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David Gillespie is someone who likes to understand the things he encounters.

He's a lawyer by training,

but he has written best-selling books on the dangers of sugar, on the value of public education, and on the needs of the teenage brain.

Once upon a time, David was working as part of a small team when a new member joined.

This guy seemed great.

He was easy to get on with.

Everyone liked him.

But pretty quickly, that all changed.

One-on-one, this new member could be aggressive.

He'd play favourites and pit people against one another.

And this once happy, harmonious team became nasty and dysfunctional.

Many people quit, including David.

And he was left asking himself what on earth had happened?

What was going on with this guy?

And how had the rest of them got him so wrong at the start?

David's new book is called Toxic at Work,

Surviving Your Psychopathic Workmates

from the Dominant Bullies to the Charming Manipulators.

Hi, David.

G'day, Sarah.

Take me back to that experience of yours.

What were things like at work before he came along?

It was a very dynamic team.

There were specialists in most areas involved in this team and very little overlap between our works.

And so we had to trust each other to get the job done.

There was no real ability to be looking over each other's shoulders and that would just slow us all down.

We were working fast.

We trusted each other.

We loved going to work.

People would put in huge hours

and not even realise they were doing it.

It was a classic over-the-top startup-type team.

And, yeah, it was really fun to work there.

And what were your first impressions of this guy

when they arrived?

He was great.

Absolutely terrific.

You know, he looked like he fitted in perfectly.

He said all the right things.

He believed all the right things.

He seemed to have exactly the right attitude.

And was there, then, a moment where you suddenly saw him differently or did it kind of happen by degrees?

This far beyond it, I can't remember an exact moment,

but I can describe in general what it felt like,

which was that there were instances where suddenly

the message he was giving didn't match his behaviour,

where he would do things that seemed to hurt the team

or hurt individuals in the team

or even hurt the interests of the business that we were in.

And it was really hard to explain.

You'd look at what he'd done and you'd say,

why did you do that?

Why did you attack that guy?

He's done nothing wrong.

Sure, maybe he stuffed something up,

but he doesn't deserve to be attacked

and he certainly doesn't deserve it in public.

And then what started to happen

was people started to not trust each other in the team.

People started to wonder,

if I tell that guy that I have reservations about this other fellow,

is that going to go back to him?

Is he part of that guy's team now?

Am I going to be the next guy that gets attacked in a meeting?

And that started to drain the trust out of the team.

Sort of, you know, it was once famously said,

I'm not sure by who, that trust is like oxygen.

When it's there, you don't notice it.

But when it's gone, it's a disaster.

You're gasping for your life.

What did you think you were dealing with at the time?

I had no idea.

It was really perplexing.

My overwhelming state of mind was confusion.

I knew I had to suddenly walk on eggshells in a workplace

that previously I felt everyone had everyone's back.

I knew that I was at risk of being attacked

for no apparent reason.

And I, like everyone else in that team,
probably behaved in a protective fashion,
which was keep my head down,
try and stay out of this guy's way and trust nobody.
So as time went on and you started reflecting on this experience
and the behaviours that you witnessed
and sort of found yourself somehow complicit in,
how was it that the category of psychopath
seemed to fit your experience?

It didn't at first.

I really had no idea.

So I started looking around on the internet
and trying to find anything that would explain this.
And imagine you're goofing like a crazy person at work.
That's right.

Why do I hate my job suddenly?

That kind of thing, you know,
and eventually stumbled across various articles.
It started to coalesce into there's a type of person that does this.
The things that I was experiencing
seemed to be being described by lots of different people
in lots of different types of workplaces.
And they were calling them all kinds of things,
you know, narcissists, bullies, micromanagers, sociopaths,
very few of them called them psychopaths.
But that was the kind of theme of it.

And, but what I was noticing
was that all of the behaviours they were describing were identical.
They could have been describing
the person I was working with.
What are the key ones?

So the thing about them initially being really charming
and nice and great to be around,
that seemed to be a common fact.
The first time anyone met the person they were now worried about,
they were the best thing since sliced bread.
The thing about the private meetings, the one-on-ones,
where the person suddenly goes from really nice guy
to really nasty, vicious person
and then flips back again as soon as the private meeting's over,
the perception in the workplace about there are people there
who say, I've got no problem with Bob, he's fine.
I don't know what on earth you're talking about,

