

# Machiavellians: Self-Made or Born That Way?

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A reader recently asked me, “What is the origin of this trait [[Machiavellianism](#)]? Is it developed? And if someone were to read Machiavelli’s *The Prince* in order to learn how to make themselves this way, would they be “Machiavellian” in the true psychological sense?

He is correct in labeling Machiavellianism as a [personality](#) “trait.” It is one but not the only feature of a master manipulator’s personality. When Machiavellianism dominates an individual’s personality, that person would likely register as a “[High Mach](#)” on the [Mach IV test](#) (unless he or she “fakes good” on the test, in true Machiavellian fashion). Most people would register as “low Machs.” We are all capable of such behavior but most of us are not predisposed to behave that way most of the time.

In [politics](#), Machiavellianism means a cynical, calculated strategy for acquiring and holding onto power. In psychology, it means a personality trait or acquired habit that sees human interactions through a profoundly cynical lens. Every encounter then becomes potentially a competitive, win/lose game.

There is probably some genetic predisposition towards callous, selfish, and manipulative personality traits. However, early parental influences and home life are probably the deciding factor. A psychiatrist I know once remarked that the surest way to create a psychopath is to cycle a child through half a dozen foster homes from birth to age 11. We know that there is a genetic predisposition in some people towards [psychopathy](#). But a bad start in life can shape even a normal child's personality in that direction. I think the same applies to Machiavellianism.

An interviewer once asked me if I recommend Machiavellian behavior. I replied that I don't recommend it, but I recognize that in exceptional situations it may be the only satisfactory response. In extraordinary circumstances, even low Machs may find it necessary to adopt Machiavellian tactics as a means of self-defense or of defending one's personal boundaries.

For example, suppose you were employed in an unethical, backstabbing workplace. You might have to adopt some of the same tactics being used against you in order to fend off co-workers who are trying to offload their work onto you, or take credit for your achievements, or spread false rumors about you. You might not like behaving that way, but if you were to behave ethically and honorably in that kind of organizational culture, you'd be victimized without mercy.

The question of whether a low Mach person could learn to become a high Mach by reading *The Prince* is intriguing, if for no other reason than to speculate about that person’s reason for asking. If a low

Mach individual were to read *The Prince* and practice that behavior until it became habitual and more or less automatic, then he or she would be a high Mach in the true sense of the word. So yes, one may deliberately warp his or her personality in that direction. But someone who would want to do that is probably already on the upper end of the low Mach scale (i.e., a borderline Machiavellian).

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