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LEADERSHIP
and SELF-
DECEPTION

→ getting out
of the box

The Arbinger Institute
Authors of the bestseller *The Anatomy of Peace*

an excerpt from

***Leadership and Self-Deception:
Getting Out of the Box***

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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 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 is the central issue in personal and professional leadership, is the subject of this book.

To give you an idea of what’s at stake, consider the following analogy. An infant is learning 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. She, after all, 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 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 cause of problems, and once blind, all the “solutions” we can think of will actually make matters worse. That’s why self-deception is so central to leadership—because leadership is about making matters better. To the extent we are self-deceived, our leadership is undermined at every turn, and not because of the furniture.

We have written this book to educate people about this most central of problems, a problem that has been the exclusive terrain of scholars for far too long. But this book is about more than the problem—it offers a solution to self-deception as well.

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 London, community activists in Malaysia, or parenting groups in Japan. 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 the year 2000, with the paperback appearing in 2002. The ideas about self-deception, told as they are through a fictional story that captures most readers, has made *Leadership and Self-Deception* a prominent international bestseller that is now available in over twenty languages. Our most recent bestseller, *The Anatomy of Peace*, published in 2006, 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. In organizations as varied as commercial ventures, neighborhoods, and families, what is needed most is people not just with influence but with influence for good.

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 an actual historical account drawn from the book *Childbed Fever: A Scientific Biography of Ignaz Semmelweis*, by K. Codell Carter and Barbara R. Carter (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.)

PART I

*Self-Deception
and the “Box”*

1 *Bud*

It was two months ago to the day that I first entered the secluded campus-style headquarters of Zagrum Company to interview for a senior management position. I'd 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 a three-week period of silence and self-doubt, I was hired to lead one of Zagrum's product lines.

I was about to be introduced to a senior management ritual peculiar to Zagrum—a day-long, one-on-one meeting with the executive vice president, Bud Jefferson. Bud was 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, is 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.

I knew Bud by reputation only. He had been present at a product rollout conference I attended but had taken no active part. He 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 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 in the company—like Zagrum, mysterious yet open, driven yet humane, polished yet real. He was universally admired, if wondered about, 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 23 connecting Zagrum’s 10 buildings—meandered beneath oak and maple canopies along the banks of Kate’s Creek, a postcard-perfect manmade stream that was the brainchild of Kate Stenarude and 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 of it, I was making a point to outwork and outshine every coworker who might compete for promotions in the coming years. 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 9:00,” I said.

“Yes. 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 left me to myself in a large conference room, where from the long bank of windows I admired the views of the campus between the leaves

of the green Connecticut wood. 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 me his hand. “Please, sit down. Can I get something for you 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 out of the pitcher 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 bet even your neighbors know it.” He was smiling warmly. “The problem is that *you* don’t know it.”

I found myself speechless. 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. Are you saying that I . . . that I . . .” I had *no idea* what he was talking about.

“Well,” he said in a way that made me think he was enjoying this, “think about these examples for starters.

“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?”

How did he know about that? I wondered.

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

How did he know about that?

“Or the time, under similar circumstances, you took the kids to the ball game anyway but made them feel guilty for it?”

Uh-oh.

“Or the time, when reading to your toddler, you cheated him by turning more than one page at a time because you were impatient and ‘he wouldn’t notice anyway?’”

Yeah, but he didn’t notice.

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

Hah! I've never done that.

“Or the time you did the same thing but ran from the car with apparent purpose to show that your errand was so important that you just *had* to park there?”

Well, I have to admit I have done that.

“Or the time, driving at night, the driver of a car close behind you kept his brights on, and you let him pass so you could do the same thing back to him?”

So?

“And think of your style at work,” he continued, now on a roll. “Do you sometimes demean others? Are you sometimes punishing and disdainful toward the people around you, scornful of their laziness and incompetence?”

“I guess that’s true part of the time,” I muttered. I had to admit it; he seemed to know. “But—”

“Or do you more often try to do the acceptable thing?” he interrupted. “Do you indulge the people who report to you with kindness and all the 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?”

This was hitting below the belt. “I work hard at treating my people right,” I protested.

“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? Is it any different from the way you feel when you’re being punishing and scornful toward people? Deep down, is there any difference?”

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

“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 the kind of people you're stuck with?"

"Stuck?" I asked, still stalling.

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

I thought frantically. There was no escape. Finally, I replied: "Well, I guess it's true. I do think a lot of people are lazy and incompetent. But what am I supposed to do? Telling them doesn't usually help. So I try to get them going in other ways. Some I cajole, others I try to motivate, others I outsmart, and so on. And I try to smile a lot. I'm kind of proud of how I handle myself, actually."

Bud smiled kindly. "I understand. But when we're finished, you won't be so proud of it. What you're doing is often wrong."

I was incredulous. "How can it be wrong to treat people right?"

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

"What do you mean? You're going to have to explain that to me." Angry now, as well as befuddled, I wanted to know what he was up to.

"I'll be happy to explain it to you," 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—slowly, even solemnly—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.

It had been a long while since I considered those early thoughts surrounding Todd’s birth. So much had happened since then that those memories had been swept downstream by a decade of bitter words and memories. Todd had been diagnosed as having attention deficit disorder (ADD), and it was impossible for me to think of Todd without feeling a disturbance in my soul. He was nothing but trouble and had been for years. But Bud’s question called me back to a sweeter time. “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, nodding his head knowingly. “I want to tell you a story that began with the birth of *my* first child. His name is David.

“I was a young lawyer at the time, 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. In our firm alone, there were eight attorneys assigned to it from four different offices worldwide. 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 some 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—an office 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 opened on my desk.

“I worked from 7:00 A.M. till after 1:00 A.M. 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 chewed out 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 don’t think so,” I said, surprised at the ease with which I was about to lampoon Bud Jefferson. “In fact, you don’t seem like you were engaged in the project at all. You were preoccupied with something else.”

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

“I think 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 agreed. “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 think you’re right,” Bud agreed. “I had become a problem. 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. Although it should have been outwardly obvious, Bud might have had trouble seeing himself as others saw him at the time. “No. I suspect you might have felt defensive if someone had said that to you.”

“You’re right. Think about it: Who left behind a new baby to come to San Francisco? I did,” he said, answering his own

question. “And who was working 20-hour days? I was.” Bud 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?”

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

“You better believe it,” he agreed. “And how about being committed, engaged, and catching the vision? Do you see that from my perspective, not only was I committed, I just might’ve been the most committed person on the deal? For from my perspective, 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.”

“Now, think about it, Tom.” Bud was standing again and began pacing the floor. “Remember the problem. I was uncommitted, 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 forward 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 feel 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 be thinking that *I* have a bigger problem. My mind was starting to race with self-worry when I heard Bud's voice again.

"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?"

"Sure. I get the idea," I responded, temporarily reconnecting with Bud and his story.

"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 really 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 such a guy."

"Well, here's the question: Does the person you're thinking of believe he's a problem like you believe he's a problem?"

"No. Definitely not."

“That’s usually the case,” he said, stopping directly across from me. “Identify someone with a problem and you’ll be identifying someone who resists the suggestion that he has a problem. That’s self-deception—the inability to see that one has a problem. Of all the problems in organizations, it’s the most common—and the most damaging.”

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

“Yes.”

“This is it. Self-deception—the box—is that problem.” Bud paused. It was clear this was a point of major importance to him.

“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.”

this material has been excerpted from

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