and yet you're feeling hell on the inside.
So those sorts of traits plus the constant lying.
So that's one that comes across throughout every story
about psychopaths, is they lie all the time.
Psychopath is a term, David, that's, you know,
associated with serial killers, with sadistic offenders.
That wasn't true of this guy that you were working with.
No, no, not at all.
In fact, just the opposite.
So psychopath, we get that association probably from a movie
that talked about a psychotic rather than a psychopath,
which was Psycho.
And before Psycho, which was in the early 1950s,
psychopath was commonly used in the psychology profession
to describe what I'm talking about.
They switched from that to sociopath
after that movie was released because of the confusion.
People hear the word psycho when they think psychopath,
but what we're really describing is a pathology
that doesn't have anything to do with chopping people up.
It just happens that a fair percentage of people
who do chop people up also have this pathology.
That's not a Venn diagram,
I want to spend too much time thinking about.
So you've described what it was like to work with someone
with these traits.
Flip it around for me.
How does someone who is a psychopath see other people?
Who are we to them?
We're not people, is the short way of describing it.
And this is the bit that is really, really hard
for us to understand in the first place
and then continue to apply
because our default position is that people are people
and that people should be treated
the way we would expect to be treated.
Psychopaths cannot see the world that way.
It's not that they're choosing not to see the world that way,
it's that they cannot see the world that way.
Everybody else in the world is an object.
Just as a stapler on your desk or a computer,
they're just objects, they're inanimate objects,
tools to be used to produce better outcomes
for the psychopath.

And they see us that way all the time
and it is really hard for us to get that through our heads.
What's motivating someone who sees the rest of the world
like an object?
The same thing that motivates all of us,
which is self-interest,
but our self-interest is tempered by consideration of others.
They have no such consideration.
What about the qualities like, you know,
shame or remorse that guide our behavior so often?
How do they figure for someone like this?
Well, a psychopath is incapable of feeling shame or remorse
because to do so would be to admit
that they'd done something wrong.
And the biology that underlies psychopathy
does not permit them to learn from mistakes.
And if you can never learn from a mistake,
you can never have done something wrong.
So if you can't do anything wrong,
how on earth can you feel shame or remorse for it?
You describe some tests that were done using electric shocks.
Yeah.
Tell me about those.
So, you know... That's a slightly psychopathic laugh you have.
Well, and... Reflecting on that.
And less enlightened times.
I always enjoy reading studies from the 70s
because ethical controls were probably a little less tight.
And so you can read some really interesting human studies
that now would never be allowed to happen.
But some studies were done in the 70s on prisoners.
And what they did was that they used a standardized test
to divide up prisoners based on whether they were likely
to be psychopaths or whether they weren't.
And they matched them up by the type of crime they'd done.
So they weren't having it affected by what sort of crime it was.
And then they got a matched group also
from the general population who were not prisoners.
And what they did was that they put them in a room.
They said to them,
we're going to give you an electric shock.
We're going to count down.
And after eight counts,
we're going to give you a really, really nasty electric shock.

It won't kill you, but it will hurt.
Now, people probably at this point were wondering
whether the 10 bucks was worth it.
But they did it.
So they did it.
And you can imagine yourself sitting in the chair,
you know, eight, nine, et cetera.
I feel anxious to hearing you describe this.
And you know that when you hit zero,
it's going to be a nasty electric shock.
Unsurprisingly, when normal people sit in that chair
and have that happen,
all the tests they've got,
so they've got skin sensors on them
and all that sort of thing,
all the measures of anxiety go off the chart.
You are hearing the countdown.
You know it's going to hurt.
You know it's going to happen in one second.
People get really anxious.
It's even worse when they do it the second time
and the third time and the fourth time.
Normal people really struggle with this.
They did the same thing to psychopaths.
They couldn't care less.
There was no anxiety about the countdown.
So what's that saying?
Well, the researchers interpreted it as a lack of fear.
A probably more accurate thing
is that they were not capable of calculating
that something bad was going to happen.
They knew it would happen,
just like everyone else, they're not idiots.
But the part of their brain that registers that
and produces anxiety as a response,
which is necessary for our survival
to make us stop doing things which will hurt,
was not connected in the psychopaths.
And what it tells us is that psychopaths
cannot be punished.
Meaning all punishment revolves around a threat.
You know, the idea is that I don't have to punish you
if I can just threaten you and that will stop you doing it.
If you're a psychopath, that doesn't work.

