Why Silicon Valley CEOs are such raging psychopaths

By Eric Spitznagel

Enlarge Image

Silicon Valley has a psychopath problem -- exemplified by the bad behavior of notorious tech CEOs such as Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk and Elizabeth Holmes. NY Post photo composite/Mike Guillen

More On:

silicon valley

Sex, drugs & start-ups: Inside Silicon Valley's doomed creative culture

Tesla shares surge after Elon Musk announces stock split

Tech CEO enrolls in anti-racism school after tirade

Waitress speaks out on tech CEO's racist rant on Asian family

Maëlle Gavet, a 15-year veteran of the tech industry, recalls an unsettling conversation she had at a Silicon Valley cocktail party in 2017.

Gavet was chatting with an early investor at Uber and mentioned some of the disturbing news surrounding the company's co-founder and CEO, Travis Kalanick. There were revelations about spying on passengers, sexual harassment, a toxic macho work culture, and according to Kalanick's own friends, his "aspirational baller syndrome."

The investor, Gavet told The Post, just laughed and said, "Oh, no, he's so much worse than anybody knows." Gavet was nonplussed, asking the investor why he chose to do business with somebody so unrepentantly awful.

"He may be an asshole," the investor told her. "But he's my asshole."

This was just one of the many interactions that inspired Gavet to write her new book, "Trampled by Unicorns: Big Tech's Empathy Problem and How to Fix It" (Wiley), out Tuesday. Though Kalanick was ousted as Uber's CEO in 2017 and stepped down from the company's board of directors earlier this year, his psychopathic behavior is all too common among Big Tech execs, Gavet writes.

Enlarge Image
Uber’s ex-CEO Travis Kalanick has been accused of spying on passengers and building a toxic macho work culture.NY Post composite/Mike Guillen

According to the Hare Psychopathy Checklist — the universally accepted diagnostic tool used to assess this disorder — a psychopathic personality includes traits such as a grandiose sense of self-worth, a lack of remorse or guilt, poor behavioral controls, pathological lying and a lack of empathy.

These attributes aren’t just present “but celebrated in Silicon Valley,” says Gavet, who once held the position of executive vice-president of global operations for Priceline Group, among other roles.

News of bad behavior by Silicon Valley CEOs — from Elon Musk's tweeting out misinformation about the pandemic to WeWork co-founder Adam Neumann now being probed by the New York state attorney general over allegations of self-dealing — has recently become so frequent, it's considered normal.

Take Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes, known for her eerie lack of blinking and an allegedly faked baritone voice. Once a Silicon Valley darling, she became a self-made billionaire by promising her blood-testing company would revolutionize health care with innovative finger-prick tests that delivered quick, painless, cheap results. But her claims were a lie. She now stands accused of fraud and is reportedly planning to make an insanity plea when she goes to trial this March.

Through the power of her psychopathy, Holmes convinced many — including veteran investors and politicians — "of her 'messianic vision' to defy reality with her 'miracle' blood-testing kit," Gavet writes.

Research by the FBI found that companies managed by psychopaths tend to have decreased productivity and low employee morale. In fact, Silicon Valley's psychopathic traits "trickle down through entire organizations," says Gavet. "In effect creating psychopathic companies."

Enlarge Image
WeWork co-founder Adam Neumann is being probed by the New York state attorney general over allegations of self-dealing.NY Post composite/Mike Guillen

This is enabled by an “infantilized culture” at many start-up companies, where employees become accustomed to working in “hyper-privileged bubbles where their every whim is catered to and every need anticipated,” she writes.

At Google, for instance, employees are treated to nap pods, free massages and a luxury hotel-style concierge service to run errands. The biotech firm Genentech reportedly offers perks like on-site car washes, haircuts, spa treatments and even a dentist.

“By sheltering these guys in this little cocoon or womb, it kind of emphasizes that young male problem, where Mom takes care of

everything," says Richard Walker, professor emeritus of geography at the University of California, Berkeley, and a veteran Valley-watcher. "It's kind of magical, where food just appears, and 'If my treat isn't there it's because Mom forgot to provide it!' "

And it's resulted in a serious lack of empathy, writes Gavet.

