

Introduction

Julle's boss is a nightmare. He is surly and liable to lose his temper if anything is not exactly as he wants. He frequently blames her for his mistakes.

John has two employees who are at each other's throats. He has tried to reconcile them by getting them together and having it out; he has tried talking to them individually. Nothing works.

Andrea wants a pay rise. Several others on the team do less work than her and bring less money into the business, yet they are paid more. When she points that out to her boss, he is not persuaded by her argument, and Andrea is left feeling resentful.

If you have similar everyday dilemmas, this book offers solutions. The first part explores what makes troublesome colleagues tick and suggests ways in which you can protect yourself against these types. The second part explains how office politics work and how to become better at them.

The expression 'office politics' has got a bad name. We think of them as something undesirable, unwholesome, toxic. But, as you will see, they are far from bad, just an inevitable part of professional life. They must be embraced with as much humour, self-conscious deliberation and wisdom as possible.

On a daily basis, it's absolutely unavoidable that people will find themselves in competition with one another. Interests at work frequently do not coincide. Resources, like the most stimulating tasks, the best shift hours or

pots for bonuses, are finite. It is healthy for us to use our wiles to try and get the best of these for ourselves. At its simplest, that's all I mean by 'office politics': the normal wheezes everyone uses to advance their interests.

More precisely, researchers have identified four components of office political skill:

Astuteness: This is the foundation of being a good office politician: being able to read others, your organisation and yourself. If you cannot interpret the signals of people around you, there's little likelihood of you working out how to get your way. If you do not understand how your organisation works, you will be blundering about in the dark. If you are not clear what you want, how are you going to act in ways that will get it? You must try to be as astute as possible about others, your organisation and yourself.

Effectiveness: Having understood what is going on and made plans, you have to be skilled at executing them. That means knowing which combination of tactics to use, who to direct them at, choosing the right moment and performing the words and deeds effectively, always with some measure of actual thespianism – deliberate pretences and acting.

Networking: Carefully nurtured relationships, within and beyond your organisation, enable you to press the right buttons. They build your reputation, oil wheels and are vital for moving between jobs.

The appearance of sincerity: The closer the fit between who you really are and who you come across as, the better. But quite often, the inner and the outer must necessarily be different in order for you to achieve successful management of the impression you are creating. You need to be able to do this in ways that seem sincere. If your colleagues have lost faith in your honesty and integrity, it will be hard to progress.

Defined as these four skills, my suggestion to you is that there is nothing wrong with office political activity. In fact, my ambition is to help you to become much more self-aware about your use of it. If you are someone who wants to believe that you should never try to advance your interests at the expense of others using these skills, I would plead with you to think again. You are almost certainly deceiving yourself: like it or not, one in five communications we have with others contain a white lie. Many lies are said to protect others' feelings but some are necessary and healthy deceptions that advance our interests. If you can be more conscious of what you and others get up to, you will be much better able to do good for others, as well as yourself. Being shy or self-deceiving about this will only make you frustrated and resentful. You will be thwarted and outwitted by better operators. I am hoping to persuade you that there is nothing wrong with being a good office politician and improve your skills.

That does not mean I am advocating cold, selfish ruthlessness, far from it. I am not in favour of dog-eat-dog, self-preening career bestiality. Psychopaths, Machiavels and narcissists are rife in many sectors of the business world and it's in your best interests to be able to identify them and develop strategies to effectively deal with them. The first part of this book is devoted to the fascinating new evidence regarding those kinds of people. It has been proven they are the sort most likely to be making your life hell at work. There are three kinds, which overlap:

Psychopaths: Highly impulsive thrill-seekers who lack empathy for others. Think Stalin and Gordon Gekko from the film *Wall Street*. They are four times commoner* among senior executives than in the ordinary workforce.

Machiavels: Exceptionally calculating, they behave in a cold and manipulative fashion, ruthlessly pursuing their self-interest. Think Henry Kissinger and Peter Mandelson. People at or near the top* have this trait much more than those lower down the food chain.