You compared trust to oxygen earlier
and trust is very closely related to empathy.
One of my favorite ways of thinking about empathy
is that cartoon where two young fish are asked
by an older fish, how's the water?
And one young fish turns to the other and says,
what the hell is water?
Because empathy like air is something that,
or like water, if you're a fish,
is something that just surrounds us.
It's something we're not even aware of.
We take it for granted.
How early did empathy turn up
as a marker of human societies, do you think?
Is it something that we've always had as humans?
We've always had.
We probably haven't called it that.
So if you think about humans as,
we are the apex predator on this planet,
but we shouldn't be.
We haven't got sharp teeth.
We haven't got talons.
We haven't got claws.
We haven't got venom.
We've got no armor.
Essentially, we're meat on feet.
And you'd think that is the apex predator.
Because in a one-on-one with a crocodile or a great white,
you might beat them, but I would struggle.
But you might say, well, how on earth is that the apex predator?
And the secret ingredient for us
is that we are the only species on this planet
that can work well with strangers.
We're the only species that can work well
with members of our species who we are not related to.
And the only reason we can do that
is because we have empathy.
In other words, we trust other humans,
our default position is a stranger is trustworthy.
That allows us to cooperate in large groups
and defeat any other predator.
What role do mirror neurons play in empathy?
They're essential because a mirror neuron allows us
to automatically communicate in sub one second time frame.

So at light speed, we can communicate.
We don't have to calculate anything.
We can sense that someone we know is sensing danger
by micro movements that they make,
noises that they make, the way they breathe,
the way they move their head.
They don't have to say anything.
We get that communication in less than a second.
It's been measured, actually, in baseball studies.
What do you mean? How?
So we have to know.
So, well, baseball has a lot of money for this kind of work.
But what they do is that they want to know
what's the difference between someone who hits a pitch
reliably and someone who doesn't.
And it turns out it's that sub one second.
Now, baseball takes at full speed about 300 milliseconds
to get from the pitcher to the bat.
In that timeframe, good hitters know which way the ball
is going and can hit it.
Bad hitters can't.
There's been extensive work on this.
And it turns out that those good hitters micro responses
are reading the pitcher.
We do that all the time in every day social interaction,
and that's what our neuro neurons do.
Do we need to be in one another's physical presence
for those neuro neurons to fire?
It helps, because there's a lot going on
that you just can't sense.
So obviously, if you're on the phone,
all you've got is the voice.
And that's probably a very, very small amount
of the communication.
If you can see the person say on a video conference,
you've got more. You've got facial movements.
But it's still not in 3D,
and you can't see the rest of their body.
You can't hear the micro noises
that the microphones are filtering out.
You can't see how the rest of their body moves.
So ideally, we are evolved for in-person interaction,
and that's where we work best.
And I mean, baseball's one example,

but conversations is another.
That's why Richard and I always want to do our conversations face to face.
It's such a different kind of interaction.
Absolutely, because we're reading so much more than what's coming out of the person's mouth.
So lots of animals have these mirror neurons.
I mean, they're what allow starlings to fly in formation or fish to move.
You know, the schools of fish to move through the water.
But our species takes the information from these mirror neurons one step further.
What else is going on in our brains when it comes to empathy?
So humans, we think relatively uniquely, not quite uniquely, but close, have evolved a set of neurons called von Economo neurons, which are very, very long neurons for the human brain, which connect our amygdala to our prefrontal cortex, which is our supervisory processing, our most recently evolved part of our brain.
So it's connecting our primitive part of our brain to our evolved super processing part of our brain.
And it's taking the feedback from those motor neurons and using it to calculate information about the way another human will react.
So it is a super socializing neuron, if you like.
We have a capability to assess the intent of other humans using that motor neuron facility.
So it's not just good for picking baseball pitches.
It's good for picking, can I trust this person or not?
And are we born with these neurons fully functioning?
No, actually not at all.
So human babies have no von Economo neurons.
So the end result of that is, by the way, if you don't have von Economo neurons, you're a psychopath.
What are you saying about babies, David?
Well, anyone who's ever had anything to do with a baby knows what I'm talking about.
Charming.
Well, very charming until they don't get what they want.
And then they're crying and yelling and screaming.
So everyone who's had anything to do with a baby

knows they're dealing with a psychopath.
And the biochemistry backs that up.
They don't have von Economo neurons.
By the time a child is four years old,
if they are a normal child, that is not a psychopath,
they have a full set of adult von Economo neurons.
So they have full empathy by the age of four.
That's so interesting.
So the structure must be present,
but the development happens what?
Through socialization or just through age.
If we were the answer to that, we'd be Nobel laureates.
We don't know why one in 20 people don't develop them,
but we do know that they don't.
And you said that we're the only or one of the few animals.
So there are other species who have these.
There are other species that have them
at nowhere near the density of humans.
Other species have this kind of neuron,
but they often co-opted for something else.
So for example, dogs have a similar neuron,
which they co-opt to significantly enhance
their sense of smell.
Birds have a similar neuron,
which they use to create a much, much better eyesight.
And it's a differentiation neuron.
So it helps us differentiate.
It helps us get really, really fine differentiation
in smell, sight, and in humans' case, emotions.
How did a computer programmer called Lee Holloway
help scientists understand the role
of these von Economo neurons?
Well, the theory is that if you don't have von Economo neurons,
you're not capable of empathy
and therefore not capable of trust.
And therefore a psychopath is a person
who doesn't have von Economo neurons.
Now, when you cut up psychopath's brains after they're dead
and count the von Economo neurons,
yes, it's better to wait till after they're dead.
Definitely.
Otherwise, you're in that category yourself.
That's right.
And count them, you come to the conclusion,

