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# LEADERSHIP AND SELF-DECEPTION



getting out  
of the box

The Arbinger Institute  
*Authors of The Anatomy of Peace*

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## Preface

For too long, the issue of self-deception has been the realm of deep-thinking philosophers, academics, and scholars working on the central questions of the human sciences. The public remains generally unaware of the issue. That would be fine except that self-deception is so pervasive that it touches every aspect of life. “Touches” is perhaps too gentle a word to describe its influence. Self-deception actually *determines* one’s experience in every aspect of life. The extent to which it does that—and in particular the extent to which it determines the nature of one’s influence on, and experience of, others—is the subject of this book.

To give you an idea of what’s at stake, consider the following analogy. An infant is learning how to crawl. She begins by pushing herself backward around the house. Backing herself around, she gets lodged beneath the furniture. There she thrashes about, crying and banging her little head against the sides and undersides of the pieces. She is stuck and hates it. So she does the only thing she can think of to get herself out—she pushes even harder, which only worsens her problem. She’s more stuck than ever.

If this infant could talk, she would blame the furniture for her troubles. After all, she is doing everything she can think of. The problem couldn’t be *hers*. But of course the problem *is* hers, even though she can’t see it. While it’s true that she’s doing everything she can think of, the problem is precisely that *she can’t see how she’s the problem*. Having the problem she has, nothing she can think of will be a solution.

Self-deception is like this. It blinds us to the true causes of problems, and once we're blind, all the "solutions" we can think of will actually make matters worse. Whether at work or at home, self-deception obscures the truth about ourselves, corrupts our view of others and our circumstances, and inhibits our ability to make wise and helpful decisions. To the extent that we are self-deceived, both our happiness and our leadership are undermined at every turn, and not because of the furniture.

We have written this book to educate people about a solution to this most central of problems. Our experience in teaching about self-deception and its solution is that people find this knowledge liberating. It sharpens vision, reduces feelings of conflict, enlivens the desire for teamwork, redoubles accountability, magnifies the capacity to achieve results, and deepens satisfaction and happiness. This is true whether we are sharing these ideas with corporate executives in New York, governmental leaders in Beijing, community activists on the West Bank, or parenting groups in Brazil. Members of every culture participate to one degree or another in their own individual and cultural self-deceptions. The discovery of a way out of those self-deceptions is the discovery of hope and the birth of new possibilities and lasting solutions.

This book was first published in 2000, with the paperback appearing in 2002. In this new edition, published in 2010, the text has been updated, and we have added a section at the end that describes the various uses people have made of the book and its ideas over the last decade. Initially, some readers are surprised to find that the book unfolds as a story. Although fictional, the characters' experiences are drawn

from our own and our clients' actual experiences, so the story rings true, and most readers tell us that they see themselves in it. Because of this, the book delivers not just conceptual but also practical understanding of the problem of self-deception and its solution. The resulting impact has made *Leadership and Self-Deception* an international bestseller that is now available in over 20 languages. Our most recent bestseller, *The Anatomy of Peace*, published in hardcover in 2006 and in paperback in 2008, builds on both the story and the ideas developed in *Leadership and Self-Deception*. Individually and together, these books help readers to see their work lives and home situations in entirely new ways, and to discover practical and powerful solutions to problems they were sure were someone else's.

We hope that this introduction to the self-deception problem and solution will give people new leverage in their professional and personal lives—leverage to see themselves and others differently, and therefore leverage to solve what has resisted solution and to improve what can yet be improved.

### *A Note about the Book*

Although based on actual experiences in our work with organizations, no character or organization described in this book represents any specific person or organization. However, the information that appears about Ignaz Semmelweis is a historical account drawn from the book *Childbed Fever: A Scientific Biography of Ignaz Semmelweis*, by K. Codell Carter and Barbara R. Carter (Transaction Publishers, 2005).

# *Self-Deception and the “Box”*



# 1 *Bud*

It was a brilliant summer morning shortly before nine, and I was hurrying to the most important meeting of my new job at Zagrum Company. As I walked across the tree-lined grounds, I recalled the day two months earlier when I had first entered the secluded campus-style headquarters to interview for a senior management position. I had been watching the company for more than a decade from my perch at one of its competitors and had tired of finishing second. After eight interviews and three weeks spent doubting myself and waiting for news, I was hired to lead one of Zagrum's product lines.