Narcissists: Commonly perceived as vain, they are prone to grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, a desire for dominance and feelings of superiority. Think Madonna and Maradona. Senior managers are more likely* to be like this than ordinary people and, believe it or not, than mental hospital patients.

New evidence shows that people who have one of these tendencies are liable to possess the others. This Dark Triad of characteristics is very likely to be present in that person in your office who causes so much trouble.

The awful truth is that the number of such triadic people has greatly increased* in the last thirty years, how much depending on which country you live in. The reason is because the global economy increasingly demands elements of triadic behaviour in order to succeed. This is especially true of English-speaking nations, like Britain and America, but also in emerging nations, like China, India and Russia. Frankly, it's scary. Whether you work in the corporate sector, a small business or a public sector job, the system you are in is liable to reward ruthless, selfish manipulation. The likelihood of your daily working life being troubled by a person who is some mixture of psychopathic, Machiavellian and narcissistic is high. If you do not develop the skills to deal with them, they will eat you for breakfast.

In developed nations, the fundamental reason why such characters are able to thrive is the huge shift from manufacturing jobs to service sector ones. In Britain, for example, only 11 per cent of people now work in manufacturing. It is much easier to quantify what someone has produced when that object is able to be picked up or seen with your own eyes. However, determining how well or poorly a person in the social sector performs is subjective, and much more difficult to pin down. With that shift comes a crucial difference in how reward and promotion are decided.

If you work in a factory producing wooden dolls and are paid a set amount per doll, everyone knows where they stand: you either make 100

or 1,000 a day and will be paid accordingly. If you are a prodigious doll-producer, this merit may be rewarded with promotion.

Matters are completely different in the vast majority of service sector occupations. There are no objective metrics, no quantities of dolls, by which your contribution can be measured. A prime example of such a profession is television production, in which I worked, on and off, for twenty-five years. I once came upon an amusing admission of the way things work there when I saw the following sign pinned on the wall of a television production office:

THE SIX STAGES OF ANY TELEVISION PRODUCTION:

1. Enthusiasm
2. Disillusion
3. Panic
4. Hunt for the guilty
5. Punishment for the innocent
6. Reward for those who had nothing to do with it

Whether you work in television, public relations, financial services or as a nurse, it's extremely difficult to prove your achievements or for your boss to obtain hard evidence, positive or negative.

If the client is pleased by your public relations performance, your boss has little to go on objectively. The boss will be substantially influenced by what the client says about you and that often depends on whether you got on well with them. Your boss will also be heavily affected by your relationship with him or her. If they like you it will be much easier to persuade the boss that any adverse outcomes, like bad publicity, were due to someone else on the team, or to the difficulty of the subject; you can still emerge smelling of roses.

As an investment banker, you might have thought there would be objective criteria for measuring success, but it is largely not so. You can

usually argue when things go wrong that it was not your fault, whilst taking credit for the positives, especially if the boss likes you. If you have a good relationship with clients, they will give positive feedback about you to your boss.

As a nurse, if many of your patients die, how can it be proven that this was your fault (assuming you are not a mass murderer)? So many other clinicians were involved in the case. As long as you are nice to patients, they will not complain about you. If you foster positive feelings in your matron, she is much less likely to blame you for mistakes, or to notice them.

In service industries, instead of objective measures, your relationship with your boss becomes critical to your appraisal, their subjective evaluation paramount. At its simplest, this is hugely influenced by whether they like you. Schmoozing works. You can use tactics like ingratiation (flattery, chameleonism – which is mirroring another person's mannerisms, way of speaking, style and ideas – and doing favours) to increase the likelihood of favourable assessment.

What others say about you behind your back, for good or ill, also affects your boss's perception. This reputation can also be manipulated by ingratiation. If you are skilled at covering your tracks whilst taking credit for what is not yours and shifting blame for your mistake on to others, so much the better for how your boss views your contributions.