yes, that's what's missing.
Now, to prove this, it will be really excellent
if you could come up with a disease state
that affected von Economo neurons
that converted normal people into psychopaths.
And that's what happened with Lee Holloway,
who's probably one of the most famous examples of this.
He had something called PICS disease.
And he is the founder of a massive internet company
that started out in much the way I described my workplace.
A diverse team of individuals working really hard
for an output.
He was regarded as one of the best bosses going around,
super supportive, a mentor to the younger players,
mentor to the developers,
always cooperating with a team,
could be absolutely trusted.
And then suddenly, he couldn't.
Suddenly, he turned into what his wife described
as an asshole at home, at work.
He just turned into a state
that would match very, very closely
the description of psychopath.
So how did anyone realize
he wasn't just being a class A jerk?
Well, it took a while.
And that's probably the distressing part for his family
is that at first, they thought,
this guy's just, I don't know what's wrong with him.
Maybe midlife crisis, whatever it is.
And so when he got divorced and left his job.
Yeah, he's married at communications work,
person in charge of communications at the office
within a year of divorcing.
And it still got worse and worse and worse,
less and less supportive, angry at work,
bullying employees, et cetera.
Eventually, they convinced him to undergo a brain scan
that picked up that it was likely
that he was suffering from something called
frontotemporal dementia, the behavioral variant of that,
which affects, it's the most common dementia
in people under 50.
And it destroys the Von Economo neurons.

And what they found is that once you've lost 75%
of your Von Economo neurons, you're essentially a psychopath.
Was he aware that he had changed in that sort of way?
Like, what's it like to be that person?
He was, so he would frequently,
when people would point it out to him, he would apologize,
but it wouldn't change his behavior.
So he was able to stand back and say,
yes, this is not good behavior,
because he had a benchmark for what good behavior was.
He'd been a normal person his whole life.
And in fact, there was an even better example,
a fellow by the name of Howard Glick,
who actually published a blog
where he recorded these impressions.
And he actually said,
I just wanna go back to being a normal caring human.
He recognized in himself
that he knew he was doing the wrong thing
and couldn't care less.
What an awful, just like a horror movie,
that sort of state,
to feel yourself losing your humanity almost.
Yeah, now a psychopath never feels that
because they've never had it in the first place.
But that disease is really instructive
because it allows normal people to give us insight
into the way it feels to be a psychopath.
So these qualities that are notably absent
in the people you're calling psychopaths,
most notably trust and empathy,
researchers have worked out different sorts of tests,
sorts of philosophical or practical tests
to try to assess where people are
and when we should trust people and when we shouldn't.
There's a famous one called the prisoner's dilemma.
Can you give me a sketch of that
or one that makes sense for our conversation?
So the prisoner's dilemma is difficult to describe
without seeing it written down on a piece of paper.
I'll describe the original dilemma,
which was that they would say,
what you're going to do is you imagine two people
who've been arrested for a crime,

they're put in separate interview rooms
and they're told that if they admit to the crime,
they'll get off scot-free,
but they've got to implicate the other person
and they'll go to prison for three years.
And if they don't admit to the crime,
then they will go to prison for two years
and so will the other person.
And both of them are told this.
So you're working out whether to risk
the other person dobbling you in or not.
That's right.
And I find that difficult to picture in my head.
So, and I was listening to the radio recently in Brisbane here
and a commercial radio station had a game
where they pitted people against each other
for a cash prize of \$20,000.
And in this game, what the person had to do
was remain kissing a pile of \$20,000.
And so they had...
The ABC would never do this.
No.
We don't have that kind of money anyway.
That's the first problem.
So they'd stand there against this wall
and they picked 20 people and they're all doing it.
And they went for days and days, as you would imagine.
And then eventually they were left with just two people
still attached to the money and they were not giving up.
And the segment needed to end.
So they decided to end it with a prisoner's dilemma.
And what they said to the people was,
on the count of three,
you are going to have to decide
either to remain attached or to pull back.
Now, both of you have to do it on the count of three.
You have to make a decision.
If you stay attached and the other person pulls back,
you win the \$20,000 and they get nothing.
And vice versa.
If you both stay attached, then we'll split the money.
If you both step back,
then we'll give it to someone in the crowd.
Could be the other way around.