Now, four weeks later, I was about to be introduced to a senior management ritual peculiar to Zagrum: a daylong one-on-one meeting with the executive vice president, Bud Jefferson. Bud was the right-hand man to Zagrum's president, Kate Stenarude. And due to a shift within the executive team, he was about to become my new boss.

I had tried to find out what this meeting was all about, but my colleagues' explanations confused me. They mentioned a discovery that solved "people problems"; how no one really focused on results; and that something about the "Bud Meeting," as it was called, and strategies that evidently followed from it, was key to Zagrum's incredible success. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I was eager to meet, and impress, my new boss.

Bud Jefferson was a youngish-looking 50-year-old combination of odd-fitting characteristics: a wealthy man who drove around in an economy car without hubcaps; a near-high

school dropout who had graduated with law and business degrees, *summa cum laude*, from Harvard; a connoisseur of the arts who was hooked on the Beatles. Despite his apparent contradictions, and perhaps partly because of them, Bud was revered as something of an icon. He was universally admired in the company.

It took 10 minutes on foot to cover the distance from my office in Building 8 to the lobby of the Central Building. The pathway—one of many connecting Zagrum’s 10 buildings—meandered beneath oak and maple canopies along the banks of Kate’s Creek, a postcard-perfect stream that was the brain-child of Kate Stenarude and had been named after her by the employees.

As I scaled the Central Building’s hanging steel stairway up to the third floor, I reviewed my performance during my month at Zagrum: I was always among the earliest to arrive and latest to leave. I felt that I was focused and didn’t let outside matters interfere with my objectives. Although my wife often complained about it, I was making a point to outwork and outshine every coworker who might compete for promotions in the coming years. I nodded to myself in satisfaction. I had nothing to be ashamed of. I was ready to meet Bud Jefferson.

Arriving in the main lobby of the third floor, I was greeted by Bud’s secretary, Maria. “You must be Tom Callum,” she said with enthusiasm.

“Yes, thank you. I have an appointment with Bud for nine o’clock,” I said.

“Yes. Bud asked me to have you wait for him in the East-view Room. He should be with you in about five minutes.” Maria escorted me down the hall and into a large conference room. I went to the long bank of windows and admired

the views of the campus between the leaves of the green Connecticut woods. A minute or so later, there was a brisk knock on the door, and in walked Bud.

“Hello, Tom. Thanks for coming,” he said with a big smile as he offered his hand. “Please, sit down. Can I get you something to drink? Coffee, juice?”

“No, thank you,” I replied, “I’ve had plenty already this morning.”

I settled in the black leather chair nearest me, my back to the window, and waited for Bud as he poured himself some water in the serving area in the corner. He walked back with his water, bringing the pitcher and an extra glass with him. He set them on the table between us. “Sometimes things can get pretty hot in here. We have a lot to do this morning. Please feel free whenever you’d like.”

“Thanks,” I stammered. I was grateful for the gesture but more unsure than ever what this was all about.

“Tom,” said Bud abruptly, “I’ve asked you to come today for one reason—an important reason.”

“Okay,” I said evenly, trying to mask the anxiety I was feeling.

“You have a problem—a problem you’re going to have to solve if you’re going to make it at Zagrum.”

I felt as if I’d been kicked in the stomach. I groped for some appropriate word or sound, but my mind was racing and words failed me. I was immediately conscious of the pounding of my heart and the sensation of blood draining from my face.

As successful as I had been in my career, one of my hidden weaknesses was that I was too easily knocked off balance. I had learned to compensate by training the muscles in my face and eyes to relax so that no sudden twitch would betray

my alarm. And now, it was as if my face instinctively knew that it had to detach itself from my heart or I would be found out to be the same cowering third-grader who broke into an anxious sweat, hoping for a “well done” sticker, every time Mrs. Lee passed back the homework.

Finally I managed to say, “A problem? What do you mean?”

“Do you really want to know?” asked Bud.

“I’m not sure. I guess I need to, from the sound of it.”

“Yes,” Bud agreed, “you do.”

## 2 A Problem

“You have a problem,” Bud continued. “The people at work know it, your spouse knows it, your mother-in-law knows it. I’ll bet even your neighbors know it.” Despite the digs, he was smiling warmly. “The problem is that *you* don’t know it.”

