rules and if caught promise not to do it again to avoid conflict, but continue on at increasing levels. Usually they leave before action can be taken.

Information and intelligence will need to be gathered. This can be somewhat delicate as victims may not want to discuss the problems they are experiencing and/or there is some doubt as to the validity of the issue. If you have an EAP, the service provider might be able to provide some general information about trends in people that they are assisting.

Diagnosis can only be provided by a mental health professional, such as a Forensic or Organisational Psychologist. Many people display the characteristics described but would not be diagnosed as such but the information contained in this guide can still be utilised, whether diagnosed or not.

These professionals, investigators and specialists such as a Forensic Accountant can gather the information required for this type of investigation and give advice. An external investigation can provide a more balanced approach and may encourage employees to be more open. Please refer to Links page of the Vieo Website for companies that can provide these services.

### **What to do if you have one**

Act promptly; hoping it will go away will compound the issue. Toxic work environments and poor behaviour spread and the experience will leave lasting cultural legacies.

- Develop an exit plan, with advice of an IR specialist and an Organisational Psychologist. This is a personality disorder, which an organisation cannot change.
- Implement a strict performance plan that requires work to be completed to specific criteria, deadlines and disciplinary or punitive action if not achieved. The individual must sign off on the plan so that they cannot say they did not know or understand at a later date.
- Have regular planned and unplanned meetings – the individual must feel that they are being monitored so they may be inclined to behave appropriately.
- If the individual wants to meet repeatedly just to waste time or inconvenience others, schedule for just before they would want to go home. The individual should not be allowed to set a schedule for meetings, nor should they be enabled to interrupt work.
- If the individual becomes agitated during a meeting, ask and wait for them to calm down and if they don't, remove them from the meeting if a group meeting or reschedule if it was only

with them. If they do this a second time, repeat and issue a written warning about appropriate behaviour and request the information that was going to be discussed at the meeting, asking for a response in writing in a specific time period.

- Do not allow the individual to deviate from the planned meeting agenda.
- Document all actions.

The psychopath will play harder once the above restrictions are put in place, trying to discredit those involved and gain support from others in the organisation who have only witnessed his/her charm, not the other insidious behaviours. The following steps can be taken:

- Ensure others more senior are aware of what is occurring and what actions are taking place. Give specific examples of inappropriate behaviour, not generalisations.
- Ensure employees have factual information and correct any rumours that are not true.
- Consult others more senior and/or experienced about what actions would be appropriate if the situation doesn't improve.
- Having existing, strong working relationships across the organisation is the best defence for the psychopath – make it difficult for them to discredit or spread rumours.

### **Minimise the effect and help victims**

Ensure your employees know what is inappropriate workplace behaviour and what to do about it. It should be part of your equity/harassment/bullying education program or a toolbox or other group-meeting topic. Do not use the word *psychopath* as people only think of serial killers.

Awareness makes it much more difficult for people to be manipulated and makes the inappropriate behaviour easier to recognise. Employees who know what to do if it occurs and are confident that policies and procedures are in place to deal with it are more likely to take action early.

If soft skill training is taking place in your organisation, include assertiveness as a topic. As painful as role-plays can be, it is one of the most effective ways for people to learn how to be assertive at work. It de-mystifies the skill (people confuse assertiveness with aggression). Assertive, aware employees are more resilient to these behaviours.



Ensure your organisation has either an Employee Assistance Program or access to counsellors that employees can be referred to. An EAP services is preferred as employees can use the service without having to speak to someone internally first. If a problem is identified, ensure that employees that may be affected by the psychopath's behaviour are aware of the program and how to access it.

It may be necessary to do a group debrief with the employees working closest with the psychopath when they leave. An internal or external facilitator can do this. At an individual level, specific help or planning may be required to get the employee back on track.

Evaluate your organisational policies and procedures. How does your organisation respond to a report about a difficult employee or a claim of harassment or unwarranted/inappropriate behaviour? What is the typical flow of events once a complaint is made or a manager hears of an issue? Do your managers know how to handle a complaint or issue? Are complainants told something like, 'stop worrying about the interpersonal issues and just get on with the job'? Can a note be put on an employee file without evidence and/or without a discussion with the employee? Are the principles of natural justice applied? Would the process stand up to legal scrutiny? How would you feel if you had to make a complaint about your manager using the processes?

Consider whether a number of your employees should gain investigation skills. Refer to the Links page of the Vieo Website for possible suppliers of this type of training.

Learn from the experience. Debrief the senior managers ensuring everyone understands what occurred and duty of care.

### **Exiting the psychopath**

As mentioned above, an exit plan is essential once behaviours are recognised and performance management plans are in place. The havoc and long-term damage resulting from the psychopath is huge: psychological fall out for victims, possible legal and workers compensation ramifications, loss of valued employees, damage to client and stakeholder relationships, lack of respect and trust that the organisation is looking after an employee, financial loss if fraud is involved, etc. Do not hope that the issue will go away; take a proactive approach to removal.