They're saying that if you stay attached,
if you both stay attached, then it goes to someone else.
If one of you stays attached and one stands back,
the one who stays attached gets it.
And if you both stand back, you get half each.
That's right.
They're half each, yes.
What did they do? What did they realise?
Yeah, what did they do?
In the end, they both pulled back at the same time.
So they both got half?
They both got half. They trusted each other to pull back.
They trusted each other that they would pull back
and they would get half.
And that's a big call.
Because one of them could have said,
you know what?
I'm just going to stay attached.
And then I get all the money.
They couldn't do it because they'd just spent a week
talking to each other, getting to know each other,
understanding their lives,
understanding how much they needed this money.
And each of them needed the money badly.
But neither of them was prepared to do over the other person
just to take away the money.
Their reputation mattered to them.
So they had a trust for one another
and for how each other would behave.
But as you said, we can trust even strangers
in a scenario like that.
Yeah, we do.
Automatically.
And scientists have proven this
with a very simple computer game called Hit for Tat
where they model, trust and ask us,
what is your strategy when you are put in a position
like the Prisoner's Dilemma?
This is Conversations with Sarah Konoski.
Hear more conversations anytime on the ABC Listen app
or go to [abc.net.au slash conversations](http://abc.net.au/slash/conversations).
So, David, this game, this Hit for Tat model about trust,
how does it work?
Well, it's based on the Prisoner's Dilemma.

And when we're talking about that radio show thing,
the people had to trust each other to pull back.
If the other one had broken the trust,
they would have ended up with nothing.
So the rational thing to do,
if you were entirely selfish and you looked at that
and said, what is the rational thing to do?
The rational thing to do is stay attached
and hope that the other person's stupid enough to trust you.
That's how a psychopath would view the world
and that's exactly what they would do every single time.
Now, scientists wanted to see what happens
if you iterate that, like have them play that game
over and over and over again for money.
Now, when they tried that with human secretaries
in the Rand Corporation, what happened was that they,
because they have a reputation in their own workplace
and the money wasn't large, it was a dollar a time,
they would always share the money.
They cared about the reputation.
They would always trust the other person
to care about their reputation and they would do it.
So scientists wanted to see,
well, is that the ideal strategy?
To trust.
To trust.
Is that the ideal strategy?
Does it work when you do it at scale?
So they did computer models of this
and there was a worldwide competition to say,
what is the solution to the prisoner's dilemma
on an iterated basis over and over and over again
that gets a person the most money?
Does the psychopath solution work?
Does the other solution where you trust each other work,
which by the way, they called tit for tat
or does something else work?
So in this competition, they ran it.
They found that the strategy that worked was tit for tat.
And the way tit for tat works is,
initially you trust the other person.
If the other person betrays that trust,
then you betray them the next time round.
As soon as they come back to being trustworthy,

you trust them again.
So you're mirroring their behavior.
Exactly.
You just copy their behavior,
but you start with trust.
You default to trust, then copy.
That worked.
It won every time against hundreds of alternative programs
that were all kinds of complexities
about do it three times in a row, then trust
and all that kind of thing.
Or just do it the way a psychopath,
which is never trust.
The one that always worked regardless was tit for tat.
And the scientists concluded
that that is actually a really good model
for the way our world works,
which is that we default to trust.
I want to ask you about how some of these traits
are exemplified in an American
who started as a businessman
and went on to become president.
Tell me about a TV interview
that Donald Trump did on the morning of 9-11.
Yeah, so then Donald was just a real estate developer
in New York.
And a friend of his, a fellow who'd previously worked for him,
had this radio gig on the morning that 9-11 occurred.
And Donald had been scheduled to do this interview.
So when the time came, he phoned in as arranged.
Now at that time, the first tower had already been hit.
And he was unfolding outside his office windows.
He could see it from his office in New York.
So could the interviewer.
And so everything was interrupted
and he started talking about,
they started talking about that.
And the interviewer said,
what are your thoughts on this tower?
And Donald said, well, I have the tower next door.
I can't remember the address.
It used to be the second highest building in New York,
but now I guess it's the highest.
And that is astounding.

It's even-

It is so astounding that as he's watching people die,
this catastrophe unfold,
he's saying, I've now got the tallest building in New York.
And it's instructive as to the way
someone with this pathology thinks,
which is while you and I are horrified
by the human tragedy that's occurring in front of us
and feeling every second of it as if we were there,
Donald was there watching it, experiencing it,
but he was obsessed by details
that most of us wouldn't care less about
because we're so horrified by the emotional impact.
Well, he was obsessed by the detail
of his own prominence as a consequence.
He found the one detail in that whole thing
that enhanced him.

