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Does Power Corrupt or Does it Attract Corrupt people?

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Power corrupts ...

Most readers would be familiar with this quote attributed to Lord Acton – “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. This is not only supported by anecdotal evidence documenting cases of people in power taking advantage of their positions to indulge in and often get away with corrupt behaviours. Many of us have come across good people whose behaviour changed for the worse once they got promoted to positions of power.

The negative impact of power on behaviour is also supported by social experiments like the one conducted by Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1971 where students randomly assigned positions of power (‘prison guards’) very soon indulged in reprehensible behaviour and violence towards those they were supposed to control (‘prisoners’ role-played by other randomly assigned students).

Power attracts corrupt people ...

In 2007, Sam McFarland and Thomas Carnahan of the University of Western Kentucky republished the same advertisement that Zimbardo used to recruit volunteers for his experiment reading as follows: “Male students needed for a psychological study of prison

life...”. They compared the volunteers with those who responded to another similar advertisement where the words “of prison life” were deleted. It turned out that those who responded to the advertisement that specified that it was a study of prison life “scored significantly higher on measures of the abuse-related dispositions of aggressiveness, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance and lower on empathy and altruism” (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6388845>).



This finding leads us to the realisation that while ‘power tends to corrupt’, it also tends to attract people who should logically not be appointed to positions of power as they share a certain profile characterised by Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – The Dark Triad, to use a term coined by psychologists Delroy Paulhus and Kevin Williams. Power can also be a magnet that attracts the ‘wrong’ kind of people.

The question that we may ask ourselves is why power attracts corrupt people. Is it because of the opportunities it offers for self-serving activities with minimum risks of sanction? Or is it because the system itself is corrupt and thus attracts people who would feel comfortable in this environment? Studies have shown that the civil service in countries which are known to be highly ethical tend to attract candidates with high integrity scores and the opposite trend has been observed in countries where the civil service is characterised by rampant corruption.

How do ill-suited people manage to win power?

In view of the above, one may wonder how some people embodying traits of the Dark Triad – Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – manage to get elected in democratic systems or how they get ‘selected’ in corporate environments or non-profit organisations. This

may be explained by the fact that in corporate environments, influential members of selection panels for key positions would also be embodiments of the Dark Triad. They help to perpetuate the model. As far as elections are concerned, evolutionary psychologists explain the phenomenon by pointing out that the human brain is hard wired for a hostile environment where groups headed by people who were perceived as more powerful (mainly because of their Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) were more likely to thrive, survive and reproduce. This environment has existed for almost 99.8 % of human history. Today, most of us live in a less hostile environment (with hardly any predators eyeing us as their next lunch) but the human brain is yet to evolve.

It is thus not surprising that most of those with autocratic tendencies usually identify a specific ethnic or religious group (or immigrants) as a major threat and position themselves as the only protector or as the only one who can restore the country to its former glory. This partly explains the popularity of many such autocrats. This also explains why some of those in positions of power sometimes pose shirtless and show off their masculinity and why reporting that they may have a serious health condition is considered a major offence and can sometimes land the journalist in jail. This is also why many of those (both male and female) campaigning for positions of power tend to project an aggressive image in public meetings by using a belligerent (and sometimes vulgar) language and tone. This may also explain some of the verbal violence during parliamentary exchanges.

It is also worth noting that psychopaths in positions of power or aspiring to get there know how to project a charming appearance – this helps them in impressing interview panels. They are also very good at hiding their psychopathy and at fooling others into believing that they are kind and compassionate. Robert Hare and Paul Babiak refer to them as ‘snakes in suits’. In his book entitled ‘Corruptible: Who Gets Power and How It Changes Us’ published in 2021, Brian Klaas discusses studies showing that the percentage of psychopaths in positions of power in corporate environments far exceeds the percentage of psychopaths in society at large.

Implications

The above analysis is far from exhaustive. It however offers clear hints on actions required to address the situation. If power tends to corrupt, there is need to be more vigilant about those who are appointed to positions of power. It is imperative to enhance the level of transparency and scrutiny to expose and sanction corruption before it gets worse. A close look at party financing and electoral expenses is required. We should empower the Electoral Supervisory Commission to strictly monitor electoral expenses so that no candidate or party spends a cent above the prescribed spending limits. And if the corruption prevailing in a system is attracting the wrong people to positions of power, strong actions have to be implemented to clean the system as far as possible following the footsteps of some Scandinavian countries so that it attracts more ethical people. Finally, we should bear in mind that while the limelight is more frequently on corrupt politicians, the latter are not corrupted by other politicians but by representatives from the corporate sector and that it takes two to tango. The practices of both protagonists should be closely scrutinised.

Conclusion

While this article has focussed mainly on the dark side of power, one has to acknowledge that not everyone who exercises power is necessarily corrupt and that power can potentially be used to achieve positive goals in the interest of the organisation or of society. Notwithstanding the exceptions, however, a clear understanding of the dark side is critical if relevant actions are to be initiated to minimize the risk of power misuse.