

UNDER REVIEW

Leadership and Self Deception

By The Arbinger Institute (2000)

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This book was directed primarily to those in the business world, but everyone who works in the field of education in any capacity, yes, everyone, will benefit from the concepts in the book *Leadership and Self-Deception*. No matter how knowledgeable an individual is or how many years of experience he or she has, unless this fundamental concept of self-deception is understood, they will not experience optimum effectiveness. Some of us may instinctively understand this concept and interact in a positive manner most of the time, but we can be self-deceived into thinking we are doing it well when in reality we are not. All of us in education are required to interact and communicate, but this is not effective without understanding how to avoid self-deception.

The book uses a fictional first person narrative to convey the concepts of self-betrayal and self-deception that are common to everyone. The storyline begins with a man named Tom Callum who has been recently hired as a senior management officer for a large company. Within the first month of his employment, he is called in by the company vice president, Bud Jefferson, and is told in a very non-threatening manner that he has a problem. He is told that practically everyone knows about this problem including his coworkers and family, but surprisingly Tom seems to be the only one who does not know about it.

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Bud begins by telling of a personal experience from early in his career. It is easy for Tom to see the self-centered and self-deceived behaviors of his boss as the story unfolds, but cannot see any connection to his own experience.

The story of the book depersonalizes the presentation of the information and makes Tom feel at ease. In the same manner, the fictional storyline of the book makes it easy for the reader to be disarmed, and see applications of the principles in their own lives. The book has numerous illustrations of how the process of self-deception works, but one of the most straight-forward is the one that Bud tells about his newborn infant.

When Bud's first child was only a few months old, he and his wife were in bed, sound asleep, about 1a.m. The baby started fussing and crying and Bud woke up and his first impulse was to get up and tend to the baby. The only problem was that after thinking about it for a few seconds, he realized that he was tired and did not feel like getting up. As he continued to think about it, he reasoned through the situation and decided that his job was to earn the living and the wife's job was to take care of the baby. He decided it was not his problem, and to be fair, his wife should take care of the baby. He reasoned that he had to get up and go to work and that his wife was pretending to be asleep as the baby continued to cry. After telling this, Bud explained to Tom how his not acting on his inclination to help his wife and take care of the baby was self-deception. He pointed out how he was thinking of reasons why she should not do what he felt convicted to do, and to further build his case, he began thinking of his wife in negative ways, imagining her to be lazy and a faker. This is an example of how self-deception begins.

The term used in the book for this self-deception experience is: "being in the box." When we are in the box, we see individuals as objects that are in our way, instead of people

with feelings and needs just like us. The storyline of the book continued to develop the concept of self-betrayal revealing that when we are in the box, we inflate the faults of others, inflate our own virtue, inflate the value of things that justify our self betrayal, and place blame on others. When this behavior becomes habitual, we begin to carry these boxes with us, and in many circumstances do not even have the initial inclination to do the right thing.

The story further developed the self-betrayal concept by illustrating interactions between multiple individuals who are “in the box,” explaining how that scenario compounds communication and productivity problems. The storyline also explained how our “in the box” actions tend to demoralize those we work with and make them feel unappreciated and unvalued. This, of course, makes a huge negative impact on individual morale and productivity.

In the beginning of the story, Tom was puzzled about how the focus on interpersonal relationships relate to his job, but as the story unfolds he begins to see that the harmony of the employees is a very significant issue in being truly productive. Of course, this is a universal issue in any endeavor where personal interactions are involved.

For those of us in education, what is more important than communicating effectively and bringing out the very best our students are capable of? In this book, self-deception and all of its implications and complications is discussed in great detail. The book does give some great insights on how to “get out” and “stay out of the box,” but you will have to read the book to learn the secret.