So as you said, this is before he was president,
but what are some of the striking instances
of emotional misfire once he becomes
the president of the United States?
The one that struck me the most,
I mean, this was one that gathered a lot of attention
at the time is when he was throwing the paper towels
into the audience.

So there was a terrible natural disaster in Puerto Rico
and he went there to help in the aid relief.
After telling them that it wasn't that big a deal,
and then there's video of him throwing paper towels
into the audience.

And he was asked about it afterwards
and saying that's really flippant and callous
to these people and have no power,
have had their homes destroyed, need these supplies
and you're there like you're opera distributing prizes.
And he never understood what was wrong with that, never.
He acknowledged that everybody else
thought there was something wrong with that,
but couldn't for the life of him think
what was wrong with that?

I think not long after that,
he was meeting with people who'd survived a mass shooting
and it was filmed that he had these little notes,
like ask questions or show concern.

Show concern.

So you say that psychopaths don't feel empathy,
they're missing the part of the brain
that allows humans to feel empathy,
but can they pretend that they're feeling empathy?

Absolutely, they can and they do
and they're very, very good at it.

From about the age of four, remember,
they aren't like the rest of us and they know it.
Very, very quickly they come to the conclusion
that there's something different about the way they think.

They don't see it as a weakness,
they don't see it as a problem,
but they do see it as potentially causing them issues.

So I give an example in the book,
a completely made up one of a child
that falls out of a tree house and their leg is broken
because of the actions of a psychopathic child
and the child comes up and notices the bone
sticking out of the skin and says,
oh, that's really interesting.

You know, I've never seen something like that,
that's really curious.

Rather like the way Donald behaved about the building,
you know, this is an interesting fact.

Then the child looks around and notices
all of the parents gathered around who are utterly distraught
at what they're seeing, the child is harmed,
the kids are all in tears
and that psychopath is thinking,
wow, what is wrong with these people?

And then very quickly realizes,
I better start behaving like this
or I'm gonna be cast out from this group of people.

So psychopaths learn very, very quickly,
they have to learn to imitate empathy,
they have to pretend.

The difference is that when they do that,
it's a manual override,
they have to think about it and then do it.
Whereas we're doing it in sub one second speed,
that gap is something we can pick up.
Is that something that is something that's true
around say the charming element,

the charming aspect of these kinds of people as well?

Is that something that's deliberately put on
and can switch on and off?

I mean, Trump I guess could be a good example of that.

Absolutely.

And there are many stories of Trump
from people who've met him in person
who say, this is an incredibly charming fellow.

This is, you know, you could look at him on television
and you could see him doing things

like throwing the paper towels

or having the cheat notes to remember to be empathetic.

And you would say, how could anyone ever vote for this person?

But if you meet him in person,

according to many, many accounts of people who have,
he's extraordinarily charming.

He is very, very good at telling you what you want to hear.

And all psychopaths are,
they're very good at reading what we want
and reflecting it back to us.

I think the Washington Post fact checking department,

you mentioned listed 30,753 lies

that Trump told during his presidency.

But those lies varied from the really consequential things
like losing the election

to things that seemed not to matter really at all.

Yeah.

Are psychopaths even aware that they're lying?

Is it something they're doing deliberately?

Yes and no.

They're saying things which they know may not be true,
but they don't care that they're not true.

It's, we have a problem with lying

because as soon as we lie,

we know we are risking the trust that others are putting in us.

Psychopaths don't believe anyone trusts them

because they don't trust anybody else.

And so they have absolutely no problem

saying whatever gets them through that moment in time.

Now, maybe it's true, maybe it isn't, what does it matter?

It's what needs to be said at that moment.

Now, the Washington Post was counting him

because he's a president.

And so it's important to fact check these things.