Small wonder, then, that studies show that those social skills that make you likeable* and favourably appraised have become vastly more important in determining success in careers during the last thirty years in the UK: that was the period when service sector jobs replaced manufacturing.

But it is more specific than 'social skills', it is office political ones that are crucial. Studies of crude measures of personality* show that they hardly predict who will be successful. Just being outgoing or a Steady Eddy is not enough. Far, far more than the ability to do a job well or being a nice person, office political skill determines who gets to the top. To put it another way, what enables success in a great many professions is, more than any

other, the ability to be an office political animal, rather than excelling at the jobs you do.

It is a pious, sacred wisdom of our age that we live in a meritocracy, or at the least, that we should do: that technical ability, hard work and intelligence enable career success. The reality is that huge surveys of all the evidence show that conventional measures of intelligence or general mental ability are very poor predictors of who will succeed. Whilst they may explain about one quarter, and therefore, yes of course being clever helps, the fact is that office political skill is much more important.

Nor does cleverness explain who is good at office politics. There is no link between how well you do on tests of intelligence and how good you are at office politics. Being clever at exams and tests does not mean you will be clever at politics. As you have probably already observed in your working life, some apparently not very bright people do extremely well, whilst many people with great educational qualifications and high IQ scores, do quite badly. The reason is varying degrees of political skill.

I am not saying that conscientiousness, integrity and ability play no part in who succeeds. The trouble is that they are not enough. In most modern occupations, the perception of your performance is more important than your actual contribution. Politics is the critical ingredient.

Into the shifting sands of this modern work environment slides the triadic person. An occupation that is an amoral desert is fertile soil for the triadic, in fact, it actively fosters it. A terrain in which it is almost impossible to objectively measure individual contributions to work outcomes makes it much easier for triadic people to succeed. The same is true if the environment is highly competitive and insecure. The boss's perception is crucial and the triadic know how to work a boss.

Being Machiavellian is extremely helpful if you want to manipulate your boss's perception of you. Being psychopathically cold and ruthless makes it far easier to shove others out of the way without guilt about the harm you may be doing or your lack of merit. Being narcissistic makes it

only natural for you to 'big yourself up' and run down others. If the triadic manage to conceal these unattractive traits through skilled office politics, the triadic will thrive.

Of course, because triadic people have obnoxious attributes, they run the risk of being unpopular and gaining negative reputations. In most countries and organisations, unless they are skilled at concealing their unpleasantness and are adept at office politics, they will be held back. Indeed, a significant number of them do not succeed. But the ones who learn to conceal their unsavoury tendencies do very well.

In some societies, like America, the traits are actually rewarded. Studies show that Americans who are aggressive and rude* are more likely to get to the top. There is an epidemic of narcissism in America and Machiavellianism is celebrated by its culture. The same is increasingly true in Britain. By contrast, in most of the rest of the world, especially Asia, concealment is vital, especially of narcissism. But with skilful concealment, the triadic will thrive there too, and their national and organisational environments increasingly reward triadic behaviour. As John Lennon observed in one of his songs, we are always being told that anyone can get to the top, even working-class people, but you have to learn how to kill with a smile on your face in order to do so. To varying degrees, this applies to triadic people everywhere if they want to succeed.

This book offers you a chance to do more than survive an increasingly unpleasant world of work. In fact, you can thrive in it. Insecure employment laws, massive rewards for the undeserving and decreasing autonomy make for huge stress. It is caused by having to try ever harder to keep smiling when you feel like killing: the customer is being offensively rude but you must smile through gritted teeth. Known as 'emotional labour', having to be false in this way on a daily basis for years on end is proven to be very bad for your physical and mental health.