In February 2018, a 61-year-old livery driver shot himself in front of City Hall in lower Manhattan, claiming he'd lost his livelihood because of competition from Uber cars. "I will forever remember the reaction of two of my friends working at Uber at the time," says Gavet.

"During a dinner party, I asked how they felt about the suicide, and they were both like, 'It's sad, but it's the cost of disruption.' "

It's an excuse she's heard repeatedly. "I can't tell you the number of times I've heard people in Silicon Valley dismiss something horrible they may have caused with, 'That's the cost of disruption,' " she says. "They're like, 'Yeah, it's awful, but we're trying to make the world a better place, so it's OK."

> His legacy has cultivated an indelible association between being a jerk and a genius.
>
> - Maëlle Gavet on Steve Jobs

While that behavior can be found in any industry, from Wall Street to mass media, Gavet says it's particularly embedded and hard to fix in tech, "because it tends to take root at the early stages of a start-up."

“The types of things I witnessed over the years include the work hard/play hard attitude, epitomized by a culture of booze-fueled partying; recklessness; the prioritizing of hyper-growth over sustainable profits; and demeaning comments about women and minorities,” she writes.

The examples of it are abundant, from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s non-apology after the Federal Trade Commission fined his company $5 billion for allowing Cambridge Analytica to mine user data for political purposes, to Jeff Bezos complaining during an engineer’s presentation, “Why are you wasting my life?”

But some of the more glaring examples happen behind the scenes. Gavet spoke with a content moderator for Facebook, who worked for the company between 2017-2018 and looked for hate speech and graphic violence on the platform. He recalled flagging an image posted of a massacre in Southeast Asia.

Enlarge Image
Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos once said to an engineer during a presentation, “Why are you wasting my life?”NY Post composite/Mike Guillen

“There was an image of a baby with somebody’s foot on its chest,” he said. “I had decided that was a dead baby because it wasn’t fighting back.” But his auditor felt otherwise, insisting there was no proof that the baby was dead, and the photo remained.

Content moderators get a quality score and every image they mistakenly flag is a ding against their score. The result can be dehumanizing, according to Gavet.

“Imagine arguing about whether a baby is dead because you don’t want to get your quality score down,” she says. “All you care

about is getting the point back, not whether the baby is dead."

The moderator who spoke to Gavet was later diagnosed with PTSD and is now suing Facebook.

The patron saint of Big Tech douches, the one who inspired an entire generation of start-up entrepreneurs to put their worst face forward, was late Apple co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs. He disliked wearing shoes (or showering), preferred parking in handicapped parking spots and once motivated employees by calling them "f–king d–kless assholes."

"His legacy has cultivated an indelible association between being a jerk and a genius," writes Gavet. "Which has ballooned to the point where many people believe that a founder-CEO, in particular, actually has to be a jerk to be a genius."

She calls it the Steve Jobs Syndrome, and she's witnessed both powerful and up-and-coming tech exes believing in the myth like it's doctrine. Theranos CEO Holmes ruthlessly copied Jobs — not just by wearing black turtlenecks — but also by following his example of persuading people "to believe he was a prophet even when he was wrong," Gavet writes.

Enlarge Image
Late Apple CEO Steve Jobs preferred parking in handicapped parking spots and once motivated employees by calling them “f–king d–kless assholes.”NY Post composite/Mike Guillen

Gavet recalls working with a high-profile tech founder — she was overseeing the company’s acquisitions — and “every time I called him out on his lack of empathy and humility, which clearly led to many disastrous decisions, he would say to me, ‘Steve Jobs didn’t build Apple by being humble and caring about people.’ ”

These myths wouldn’t survive if the CEOs alone believed them. Former WeWork CEO Neumann was celebrated in the media for his audacious leadership style — from barefoot strolls through

Manhattan to offering his employees tequila shots and Run DMC concerts in the office.

But Neumann's success was a mirage. "He made millions leasing buildings he partly owned back to WeWork," Gavet writes. He also bought the trademark to the word "we" and then sold the trademark use to WeWork, his own company, for $5.9 million.

