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# LEADERSHIP

AND SELF-  
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*Getting Out of  
the Box*

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Bicentennial of the US Constitution

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—Barry Brownstein, CSX Chair in Leadership, University of Baltimore

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“Simple . . . clear . . . powerful. With many years of experience in leadership, organizational development, and training I was surprised to find something strike me with such impact.”

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“As a therapist I was pleasantly surprised to find that a book geared toward managers could have such far-reaching implications in my life and the lives of my clients. I believe the ideas in this book could transform the counseling profession. It is now required reading for all my clients.”

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—Dave Browne, former President and CEO, LensCrafters

“This book is a rare gem that is treasured by all who have read it. The organization for which I work has passed this book to so many people, and it is amazing to watch people’s attitudes and behaviors toward each other changing. Each day everyone gives a little more, making us better leaders, but more importantly, better people.”

—Nuala Murphy, Senior Vice President,  
Global Financial Services Company

“*Leadership and Self-Deception* holds up a brutally honest mirror to behavior in which we all indulge to justify our shortcomings. The result is not self-remorse or punishment but a glimpse of a life to be lived with integrity and freed of the boundaries and constraints we inflict upon ourselves and others. I am always excited to watch Arbinger’s thinking help my clients to unlock painful family disputes and lead them to resolution.”

—Neil Denny, family lawyer, Wiltshire, UK

“A remarkable book. It can be valuable to your understanding of why so many people create their own problems, are unable and/or unwilling to see that they are creating their own problems, and then resist any attempts by others to help them stop creating those problems.”

—Robert Morris, Amazon Top 50 Reviewer

“I’ve been in the book publishing business for twenty-five years. Rarely have I read a book as profound and life-changing as *Leadership and Self-Deception*.”

—David Sanford, Literary Agent, Credo Communications

“This book was recommended to me at an annual strategic planning session. I was stunned by the truth of it and the simple solution. Our entire management has now read it. It has been a building block for our personal and organizational development.”

—Rick Chalk, CEO, Cal-Tex Protective Coatings

“My business partners and I built a health-care company on the ideas in this book. We are amazed at what it has helped us achieve. Careful reading and rereading of this book has proven better than any productivity, team-building, or leadership training we’ve encountered.”

—Mark Ballif, CEO, Plum Healthcare

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the Box*

THE ARBINGER INSTITUTE



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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
*a BK Business book*

## Leadership and Self-Deception

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“It is in the darkness of their eyes that men get lost.”  
–Black Elk



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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. In this new third edition, published in 2018, the text has been updated, and we have added new sections at the end that describe research into the magnitude of self-deception in organizations, how to measure the extent of self-deception in organizations, and various uses people have made of the book and its ideas over the nearly two decades since it was first published.

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* one of the bestselling leadership books of all time. The book's sequel, *The Anatomy of Peace*, originally published in 2006, builds on both the story and the ideas developed in *Leadership and Self-Deception*. It has occupied the number one position on the bestseller lists in the categories of War and Peace and Conflict Resolution for over a decade. Our most recent bestseller, *The Outward Mindset*, shows how organizations can successfully implement the ideas first introduced 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 couldn't have foreseen what would happen with *Leadership and Self-Deception*. Few people had ever heard of the Arbinger Institute when the book was first published, and our choice to publish in the name of the company bucked industry norms. But the book blazed a trail. It is now an enduring classic with a message as important and relevant as ever. We are confident that this introduction to the self-deception problem and solution will give you new and helpful leverage both personally and professionally—leverage to see yourself, others, and your challenges differently, and to solve problems that have stubbornly resisted solution.

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PART I

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*Self-Deception  
and the “Box”*



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## 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 solves "people problems"; how no one really focuses on results; and that something about the "Bud Meeting," as it was called, and strategies that evidently follow from it, are 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 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 12 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.

“Of course. Bud asked me to have you wait for him in the Eastview 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