This book shows you how to develop the skills to cope in such a world and it explains the reasons for the shocking behaviour of your triadic

colleagues. That knowledge is the spade for digging an oasis of sanity for yourself in your career. By creating a persona for coping with your work relationships, you can get as close a fit as possible between who you really are and the face you present to your colleagues. You can become savvy without becoming toxic to yourself and others. By becoming deliberate and poised in your performance, you can be more, rather than less, real. You are also more likely to end up in fulfilling occupations and in roles within them, and to contribute benignly to your family and society. Indeed, at the end of this book I conclude that office political skill is an important component of true emotional health.

Before we start, a brief account of the basis for the book. I interviewed more than fifty people from a wide variety of professions. I have gone to considerable lengths to ensure their anonymity, busily changing much more than their names. I have used these interviews extensively because I am hoping that reading the stories will help you to learn from experience. Hopefully, just hearing them is a way of having office political practice.

Interestingly, I have done interviews for previous books that covered intimate matters, like sex, money and relationships with parents, but it was often harder for the interviewees in this book to talk about their political activities than those subjects. Most people are reluctant to acknowledge to themselves what they get up to politically, let alone to others. For many it was an uncomfortable experience squeezing out the truth about their manipulations because they were only semi-aware of them. Once admitted to, they then had the unease of sharing these secrets, feeling shame or guilt in some cases.

The book is also based on the scientific evidence in this field. Only the most illuminating studies are described in any detail, mostly I have simply summarised the findings in a few sentences. Where I refer to a specific study or literature, I have provided an endnote as reference for that

minority of readers who care to pursue the original research. When I have provided a reference, a * symbol appears in the text beside the relevant words, indicating that the endnotes will contain a reference relating to this page.

I have brought very little of my personal experience directly into this book, but it has helped me to understand the subject. My first career job was as a research fellow in a university that provided management consultancy services to health service professionals. Then I worked for six years as a clinical psychologist in a mental hospital before switching to television production, first a researcher, then producer, then presenter. I have also worked as a journalist for many years. These media jobs, along with some of the books I have written, have enabled me to observe a wide variety of professions from the inside.

Part One

Coping with Toxic Colleagues and Professions

Chapter 1

A Vicious Combination: Psychopathy, Machiavellianism and Narcissism

When I have mentioned that I am writing this book I have frequently received this reaction: ‘Oh great, there is someone in my office who is just a nightmare. I would dearly love to know what makes them tick and how to deal with them.’ Hopefully, this part of the book will be what you are looking for if you are dealing with snakes, hyenas and other dangerous office predators. Spotting over-promoted, malicious animals has become crucial for anyone hoping to survive the office jungle. Whilst most of us are usually unthreatening – the sheep, cows, pigs and other common livestock eking out a living as best we can – there are always some hungry predators above, alongside and below you, making your life a misery.

Most toxic people do not rise very far for the simple reason that they are disliked and frequently not very good at their work. However, a significant number learn to conceal their objectionable traits or manage to worm their way under the protection of a powerful patron. These people can go all the way to the very top, usually with lamentable consequences for their colleagues.

Luckily, there has been some good-quality research* done recently into their psychology. In the chapters that follow, you will gain a fresh understanding of how their minds work. Just this, in itself, should make it easier for you to cope with them. In most cases, there will be little you can do to actually beat them at their own game but at the least, having spotted them, you will have a better chance of keeping out of their way. Since the successful ones are often hard to identify, doing so is half the battle. If nothing else, by the time you have finished this part of the book, you are likely to pity as much as hate them.

The new evidence shows that the people who most cause you harm at work are likely to have three interlinked traits: psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism. There is a simple test by which you can assess if someone is like that.

Picture the most problematic person you deal with at work. Now apply the following 12 statements to that person, scoring low (1) if you feel it does not apply much or at all, high if it applies quite a bit or a lot (5). Specifically, score it as follows:

- A. If you 'strongly disagree' that the statement applies to them, score a 1.
- B. If you 'disagree' that it applies, score 2.
- C. If you feel it maybe applies sometimes but not much, score 3.
- D. If you 'agree' it applies, score 4.
- E. If you 'strongly agree' it applies, score 5.

