Watch out for these Machiavellian attributes among your employees

A staff member who combines charm and friendliness with guilt and pressure to attain what they want suffers from personality imbalance. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

IN SUMMARY

* Niccolo Machiavelli argued that leaders should utilise harsh tactics with their followers in order to achieve expediency of goal achievement.
* Research from Delroy Paulhus and many others show that Machiavellianism employees are more likely to steal from their employers and customers.

The theory of the firm states that the objective of a company entails maximising shareholding wealth. As firms plot and prod to move towards achieving their objectives, sometimes organisations trample others in illegal or amoral ways in order to either save money or earn more revenues for shareholders.

Banks might overcharge customers with illegal fees, an audit company could issue an unqualified opinion on an unworthy client’s financial statements in order to retain the customer’s business, a real estate firm might land grab from the less fortunate, universities could become reluctant to fail students and therefore reduce their client-base, or chemical companies might spill waste products into the water supply instead of paying to clean and process chemical excess.

Do the ends justify the means? Niccolo Machiavelli famously posed such questions in his landmark book The Prince in the early 16th century. He argued that leaders should utilise harsh tactics with their followers in order to achieve expediency of goal achievement. Does shareholder wealth justify any means to gain it? How about political victory justifying any means to triumph? Or on an individual who bashes colleagues’ reputations in order to gain promotion?

Desiderius Erasmus, a contemporary of Machiavelli, argued for a more pacifist approach whereby leaders should act by wholesome virtues and only use ruthless tactics when threatened unjustly. Business and political ethics debates raged for centuries over virtuous actions versus righteous goals.

Surprisingly, a certain type of person often stands at the forefront of leading organisations and followers astray towards shockingly amoral behaviour. Some people possess a personality trait appropriately called Machiavellianism.

Jason Dahling, Brian Whitaker, Brian Whitaker, and Paul Levy define someone with Machiavellianism as somebody who tends to distrust others, engage in amoral manipulation, seek control over others, and seek status for oneself.

Such individuals exist, as what researcher Dale Hartley describes, as temperamentally predisposed to live life as calculating, conniving, and deceptive.

Examples litter popular culture in television characters Luscious Lion from Empire’ Lord Varys and Lord Baelish on Game of Thrones, Frank Underwood on House of Cards and Cyrus Beene on Scandal.

Research from Delroy Paulhus and many others show that Machiavellianism employees are more likely to steal from their employers and customers, hold lower job satisfaction, quit jobs at a higher rate, act economically opportunist, and likely to engage in unethical work behaviours. Managers must watch out for such
personality traits in their workers.

If one desires to assess whether they possess the troubling personality trait, psychologists Richard Christie and Florence Geis developed a self-test for Machiavellianism.

Some of the seventy-one questions include “anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble”, “it is wise to flatter important people”, and “humility not only is of no service but is actually harmful” answered on a seven-point Likert scale. In order for executives to notice Machiavellianism in others, Dale Hartley’s lays out five warning signs.

First, such workers thrive in environments whereby the rules exist unclearly or ambiguously. Second, an employee whose emotional detachment and cynical outlook enable them to control their inner desires of Machiavellianism would wait patiently for opportunities to exploit others.

Third, colleagues desire them in competitive environments such as winning client deals or negotiating, but the individual really does not possess any friends, close workmates, or a spouse. Fourth, a staff member who combines charm and friendliness with guilt and pressure to attain what they want. Fifth, the employee utilises subtle tactics to hide their true intentions.

Unfortunately, untrained eyes fall victim to the Machiavellism’s tactics. They get fooled by the flattery, the charm, or yield to the strategically applied pressure placed on them. Unfortunately, corporate employees in much of the world tend to reward such individuals through a warped view of appropriate leadership characteristics.

So individuals with Machiavellianism often gain promotion at a more rapid pace than others. Sometimes their tactics cause their demise. Other times it leads to great success.

Shocking new research released this month by Rebecca Greenbaum, Aaron Hill, Mary Mawritz, and Matthew Quade in the prestigious Journal of Management highlights that sometimes otherwise docile employees might get pushed into Machiavellianism if they work under an abusive supervisor.

The coercive supervisor can activate a Machiavellianism trigger in the employee whereby they start desiring control, distrust fellow workers, desire status, and start amorally manipulating their work situation and colleagues. An employee who suffers from supervisor emotional abuse and who also desires control holds the highest statistical chance of become behaviourally unethical.

The most fearful employees include those who embody the three most evil personality traits: Machiavellianism (as discussed above), psychopathy (cold and insensitive to others’ needs), and narcissism (believing they deserve admiration and should be treated differently than others).

Unfortunately, many politicians both here in Kenya and abroad possess all three. These negative aspects of their personality often make them crave political power in the first place. New US President Donald Trump, as an example, arguably ranks high in Machiavellianism and narcissism and moderate on psychopathy.

So managers must watch out not only for Machiavellianism traits in their employees due to the disastrous expected results, but also stamp out harsh supervisors that could trigger such traits in their staff. Look for those leading duplicitous work lives.

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