

Beyond misogyny

Our pathologically mean leaders

The #MeToo movement has unleashed a maelstrom of reports of inappropriate sexual behaviour. But, says **Mark Lipton**, what he calls the “Mean Men” syndrome has been responsible for equal, and sometimes even worse, wrongdoings





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With the arrest of Harvey Weinstein and monthly firings of so many organisational leaders, we are witnessing a day of reckoning, a defining moment where society is willing to admit to a disorder we've been sweeping under the rug for decades.

Drowning in reports of inappropriate sexual behaviour and assault, we are no longer giving a free pass to those leaders who have abused their power and preyed on those less powerful. Our tendency, and that of our co-workers, has been—consciously or not—to aid, protect and cover up for these individuals. But with the number of victims now speaking up and telling their stories, these men are finding it harder to hide.

By October 2018, the running tally of men publicly accused of sexual misconduct—people at the top of entertainment, media, finance, government and politics, and other fields—reached 425. This figure has only risen, to the point where, as of this writing, it's become the new normal to learn of someone in the public eye once universally respected and then witness them taken down in the media, quickly, before our eyes.

Beyond the evident misogyny exposed by the #MeToo movement, there is an additional dark side to many of these talented individuals. These “leaders” are often just out for themselves. They step on others to get ahead.

Exhibiting a variety of aberrant behaviours beyond sexual misconduct, they are deceptive and ruthless. They have explosive tempers and abusive personalities. They may victimise women disproportionately but they can also be racist and bigoted. And while they are not all white men, they are men with a penchant to abuse power. In a word, they are mean.

You'll see their faces on magazine covers, television and news websites. They are America's so-called winners: the tech entrepreneur; the politician; the beloved actor; the driven athlete. Social media eats them up—they're the darlings (and demons) of Twitter. And while they are universal, unbounded by geographical borders, they are disproportionately huddled in America.

In fact, a disproportionate number of these men share characteristics that compel people to behave badly even as it drives them to create and excel. I call this the "Mean Men" syndrome.

These behaviours seem to run rampant in all fields where individual talent and ambition reign—whether sports, politics, entertainment, megachurches or tech start-ups.

Those same men who flourish in challenging circumstances can also exhibit one or more behavioural facets of the Mean Men syndrome: they are abusive to employees or colleagues, unprincipled in their pursuit of success and devoid of empathy.

They are pathological liars, unable to feel remorse and incapable of taking responsibility when they fail. Arrogant and prone to see others strictly as tools for their own advancement, they may seem to be monsters. Many are.

Does this constellation of traits sound familiar? In 2016, a self-proclaimed winner slash reality TV host slash real estate mogul was accused by multiple women of sexual assault and subsequently won the US presidency.

A convicted serial rapist and child molester, Jerry Sandusky, retired as football coach at Penn State University; elsewhere in sports, Lance Armstrong had all seven of his Tour de France wins voided after lying about drug use—and had no remorse about it whatsoever. Weinstein's alleged rapes resulted in his arrest but he was also known for his adult tantrums and sudden violent public displays of hostility.

One noted film reviewer commented: "He can be cruel and abusive...but look at the great works of culture he's given us". His helpers appeared to have known what was happening in those hotel rooms. Similarly, the Elders in Mars Hill Church of Seattle, Washington, knew of Mark Driscoll's



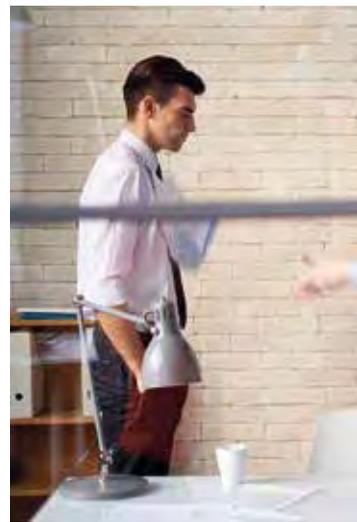
damaging abuses of power, misogynistic interpretations of the Bible and unscrupulous methods of expanding his flock—and did nothing to stop him.

Entrepreneurs from Steve Jobs to the hedge fund and pharma CEO Martin Shkreli (who is now in prison) have reportedly acted as though their "genius" and success absolved them from needing to act like decent human beings.

Many of these men do not rise up through the ranks—between the internet, technology and the abundance of venture capital funding, they've been able to start billion-dollar businesses without paying any real dues. And, at least in America, we are guilty of idolising them.

Why am I so interested in the study of mean men? I've seen them and their dark action up close in board rooms and C-suites and after observing the enormous damage they inflict on people and organisations, I undertook a study of their psychologies.

Their behaviour is appalling and it's wrong—and has much wider-reaching implications than I could ever have imagined. My research led to the realisation these men presented a particular – and rather scary – personality disorder.



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Can anything be done about them? I believe it can. While we may not be able to “cure” them, we can move them out of power, as we have seen with great acceleration since #MeToo and other movements called many to action.

Contrary to popular wisdom, mean does not “get results” and it does not “work”. In fact, a growing body of compelling research shows just the opposite. Rather, it is the leaders who support and empower people, act with authentic leadership and inspire trust who get the best results in the long term. This is true across the board—in business as well as in social and political realms.

We need to create awareness of the extent of this problem and stop getting behind mean men—instead, we must follow the example of leaders who walk the talk of gender equity and social justice and hold institutions accountable for the behaviour of their leadership.

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About the Author

Professor Mark Lipton is a graduate professor of management at The New School in New York and author of Mean Men. For more than 40 years, he has advised Fortune 500 corporations, think tanks, philanthropies, not-for-profits, NGOs and start-ups. In May 2018 Mark led a webinar based on Mean Men for AHRMIO – Association for Human Resources Management in International Organizations.