Here are the statements, give each one a score for the person you have in mind.

1. They tend to exploit and trick others for self-advancement.
2. They have used lies and deception to get their way.
3. They have used ingratiation to get their way.

4. They tend to manipulate others for selfish reasons.
5. They tend not to feel regretful and apologetic after having done wrong.
6. They tend not to worry about whether their behaviour is ethical.
7. They tend to be lacking in empathy and crassly unaware of the distress they can cause others.
8. They tend to take a pretty dim view of humanity, attributing nasty motives and selfishness.
9. They tend to be hungry for admiration.
10. They tend to want to be the centre of attention.
11. They tend to aim for high statuses and signs of their importance.
12. They tend to take it for granted that other people will make extra efforts to help them.

If the person scored more than 25 out of the maximum possible of 60, this chapter will tell you a great deal about them. People scoring high on the test will be conspicuous for their disagreeableness, aggression and penchant for coercive, forceful behaviour. It means that, to a greater or lesser degree, they possess what is known as the Dark Triad of personality traits: the nearer their score to 60, the more so. (The three traits being psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism.) And there is considerable overlap between the three types. To varying degrees, all tend to be socially malevolent characters with tendencies towards self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity and aggression. In situations where detection and punishment can be avoided, they adopt a short-term strategy that exploits others.

The discovery of the triad began with a study in 1998* that separately measured the degree of psychopathy and Machiavellianism in a large sample of people. It turned out that those with high scores on one test were very liable to score highly on the other. They were almost indistinguishable.

Machiavels have a great desire and capacity to seek power over others through deliberate manipulation. They lack emotional commitment

and expression in their dealings with intimates. They reject conventional morality, being largely free of ideologies or ethical belief systems. They are plausible, they do not immediately appear to be grossly disturbed or otherwise conspicuously weird.

All these traits were also found in that significant proportion of psychopaths who live in the community. Of course, some psychopaths are in prison or display signs of mental illness, which lead to psychiatric treatment. But the great majority manage to remain at large, undetected.

The classic list of primary psychopathic traits is:

- › Glibness and superficial charm
- › Grandiosity
- › Pathological lying
- › Conning and manipulation
- › Lack of remorse or guilt
- › Superficial emotions
- › Callous lack of empathy for others
- › Failure to accept responsibility

In addition, psychopaths tend to have sex lives in which they treat people as objects and often their sexual relationships are separated from the rest of their social existence. If married, they are prone to divorce, remarriage and further divorces. If criminal, they show versatility, committing a wide variety of crimes.

In a series of further studies* after the first in 1998, it was shown again that Machiavels are just as likely to have these traits as psychopaths living in the community (sometimes called ‘successful’ or ‘subclinical’ psychopaths): both groups are antisocial people who nonetheless often manage to keep out of prison and mental hospital.

In 2002, narcissism was added to the mix*, providing hard evidence of the Dark Triad of personalities. In a normal sample of 245 students, there

was considerable overlap between the three categories: if someone scored high on narcissism, they were also likely to do so on Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Each category was distinct, yet similar.

This finding was repeated in 2006*, with the interesting twist that there had been a significant increase in Machiavellianism in the previous twenty-five years: average scores on the Machiavel test were significantly higher when compared with results from studies using the same test twenty-five years ago. It was speculated that American society had become much more competitive and materialistic during those years (1980–2006), and that these traits might be necessary to succeed in this type of society. By implication, since psychopaths are so similar to Machiavels, it is likely there has been a significant growth in psychopathy too. There is also strong evidence from other studies that narcissism greatly increased during that period.