I was taken aback. How could I know I had a problem if I didn’t even know what the problem was? “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean,” I said, trying to exhibit calm.

“Think about these examples, for starters,” he said. “Remember the time you had a chance to fill the car with gas before your wife took it, but then you decided she could fill it just as easily as you, so you took the car home empty?”

I thought about it for a moment. “I suppose I’ve done that, yes.” *But so what?* I wondered.

“Or the time you promised the kids a trip to the park but backed out at the last minute, on some feeble excuse, because something more appealing had come up?”

My mind turned to my boy, Todd. It was true that I avoided doing much with him anymore. I didn’t think that was entirely my fault, however.

“Or the time under similar circumstances,” he went on, “when you took the kids where they wanted to go but made them feel guilty about it?”

*Yeah, but at least I took them,* I said to myself. *Doesn’t that count for something?*

“Or the time you parked in a handicapped-only parking zone and then faked a limp so that people wouldn’t think you were a total jerk?”

“I’ve never done that,” I said in defense.

“No? Well, have you ever parked where you shouldn’t but then run from the car with purpose to show that your errand was so important that you just *had* to park there?”

I fidgeted uncomfortably. “Maybe.”

“Or have you ever let a coworker do something that you knew would get him into trouble when you easily could have warned or stopped him?”

I didn’t say anything.

“And speaking of the workplace,” he continued, “have you ever kept some important information to yourself, even when you knew a colleague would really be helped by it?”

I had to admit, I had done that.

“Or are you sometimes disdainful toward the people around you? Do you ever scold them for their laziness or incompetence, for example?”

“I don’t know if I *scold* them,” I said weakly.

“So what do you do when you think others are incompetent?” Bud asked.

I shrugged. “I guess I try to get them to change in other ways.”

“So you indulge the people who report to you with kindness and other ‘soft stuff’ you can think of in order to get them to do what you want? Even though you still feel basically scornful toward them?”

I didn’t think that was fair. “Actually, I think I try pretty hard to treat my people right,” I countered.

“I’m sure you do,” he said. “But let me ask you a question. How do you feel when you’re ‘treating them right,’ as you say? Are you still feeling that they’re a problem?”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” I replied.

"I mean this: Do you feel you have to 'put up' with people? Do you feel—honestly, now—that you have to work pretty hard to succeed as a manager when you're stuck with some of the people you're stuck with?"

"Stuck?" I asked, stalling for time.

"Think about it. You know what I mean," he said, smiling.

The truth was, while I thought I knew what Bud was saying, I disagreed with what I thought he was implying. I was trying frantically to find an acceptable way to defend myself. "I suppose it's true that I think some people are lazy and incompetent," I finally replied. "Are you saying I'm wrong about that—that *no one* is lazy and incompetent?" My inflection on "no one" was too strong, and I cursed myself for letting my frustration show.

Bud shook his head. "Not at all. I'm talking about no one else now but you, Tom. And me, for that matter." He paused for a moment. "So what do you do when you're confronted with someone you believe is lazy or incompetent?"

I thought about it. "I guess that depends. I suppose I get after some of them pretty hard. But some people don't respond well to that, so I try to get them going in other ways. Some I cajole, others I outsmart. But I've learned to keep my smile with most people. That seems to help. I think I do a pretty good job with people, actually."

Bud nodded. "I understand. But when we're finished, I think you'll feel differently."

The comment unsettled me. "What's wrong with treating people well?" I protested.

"But you're *not* treating them well. That's the problem. You're doing more damage than you know."

“Damage?” I repeated. A rush of worry flushed my cheeks. Attempting to keep my emotions under control, I said, “I’m afraid you’re going to have to explain that to me.” The words sounded too combative, even to my own ear, and my cheeks flushed all the more.

“I’ll be happy to,” he said calmly. “I can help you learn what your problem is—*and* what to do about it. That’s why we’re meeting.” He paused, and then added, “I can help you because I have the same problem.”

Bud rose from his chair and began pacing the length of the table. “To begin with, you need to know about a problem at the heart of the human sciences.”



### 3 *Self-Deception*

“You have kids, don’t you, Tom?”

I was grateful for the simple question and felt the life come back to my face. “Why, yes, one actually. His name is Todd. He’s 16.”

“You remember how you felt when he was born—how it seemed to change your perspective on life?” Bud asked.