But he's not lying any more than any other psychopath does.
They lie like we breathe.
Lying is not important to them,
whereas to us it's critical.
And do they believe their own lives?
Well, they believe whatever they need to believe
at that moment in time to get them the result they want.
We care because trust is critical to us
and we default to trust.
They know that, so they'll tell us whatever
they think we want to hear.
So if we imagine how this might play out in our own workplace,
imagine that we're not in the White House, but somewhere else.
I think you said there's this millisecond
where the rest of us can pick up
that someone's performing something
rather than it being genuine.
Is this an area that we need to trust our guts on more,
our instinct?
Most people, when you ask them
about the first time they met a psychopath,
will say, when I first met that person,
they were really incredible.
You know, they were perfect for the job.
Often you hear this from interviewers, like,
I employed this person because they were perfect.
They were better than any other candidate by miles.
You know, they said everything I needed to hear.
They understood our business.
They understood what we were doing.
They were so perfect, I didn't check their references.
Bad idea with a psychopath
because every reference is probably made up
because they don't mind lying.
And they know that we default to trust.
But that instant piece where they are talking to you
the first time and giving you the full charm offensive,
you may feel uneasy.
And that's what people say is there was something off
about the person.
I can't pin it down.
There was just something off.
You've got to learn to trust that because it's right.
That's your mirror and your own's telling you

what you're hearing is not the same as what we're seeing.
So if these kind of behaviors were happening
with a colleague of mine,
not that that would ever happen at the ABC,
but just imagine that it was.
There was someone who at first seemed to be perfect
for a role and then were being vicious one-on-one
or spreading lies or misrepresenting themselves.
My instinct would be to go to a manager
or to someone higher up the chain, someone in HR.
What's your advice?
Don't do that.
They have a lot of time, psychopaths,
because they make decisions instantaneously
that wouldn't take the rest of us months
because we worry about things.
We worry about consequences.
We worry about getting the decision wrong.
We need all the data.
Psychopaths aren't troubled by any of that.
They can make a decision instantaneously
because they know they are always right.
When you're infallible, decision making is easy.
That gives you a lot of time.
And what they use that time for
is to micromanage others
and to make sure that those above them in the organisation
have an entirely positive view of them.
So believe me, if you go round a psychopath
to their manager or to HR,
the ground will already have been prepared
and that person will know
before you even get into the meeting
that you are the problem, not the psychopath.
What could I do instead, David?
Well, it's not easy, okay?
The solution to dealing with a psychopath
is often just to get out of there.
It's about, imagine a scenario
where you walk into a junkyard
and you face a vicious dog guarding the junkyard.
Now, the dog is not attacking you,
but they're snarling and they're growling at you
and you've got to decide how you're going to deal with that.

The dog is the psychopath.
Now, in what you do with that dog,
there's a couple of things you wouldn't do.
You wouldn't decide, you know what?
The way I'm going to solve this
is I'm going to fight the dog.
But strangely, that's what most of us do
when confronted with a psychopath.
Or try to pat it, befriend it.
Befriend it.
This dog's just not understanding me.
The dog's not understanding that I'm a friend of its owner
and I just need to be friends with the dog.
So I'll go up and I'll pat him on the head
and I'll be his friend.
The dog will rip your arm off.
And that's what we do with psychopaths.
Our instinct in dealing with psychopaths
is to try and help them understand our position.
Try and help them understand
how they can work with us to solve this problem.
The psychopath doesn't care any more than the dog does.
The solution to that scenario
is protect yourself while you back carefully
out of that yard.
And what does protection look like in a workplace?
So in a workplace,
it means do not give
any information that can be used against you.
So do not provide the psychopath
with information about your life
that can be leveraged against you.
Do not tell them that your wife works here or there.
Do not tell them that your child has an illness.
Do not tell them anything about your life.
Every little bit of it.
And they will be charming and lovely to you
to prize this information from you.
Every little bit of it will be used against you.
Do not do that.
Do not attack them.
Do not fight with them.
Do not try to be their friend.
Simply respond robotically to the tasks

you are asked to perform by them.
Record what they say in writing,
preferably with a confirmation in writing,
and quietly and professionally do your job.
No matter how stupid it is,
the thing that they've asked you to do,
if they're your boss and it's not illegal, you do it.
David, this just goes so against the grain
of what I would want to do in this scenario.
I would want to confront them or I'd want to take it higher.
I hate the idea of sort of kowtowing
to someone whose behaviour, I think, is like this.
We have that instinct.
All of us do.
And it is absolutely the wrong thing to do.
Our instinct is there must be justice in this world.
There must be justice.
If I just take it to his boss,
he'll understand how I'm right and he's wrong.
And that's not the way this works.
I tell story after story about psychopaths
who've gone through entire careers,
leaving the wreckage of thousands and thousands
of unemployed people and destroyed companies
behind them in their wake,
and there has never been any injustice
until right at the end when an external police force
like the Securities Commission or the actual police
comes in and who don't care about the organisation's reputation
or the person involved,
they just look at it objectively and they deal with it.
That's the only point.
But that doesn't help the 100,000 people
who lost their jobs before that.
So you're focusing on your own well-being
and your own sort of professional safety
rather than the justice, the right or the wrong situation?
Absolutely. The justice is for the organisation.
The organisation has to either be able
to solve this problem themselves
and get rid of the psychopath or control them or not.
But that's not your problem.
What if you're the owner of the junkyard with the vicious dog?
What if you're the boss rather than the colleague

of someone like this?

