

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

Chapter 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 the 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.”

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