I strained to find my way back to the memories of Todd’s birth—through the pain, through the heartache. Diagnosed at a fairly young age with attention deficit disorder, he had been a difficult child, and my wife, Laura, and I clashed constantly over what to do with him. Things had only gotten worse as he grew older. Todd and I didn’t have much of a relationship. But at Bud’s invitation, I attempted a remembrance of the time and emotion surrounding his birth. “Yes, I remember,” I began pensively. “I remember holding him close, pondering my hope for his life—feeling inadequate, even overwhelmed, but at the same time grateful.” The memory lessened for a moment the pain I felt in the present.

“That was the way it was for me too,” Bud said. “Would you mind if I told you a story that began with the birth of my first child, David?”

“Please,” I said, happy to hear his story rather than relive my own.

“I was a young lawyer at the time,” he began, “working long hours at one of the most prestigious firms in the country. One of the deals I worked on was a major financing project that involved about 30 banks worldwide. Our client was the lead lender on the deal.

“It was a complicated project involving many lawyers. I was the second most junior member of the team and had chief responsibility for the drafting of 50 or so agreements that sat underneath the major lending contract. It was a big, sexy deal involving international travel, numbers with lots of zeros, and high-profile characters.

“A week after I’d been assigned to the project, Nancy and I found out she was pregnant. It was a marvelous time for us. David was born eight months later, on December 16. Before the birth, I worked hard to wrap up or assign my projects so that I could take three weeks off with our new baby. I don’t think I’ve ever been happier in my life.

“But then came a phone call. It was December 29. The lead partner on the deal was calling me. I was needed at an ‘all hands’ meeting in San Francisco.

“‘How long?’ I asked.

“‘Until the deal closes—could be three weeks, could be three months. We’re here until it’s done,’ he said.

“I was crushed. The thought of leaving Nancy and David alone in our Alexandria, Virginia, home left me desperately sad. It took me two days to wrap up my affairs in D.C. before I reluctantly boarded a plane for San Francisco. I left my young family at the curb at what used to be called National Airport. With a photo album under my arm, I tore myself away from them and turned through the doors of the terminal.

“By the time I arrived at our San Francisco offices, I was the last one in on the deal. Even the guy from our London office beat me. I settled into the last remaining guest office, which was on the 21st floor. The deal headquarters, and everyone else, was on floor 25.

“I hunkered down and got to work. Most of the action was on 25—meetings, negotiations among all the parties, everything. But I was alone on 21—alone with my work and my photo album, which sat open on my desk.

“I worked from 6 A.M. till after midnight every day. Three times a day I would go down to the deli in the lobby and purchase a bagel, a sandwich, or a salad. Then I’d go back up to 21 and eat while poring over the documents.

“If you had asked me at the time what my objective was, I would have told you that I was ‘drafting the best possible documents to protect our client and close the deal,’ or something to that effect. But you should know a couple of other things about my experience in San Francisco.

“All of the negotiations that were central to the documents I was working on were happening on the 25th floor. These 25th-floor negotiations should have been very important to me because every change to the deal had to be accounted for in all the documents I was drafting. But I didn’t go up to 25 much.

“In fact, after 10 days of lobby deli food, I found out that food was being served around the clock in the main conference room on 25 for everyone working on the deal. I was upset that no one had told me about it. And twice during those 10 days I was chewed out for failing to incorporate some of the latest changes into my documents. No one had told me about those either! Another time I was reprimanded for being hard to find. And on two occasions during that period, the lead partner asked for my opinion on issues that had never occurred to me—issues that would have occurred to me had I been thinking. They were in my area of responsibility. He shouldn’t have had to do my job for me.” At this, Bud sat back down.

“Now, let me ask you a question, Tom. Just from the little bit you now know about my San Francisco experience, would you say that I was really committed to ‘drafting the best possible documents to protect our client and close the deal?’”

“No,” I said, shaking my head, surprised at the ease with which I was about to harpoon Bud Jefferson. “It sounds like you were preoccupied with something else. It doesn’t seem like you were engaged in the project at all.”

“That’s right,” he agreed. “I *wasn’t* engaged in it. And do you think the lead partner could tell?”

“I think that after those 10 days it would have been obvious,” I offered.