What's a good attitude or approach to take

if you think there's someone in your team

who's got some of these red flags?

How do you even know?

Well, it's going to be hard to know

because one of the things about psychopaths

is that if you or someone that they need something from,

they will maintain the mask with you.

They will be pleasant. They will be fabulous.

And you will struggle to believe

that there's anything wrong with that person

and you will readily accept anyone else coming

and saying that there's something wrong with them.

You'll say, well, you're the problem.

This guy is fabulous. He is incredible

because they work very, very hard

on maintaining that facade, managing upwards.

If you're the boss, first of all, you have to be prepared.

You have to design a system that doesn't allow you

to be fooled by that.

And there are some great examples of that,

one of them being Costco,

where the CEO of that organisation maintained a policy

of always visiting every store

in his entire chain every year

and talking to the people on the floor

and having them know that whatever they told him

would be taken seriously.

And that's a way,

having a maintaining an open door policy

that allows people at the lowest parts of your organisation

to talk to you and be believed

is a critical method for controlling psychopaths.

So it's that trust element again.

You can't just trust the person who's directly reporting to you

because they're probably the psychopath.

And by the way, the stats on this are really interesting,

just like prisons.

So in prisons, we know that about 30% to 40%

of the population in a prison is a psychopath.

We also know that a similar percentage of the people

in the upper ranks of every organisation are psychopaths.

That's what I see.

I mean, I just, I want to ask you,
it's you give the example of prisons
because I guess that one of the dangers it seems to me
in using this term is that
if we take this category of psychopath seriously
and say that there are some people who were born this way,
it's a neurological defect and there's no changing it
and you can't trust them and they're not going to change.
There's no motivation.
I mean, isn't there a risk that we get a lot of people wrong there?
Like a lot of kids who we say,
well, there's no hope trying to rehabilitate you
or keep you out of prison, for example.
But look, you're a psychopath.
We're just going to lock you away.
I just worry about the social consequences
of some of these ideas.
That isn't the solution, by the way.
So I talk about one example in the United States
called Mendota, which is a juvenile detention facility
where they took the psychopaths
out of the normal prison population.
By the way, psychopaths use their charm in prison as well.
And the average psychopath is going to be back and forth
to prison two and a half times in the time
that someone who isn't a psychopath convicted
of the same crime would be.
So they're out three times within the normal term
because they can charm a parole board
because their charm is a powerful weapon.
But they have figured out a way in the Mendota example
of controlling psychopaths.
Normal prisons don't work.
You can't threaten a psychopath.
You can't punish them.
It doesn't work.
What they found is that rewarding them does.
So they implemented a program of basically frequent flyer points.
Every time a psychopath does something correct
or some behavior they like,
they rewarded them with points
that eventually got them privileges.
They found that that was a persistent benefit.
After those people were released from prison,

many fewer of them ended up back in prison.
They found a method of controlling them
which involved rewarding the psychopath,
rather like when you're facing the dog,
give him a treat to distract him while you get out of there.
I guess, though, the question still remains for me
is who gets to choose who's a psychopath
and who's in charge of that big category on someone.
It's not like there's a blood test we can do.
No, there isn't.
The ability to see von Economo neurons on MRIs
is getting very, very good.
MRIs are now getting to the point where you can actually tell
whether a person has sufficient density
of von Economo neurons or not.
The trick is getting your psychopathic boss
just to keep his head in an MRI machine.
Yeah, we've been talking about trust and about empathy.
I wonder the effects of you on you of doing this research,
of looking into this, of looking at all of these case studies.
I mean, do you think of yourself now as a less trusting person
than you were before you began thinking so deeply
about psychopaths?
The value to me in doing this is it's really, really hard
for us to imagine the way the world looks to a psychopath
because we default to trust.
We can't help defaulting to trust.
We can't help believing that every other human
has basically good intentions.
We play tit for tat.
Our first option is always to trust the other human.
And being able to put yourself in that mind space
where that isn't the way you feel,
where every other human is just there
to make your life better.
If they deliver a benefit to you, all good.
If they don't, throw them away.
Being able to think that way
and continuously think that way is helpful,
particularly when you encounter someone like this.
David, you've given me a lot to think about.
I'm gonna be looking at all my colleagues
in a slightly new light.
Thank you for being my guest on Conversations.

[Transcript] Conversations / The psychopaths among us

Pleasure, Sarah.

MUSIC

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