A further study explored the issue* of how such potentially unpopular people could thrive in civilised societies. After all, they are disagreeable, with exaggerated self-esteem, individualistic and competitive, and conspicuously lacking in altruism. Combined with their glib charm, the researchers suggested that they were reminiscent in many respects of the popular character James Bond. Whilst being like this carries costs, such as unpopularity and a bad reputation, they were sometimes able to extract what they wanted from their environment by being so ruthlessly self-serving.

In accord with the Bond image, it was proven that such people play fast and loose in their love lives. They are more likely to poach* partners from other couples and to be poached from themselves, so their relationships tend not to last. They are less likely to feel intimate connection with lovers*. Detailed examination of their romantic style* revealed game playing and a detached, cerebral attitude. They avoid getting too dependent, making promiscuity likelier. Loving with the head rather than heart reflected a limited capacity for empathy, although they are often desperate for love and confuse it with sex.

Their impatience and need for immediate gratification* also drives their sex lives, so that if they feel desire for someone, they have to act on it without regard for the consequences in other existing relationships. This greedy neediness means that, given the choice, triadic people prefer to take \$100 today over \$1,000 in a year's time and they are more prone to short-term hits from stimulants like alcohol, cigarettes and illegal drugs. Their lack of self-control means they are more prone to symptoms of adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (twitchy people with a short concentration span who find it hard to sit still). The psychopathic aspect of the triad explains many of these tendencies.

Yet, confusingly, because they are Machiavellian as well, they have a considerable capacity to anticipate the future. Despite being impulsive, 'buy now, pay later' people, they are also very skilled at planning ahead. It makes them proactive in trying to control their environment, adept at manipulating desired outcomes and better able to anticipate them. An ability to control others and predict circumstances is adaptive if pursuing an exploitative approach to the world. The triadic are, therefore, a strange combination of impulsiveness and manipulative calculation.

Allied to this, narcissism provides inflated self-confidence. This can rub off on others positively, at least in superficial relationships, so that their self-publicity is bought into, the razzle-dazzle of the con artist. Repeated experience of successful social exploitation makes them better at predicting what will happen next time. Their psychopathy attracts them to high-stakes, high-risk situations where being a colourful chancer and blagger is actually advantageous.

Humour can be one of their weapons*. Machiavels are prone to a negative style that puts others down or humiliates them in front of peers, using aggressively disparaging jests, or the threat thereof. Done skilfully it can undermine rivals and increase their status in the eyes of peers and bosses. Psychopaths are oblivious to the emotional impact their words have on others, sometimes providing a freedom and range to their jokes that can

make them funnier. By contrast, narcissistic individuals may make more people-pleasing jokes, perhaps excelling at mimicry, heightening their self-esteem and increasing popularity. Their narcissism gives you a feeling that they are self-absorbed show-offs, yet you may not be able to help laughing at their entertaining jokes and personae, sometimes meaning that you give them the benefit of the doubt as 'lovable rogues'. Depending on the precise mixture of the triadic traits, through trial and error, they discover the style that is maximally self-serving to them.

Childhood maltreatment explains why some people are triadic and not others. Feeling deprived in infancy, neglected as a toddler and suffering abusive, traumatic care in childhood predisposes a person to be short term in thinking, impulsive, distrustful, manipulative and self-serving, and to need the exaggerated self-esteem of narcissism. They lack identity, having been let down by their parents, invisible to them and maltreated. This lack of identity gives them fluid, plastic personalities, which are able to adapt quickly to the situation they are in, and a heightened awareness of what others may be thinking or feeling for purposes of manipulation: so they can be cerebrally empathic even whilst they are emotionally unempathic. By contrast, having needs met in early life leads to a secure pattern of relationships with others, longer-term thinking and stable romantic partnerships.

Having one of the triadic traits makes you likely to have many of the traits of the others, but in most cases, one trait is predominant. I will present each one separately therefore, including analysis of how to cope with them. Of course, if the reader has recognised themselves as triadic, what I have to say will be of considerable interest too ...