

excerpt from
Leadership and Self-Deception
Getting Out of the Box
by The Arbinger Institute

Chapter 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 anxious 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 Zagrums."

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.”

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