Some organisations will terminate employment but often the person is made redundant or is encouraged to find another employer with a promise of a decent reference. Is it the right thing to do? Yes and no. It often rids the organisation of a very painful and often embarrassing problem in a non-litigious way but it rewards and reinforces the psychopath's behaviour (I behave badly, I get paid a large sum to leave, there is no record on my employment file, no public re-buff, and the reference will be excellent) and just passes the problem to the next employer.

The way it is publically handled within the organisation also has cultural ramifications. Often the higher the role the person filled, the less likely public acknowledgement of the issue. Senior managers and CEO are often loathed to admit that a person they supported was a problem and that they ignored the overwhelming evidence, making them look stupid for not seeing it sooner. We have all seen it, the CEO issues an e-mail statement about a manager who has decided for personal reasons to pursue other options, is leaving immediately, we all wish him/her the best of luck, etc. Or alternatively, the person disappears from the organisation with not a word spoken about it.

Public acknowledgement by a senior manager or the CEO might not be advised by the organisation's legal advisors but goes a long way to help heal the pain caused. It also establishes the expectation that this behaviour is not appropriate in the workplace and that if it happens again, people will be supported if they speak up.

### **But my organisation will not take action**

You know there is a problem but the organisation will not do anything about it. Most experienced hr professionals and managers have been here.

From an official point of view there is little you can do because you straddle the line between your duty of care to the employee and your official role responsibilities, which include protecting the interests of the organisation.

Making the changes to procedure, process and training, as outlined above and below are a step in the right direction but it doesn't help with the personal guilt of not being able to do anything and/or the continued presence of the psychopath.

If a person really wanted to stay but didn't want to take any further action, coach them on how to communicate assertively, how to build personal political credibility within the organisation and how to build solid working relationship with influential others within the organisation. This decreases the psychopath's power. This is only possible if the employee still has a strong sense of self, which sadly isn't often the case. This can start off as simply as building stronger relationships with those whom association already exists – providing good customer service, assisting where required, tell these people about achievements/ projects/ improvements the employee or their work group are undertaking, etc. Then widen the circle of people including roles that are outside of normal interactions, and introductions can be facilitated by yourself or someone within your work group. When the employee has a problem, assist them to identify who in the organisation can help them and even if they have never been introduced, encourage them to make contact.

If a person really wanted to stay but didn't want to take any further action and the business was big enough, encourage them to explore positions in other business units. This can be difficult if the psychopath has been spreading stories but is still a great option. Facilitate an introduction and give a good word to the potential new supervisor about the employee. Concentrate on pre-psychopath performance if questions are raised.

If it is impossible for the employee to remain in the organisation but is in a good mental position, even though they might be very angry and/or upset, encourage and assist them to find work elsewhere. Having an exit strategy is not defeat – better to leave before the employee becomes an emotional wreck. Help write a resume, give people leads and act as a referee. Once the employee has moved on and the stress of the situation is



removed, hindsight makes them wonder why they stayed for as long as they did.

No matter what your official obligation is, there is nothing more rewarding than seeing someone re-discovering the joy, or at least not a completed hatred, of going to work and them not having to battle with the mental, physical and financial issues that result from the level of stress this treatment results in.

If it is impossible for the employee to continue working anywhere, encourage them to seek help via the EAP, counsellor or doctor and seek legal advice about their options. Let them access leave if they have any available. Depending on the route taken, it may turn into a workers compensation claim, a civil claim, a anti-discrimination commission claim or the employee might elect just to resign. None of these options are ideal but sometimes it gives the employee an opportunity to re-group, find other work or the other party moves on (workers compensation) and all three-claim options may result in the organisation's management finally taking the problem seriously.

#### **Avoid employing one**

Not having the person enter the organisation is must easier that removing them and dealing with the fall out of their actions.

Aim to have experienced recruiters – life experience combined with common sense, a health dash of scepticism and an understanding of your workplace culture. Organisations need recruiters that are taking a good look at the background, not just taking a resume at face value.

#### Resumes and initial phone screening:

- Do they make a big deal out of normal role responsibilities and tasks? Find out why. Challenge about what should be part of the role, results, dealing with difficult situations, etc.

- Verify dates of employment, position and responsibility, organisation and who was their supervisor. If it isn't clear, verify with the organisation directly.
- Verify who the referees are – if in doubt ring the organisation and check name and title with the receptionist.
- Check credentials – ring the educational institute if necessary.
- Verify registrations with professional associations.
- Why is the person is applying for the position – is there a benefit and if not why would they be moving? (Note: sometime you find the person is experiencing the behaviour we have described and doesn't want to sound like they are bitching about their present/previous employer).
- What isn't in the resume? Verify why the individual left previous roles – with the candidate and with the organisation they left, if the answers are vague or along the lines of 'left for personal reasons' investigate further.

