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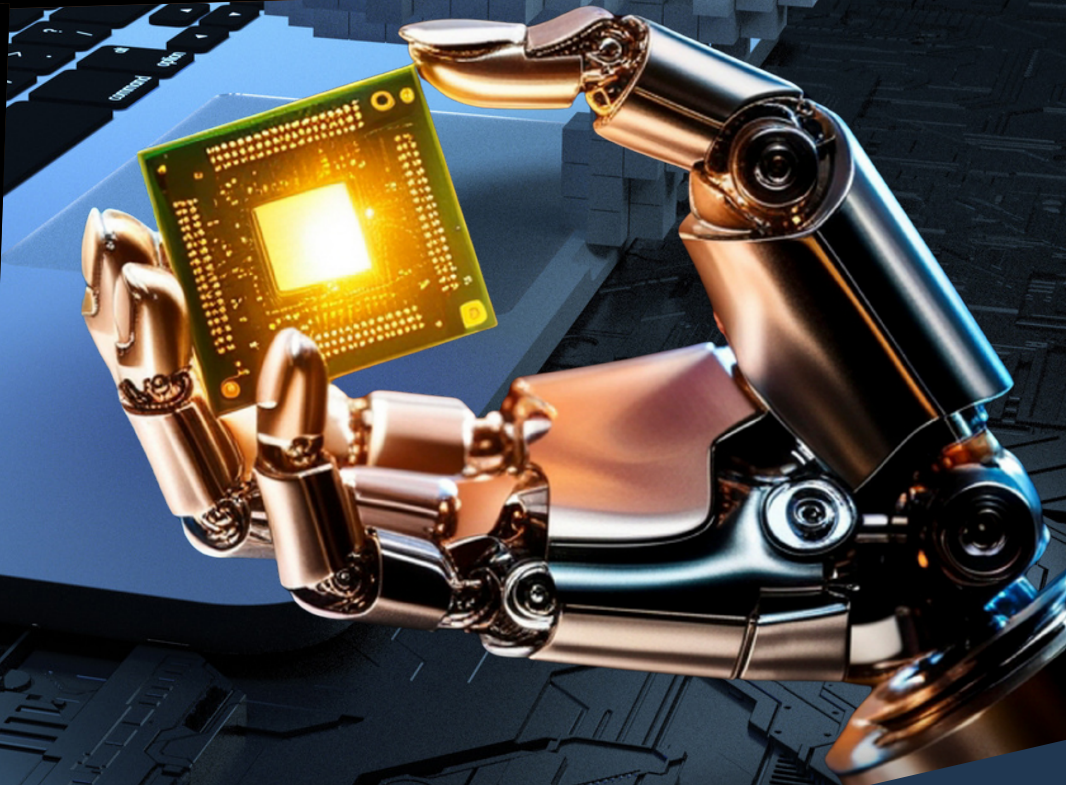


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ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEANS: MACHIAVELLIANISM AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOUR

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THE MACHIAVELLIAN PROFILE

Machiavellianism is part of the well-established personality framework in psychology known as the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). It derives its name from the political philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli, which emphasizes the use of manipulation and deceit to achieve power and success. This topic is especially relevant today since Machiavellian tendencies in the workplace can weaken work ethics, erode trust, and encourage counterproductive work behaviours that harm both employees and organizational effectiveness. Table 1 presents the characteristics of respective traits within the Dark Triad. While narcissists seek admiration and validation, and psychopaths exhibit impulsivity and lack of remorse, Machiavellians prioritize control, manipulation, and emotional detachment (Jones & Paulhus, 2013; LeBreton, Shiverdecker & Grimaldi, 2018). Machiavellianism distinguishes itself from other socially aversive traits (i.e., narcissism and psychopathy) by three primary features. First, Machiavellians manipulate others using exploitative and deceitful behaviours to achieve set goals (Kessler et al., 2010). Such behaviours are directed at influencing or controlling others to ensure their personal self-interests are realized. Second, Machiavellians are marked by emotional detachment. Although they may appear empathetic at times, this is often a calculated display of emotion, part of a careful plan to achieve desired outcomes (Wastell & Booth, 2003). Machiavellian has been associated with careful planning and patience in achieving desired outcomes and does not necessarily involve impulsivity or thrill-seeking experiences. Third, those who are high in Machiavellianism believe that moral rules are flexible when personal gain is involved. These manipulative tactics are not confined to interpersonal relationships. However, they are readily adapted to organizational hierarchies. When applied to the workplace, the Machiavellian worldview, that the ends justify the means, can undermine corporate ethics and foster a culture of distrust.