“He could tell well enough to chew me out a couple of times at the very least,” Bud said. “How about this: Do you suppose he would say that I’d bought into the vision? Or that I was committed? Or that I was being maximally helpful to others on the deal?”

“No, I don’t think so. By keeping yourself isolated, you were putting things at risk—*his* things,” I answered.

“I have to agree with you,” Bud said. “I had become a problem, no question about it. I wasn’t engaged in the deal, wasn’t committed, hadn’t caught the vision, was making trouble for others, and so on. But consider this: How do you suppose I would have responded had someone accused me of not being committed or not being engaged? Do you think I would have agreed with them?”

I pondered the question. “I doubt it. It’s kind of tough to agree with people when they’re criticizing you. You probably would have felt defensive if someone had accused you like that.”

“And consider the defenses I could have levied,” Bud said, nodding in agreement. “Think about it: Who left behind a new baby to go to San Francisco? I did. And who was working 20-hour days? I was.” He was becoming more animated. “And who was forced to work alone four floors below the others? I was. And to whom did people even forget to mention basic details like food plans? To me. So from my perspective, who was making things difficult for whom?”

“Hmm, I guess you would have seen *others* as being the main cause of the trouble,” I answered, finding the irony interesting.

“You’d better believe it,” he said. “And how about being committed, engaged, and catching the vision? Do you see that from my perspective, not only was I committed, but I just might’ve been the most committed person on the deal? Because from my point of view, no one had as many challenges to deal with as I had. And I was working hard in spite of them.”

“That’s right,” I said, relaxing back into my chair and nodding affirmatively. “You *would* have felt that way.”

“So let’s think about it again.” Bud rose again and began pacing. “Remember the problem. I was uncommitted, was disengaged, hadn’t caught the vision, and was making things more difficult for others on the deal. That’s all true. And that’s a problem—a big problem. But there was a bigger problem—and it’s this problem that you and I need to talk about.”

He had my full attention.

“The bigger problem was that I couldn’t *see* that I had a problem.”

Bud paused for a moment, and then, leaning toward me, he said in a lower, even more earnest tone, “There is no

solution to the problem of lack of commitment, for example, without a solution to the bigger problem—the problem that I can’t *see* that I’m not committed.”

I suddenly started to be uneasy and could feel my face again sag to expressionlessness. I had been caught up in Bud’s story and had forgotten that he was telling it to me for a reason. This story was for me. He must have been thinking that *I* had a bigger problem. Despite my efforts to stay coolly detached, my face and ears began to heat up.

“Tom, there’s a technical name for the insistent blindness I exhibited in San Francisco. Philosophers call it *self-deception*. At Zagrum, we have a less technical name for it—we call it ‘being in the box.’ In our way of talking, when we’re self-deceived, we’re ‘in the box.’ You’re going to learn a lot more about the box, but as a starting point, think of it this way: In one sense, I was ‘stuck’ in my experience in San Francisco. I was stuck because I had a problem I didn’t think I had—a problem I couldn’t see. I could see matters only from my own closed perspective, and I was deeply resistant to any suggestion that the truth was otherwise. So I was in a box—cut off, closed up, blind. Does that make sense?”

I nodded.

“There’s nothing more common in organizations than self-deception,” he continued. “For example, think about a person from your work experience who’s a big problem—say, someone who’s been a major impediment to teamwork.”

That was easy—Chuck Staehli, COO of my former employer. He was a jerk, plain and simple. He thought of no one but himself. “Yeah, I know a guy like that.”

“Well, here’s the question: Does the person you’re thinking of believe he’s a problem like you believe he is?”

I shook my head vigorously. “No. Definitely not.”

“That’s usually the case. Identify someone with a problem, and you’ll be identifying someone who resists the suggestion that he has one. That’s self-deception—the inability to see that one has a problem.”

Bud placed his hands on the back of his chair, leaning against it. “Remember how I mentioned that you needed to know something about a problem in the human sciences?”

“Yes.”

“This is it. Self-deception—being in the box—is the problem I was talking about. Of all the problems in organizations, self-deception is the most common, and the most damaging.” Bud paused to let the point sink in. Then he continued, “At Zagrum, Tom, our top strategic initiative is to minimize individual and organizational self-deception. To give you an idea why it’s so important to us,” he said, starting again to pace, “I need to tell you about an analogous problem in medicine.”

Thank You For Reading

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