After initially being valued at $47 billion in January 2019, WeWork's worth reportedly dropped to $10 billion in September that same year. But when Neumann stepped down as CEO, he was paid $185 million as a "consulting fee."

Neumann isn't the only CEO who's been rewarded for actively making things worse for investors. In early May, Tesla CEO Musk tweeted, "Tesla stock price is too high, IMO." Within an hour of his tweet, the Tesla share price plummeted 10 percent, wiping $14 billion off the company's stock market value. One investor tweeted back at Musk, "Dude … I just lost $10k because of this tweet. Wtf is wrong with U?"

Not only is Musk still Tesla's CEO, but his net worth also jumped this summer to $103 billion, up from $22.4 billion last year, making him the third-richest person in the world.

Enlarge Image

For anything to change, Gavet argues that companies need to take a more empathetic approach.

“They need to hire differently, promote differently, reward differently,” she says. “I’m an optimist, but I’m also a capitalist. I believe there are ways to make a company more empathetic, more reasonable, a force of good in the world. And I believe in the long run, that would actually be beneficial for the businesses.”

She sees evidence of it happening already. Tim Bray, a celebrated engineer at Amazon and their onetime vice president of Web Services, quit his job in May because of the “toxicity running through the company culture,” as he wrote in a blog post.

“I choose neither to serve nor drink that poison,” he wrote.

Bray isn’t alone in recognizing the toxic culture, but many are unsure how to take a stand.

“Some of the CEOs I’m close to — and I still think they are, to a large extent, psychopaths — they’re struggling,” says Gavet. “They tell me, ‘It feels like I’m damned if I do, damned if I don’t.’ They get criticized for being too aggressive, but when they try to be empathetic, they’re criticized for being too soft.”

The trend of psychopathy at the top of Big Tech won’t be “disrupted,” Gavet says, until we stop expecting the next Steve Jobs to be as abrasive and psychotic as, well … Steve Jobs.

Joel B. Pollak notes that former Vice President Joe Biden promised earlier this month that his climate change policies will bring new jobs — “good, paying union jobs.” He has made — and broken such promises before.

In 2009, Biden promised that $529 million in new Department of Energy loan guarantees to Fisker Automotive to produce electric cars in Delaware would provide “billions of dollars in good, new jobs.” Four years later, Fisker filed for bankruptcy — without producing a single car in the U.S.

As Breitbart News reported at the time, Fisker was granted the loan guarantees to produce a hybrid sports car called the “Karma” for the luxury auto market, with a price of $103,000. High-profile political figures lobbied for the deal. Fisker filed for bankruptcy failed in 2013 and taxpayers lost $139 million on the venture. Republicans noted: “The jobs that were promised never

materialized and once again tax payers are on the hook for the administration's reckless gamble."

Along with failed solar panel manufacturer Solyndra, Fisker was one of the highest-profile failures of the stimulus, which Biden oversaw, and which he has touted on the campaign trail as proof of his ability to handle America's economic recovery.

Moreover, Vice President Biden admitted pushing for Fisker to build its new "Karma" plant in his home state of Delaware.

As the *Wall Street Journal* reported: "A spokeswoman for Mr. Biden said that he had made no direct appeals to DOE [Department of Energy] on Fisker's behalf before the loan was approved, though he did talk to the company several times afterward to put in a plug for his home state."

The Delaware site, an old GM plant, was located across the continent from Fisker's corporate headquarters in Southern California.

The *Washington Post* noted:

> Even current Vice President Joe Biden was drawn into the Fisker debacle. To build its planned Project Nina vehicle–to be dubbed the Atlantic–Fisker maneuvered itself into a purchase of a former GM plant in Wilmington, Del., that had once built the smart Pontiac Solstice and Saturn Sky roadsters. The plant was one of many properties split off during GM's 2009 bankruptcy filing, and was to be sold as a part of the "old GM." While the plant had some physical advantages of being near a port, it had several big disadvantages–namely, it was a world away from Fisker's