#### Interviews:

- Aim for 2 or more on the interview panel, as it is more difficult to *charm* every one. One on one, they will pick up on personal information given and tailor the answers.
- Do not do the big introduction – the spiel most do about the company, the position, the type of person you are looking for – the psychopath, and smart candidates, will tailor their answers to exactly what you are expecting or wanting.
- Do not allow the candidate to use his/her resume during the interview.
- Step through the candidate work history in detail and check inconsistencies – dates of employment, reasons for leaving, roles and responsibilities. If the candidate starts to get annoyed, emotional, displays different body language, tries to change the subject or the story changes, press on with the double check. If you need to, explain that they need to be truthful and at this stage their answer and/or body language doesn't indicate as such.
- Make sure the questions are not leading (e.g. Leading = We have a big focus on team work in XYZ Company, how do you like to work?) and steer the candidate to give an answer where they have to give actual examples of what they have done in the past. After they have answered, clarify the employer where the action occurred as this can be

used during reference checking if there is some later doubt.

- Always ask the candidate to describe personal positive and negative aspects. It can be a painful question to ask but the psychopath (and nervous people, so take this into consideration) will have difficulty with the negative description because they don't know what the panel is expecting.

Pay special attention to the *perfect candidate*. Evaluate why the panel considers him/her as *perfect*. Did they flattered you or the company or did they state that they had the same hobby, follow the same sporting team or share the same interests that you mentioned in the small talk before the interview? You need to look through the gloss and make sure there is substance. Evaluate what the applicant doesn't have, what they didn't answer as thoroughly as you would have expected and what they didn't ask about but you would have expected them to.

Keep in mind that psychometric tests rarely detect the psychopath. If you are doing testing after the interview process, look at who is scoring and reporting on the testing results especially for senior or key positions. A lot of testing results are wishy washy and contradictory, giving no clear indication on personal characteristics. The reporter should want to see a copy of the candidates resume and know of any concerns you may have. If you are not happy with the test reporting, find a provider that is more experienced and has worked in your industry sector – refer to the Links section of the Vieo Website for possible suppliers of this service.

Experienced analysis and a strong relationship with your Organisational Psychologist means that if something doesn't seem right in the testing results, no matter how small, they will contact you rather than just brush over it in the report. And this issue should be further explored prior to employment – more background checking, more reference checking, and further interviews.

#### Questions to add to your reference checks:

How often are reference checks valuable? It is in part due to the nature of reference checking – a candidate will rarely supply the contact details of a referee that may paint them in anything less than a glowing light. Ensure there are at least 2 or 3 referee's that are previous direct supervisors or managers. If you know of someone that may have



worked with the candidate, ask them to give you the OK to contact them, any reluctance to allow this is a red flag. If you are not happy with the referee list they supply, work through the names of previous supervisors or managers and select a number of them and request permission to contact. It may take more time to track them down but in this day and age of business social networking, organisational websites listing key contacts and the like, it has never been easier.

The second key component is referee participation. Many are reluctant to be truthful because of the are the legal cases that sometimes result from the reference checking process, but more common is that the candidate still works for the organisation and they are desperate to get rid of them. Listen to clues in the reply given to a question - give the referee a chance to opt out of giving a clear answer that allows them to avoid legal risk but clearly indicates to you that the candidate is inappropriate. I have had many who have said that they wouldn't like to say, or they haven't worked with them closely enough to answer (when they have been a direct supervisor) or something similar.

The final key component as to why reference checking doesn't appear to deliver results are the questions used or the way they are delivered. There are some tight legal regulations around what can and cannot be asked but these are manageable. Reference checking should be much more than just checking employment periods. If the referee is not willing to answer or gives a vague answer, it is a red flag and needs to be followed up further.

- Does X take responsibility for their behaviour, good and bad?
- Does X follow through on ideas and finish projects/tasks that they are assigned?
- Does X divide and conquer, playing one

person against another in your workplace?

- Has X ever had an affair to your knowledge with a person they work with?
- Does X constantly look for new things to do?
- Do X's skills and abilities match his/her career goals?
- Has X ever taken credit for work that you or someone else has done?
- Has X ever been on a performance management plan? If so, why?
- Has X ever received a disciplinary warning? If so, why?
- Has there ever been complaints made about X's behaviour in the workplace?
- Would you describe X as a good talker? And if so, is the talk backed up by substance, does her/she know what they are talking about? Do they do what they say?
- Have you ever felt intimidated by X?
- Does X have alternating periods of anger/temper with charm? Is there some doubt as to how you might find them, mood wise, at any given time?
- Does X ever lose their temper at meetings or other public forums?
- Have you ever seen X publically belittle or humiliate another person?

A bit more challenging than the usual bank of reference check questions. Do not have an in-experienced recruiter ask these questions. The recruiter needs to be able to judge the response gained and fire back questions to elicit further information.

When amping up the recruitment process, of which some of these suggestions may not be in step with current, perceived best practice processes, as an organisation, you need to weigh up the risk of legal action against the risk of employing a person that has the potential to cause havoc within your organisation.

*Vieo can assist you to deal with your workplace psychopath or review, update your processes or provide employee training in assertiveness or equity issues.*

*Contact us on 0431 025 564 or [angela@vieo.com.au](mailto:angela@vieo.com.au)*