Table 1 Characteristics of Dark Triad Personalities

	Machiavellianism	Narcissistic	Psychopathology
Primary Motivation	Power, status, and tangible gain.	Ego reinforcement and admiration.	Stimulation, thrill-seeking, and dominance.
Core Strategy	Strategic	Self-Enhancement:	Impulsivity: Calculated

	Manipulation: Careful, long-term planning.	Charisma and grandiosity to gain attention.	risk-taking with little regard for consequences.
View of Others	Tools to be used for a specific purpose.	An audience to provide validation.	Objects of prey or obstacles to be removed.
Emotional Profile	Cold, detached, and emotionally controlled.	Fragile self-esteem masked by outward confidence.	Low anxiety, lack of remorse, and shallow affect.
Motto	"The ends justify the means."	"I am better than everyone else."	"I do what I want, when I want."

MACHIAVELLIANISM AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOUR

Notably, research suggests that Machiavellianism is particularly relevant in organizational and leadership contexts, where individuals may use subtle manipulation to gain power or influence through Counterproductive Work Behaviours (CWB). CWB is generally defined as any intentional behaviours that are not aligned with organizational direction and interest (Amir & Malik, 2016; Gruys & Sackett, 2003; Cai, Wang, & Jin, 2024). Examples of CWB are absenteeism, withholding information from other colleagues, tardiness, theft, unsafe behaviour, sabotage, and bribery. As a result, CWB cripple organizational efficiency and effectiveness while also diminishing the morale and well-being of employees (Rehman and Shah Nawaz, 2018). For Machiavellians, their engagement in CWB is rarely random, as it is a calculated tool used to climb the career ladder.

Research consistently demonstrates a positive correlation between high Machiavellianism traits and both interpersonal and organizational forms of CWB (Duradoni et al., 2025; O'Boyle et al., 2012). In the realm of Interpersonal CWB (CWB-I), Machiavellians often engage in social undermining and knowledge hoarding. By sabotaging a colleague's reputation or withholding critical information, the Machiavellian ensures their own relative indispensability. Furthermore, the Machiavellian's tendency for Organizational CWB (CWB-O), such as breaking rules or misusing resources, is heavily influenced by organizational culture. In porous organizational cultures, where oversight is lax and ethical boundaries are fluid, Machiavellians view CWB as a low-risk path to personal gain. Conversely, in highly structured and transparent environments, they may suppress these overt behaviours. Instead, they often rely on prosocial manipulation and feigned empathy to achieve their objectives. This highlights the concept of moral disengagement. The Machiavellian does not perceive CWB as unethical, but rather as a strategic tool to get ahead. This alignment between Machiavellianism and CWB confirms their 'ends justify the means' mindset.

The long-term implications for the organization are profound. While a Machiavellian may appear to be a high achiever in the short term due to their intense focus on personal success, their reliance on CWB creates a toxic ripple effect (Ahmed et al., 2025; Uppal & Bansal, 2023). This effect manifests as an erosion of trust and a pervasive sense of injustice in the working environment (Belschak, Muhammad & Den Hartog, 2018), leading to increased cynicism, higher turnover rate, and decreased collective efficacy. As a result, the cost of a Machiavellian's productivity is often paid for by the psychological well-being of their subordinates and peers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Machiavellianism serves as a potent predictor of workplace deviance behaviour. For Machiavellians, their CWBs are not impulsive. They are calculated, strategic, targeted, and highly adaptive to the organizational climate. For management, the challenge lies in identifying these traits during recruitment and in fostering a strong ethical culture that renders manipulative tactics unprofitable. Understanding the Machiavellian mind is essential for any organization seeking to protect its social fabric from the quiet erosion of strategic sabotage.

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