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LEADERSHIP

AND SELF- DECEPTION

*Getting Out of
the Box*

THE
ARBINGER INSTITUTE

Authors of *The Anatomy of Peace* and *The Outward Mindset*

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Praise for *Leadership and Self-Deception*

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

“The leadership principles in this book have had a greater impact on the quality of leadership in our company than anything we have ever implemented. They have been extraordinarily important in helping make our company a great place to work while at the same time helping us focus on results and increase productivity as never before.”

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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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“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.”

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—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

LEADERSHIP AND SELF- DECEPTION

Getting Out of the Box

THE ARBINGER INSTITUTE



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 Arbing 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.

PART I

Self-Deception and the “Box”

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 brainchild 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 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 wife knows it, your mother-in-law knows it. I’ll bet even your neighbors know it.” Despite the digs, he was smiling warmly. “The problem is that *you* don’t know it.”

I was taken aback. 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,” I said, trying to exhibit calm.

Bud nodded. “Consider a few experiences,” he said. “For example, think of times when you’ve known that your wife needed the car next and you noticed that it was almost out of fuel. Have you ever taken it home anyway, telling yourself that she could fill it just as easily as you?”

I thought about it for a moment. “I suppose I’ve done that, yes.” *But so what?* I wondered.

“Or have you ever promised to spend time with the kids but backed out at the last minute because something more appealing came up?”

My mind turned to my boy, Todd. It was true that I avoided doing much with him anymore. I didn’t think that was entirely my fault, however.

“Or, under similar circumstances,” he went on, “have you ever taken the kids where they wanted to go but made them feel guilty about it?”

Yeah, but at least I took them, I said to myself. *Doesn’t that count for something?*

“Or how about this one: have you ever parked in a handicapped-only parking zone and then faked a limp so that people wouldn’t think you were a jerk?”

“Absolutely not,” I said in defense.

“No? Well, have you ever parked where you shouldn’t and then sprinted from the car with such purpose that observers would think you just *had* to park there?”

I fidgeted uncomfortably. “Maybe.”

“Or have you ever let a coworker do something that you knew would get him into trouble when you easily could have warned or stopped him?”

I didn’t say anything.

“And speaking of the workplace,” he continued, “have you ever kept some important information to yourself, even when you knew a colleague would really be helped by it?”

I had to admit, I had done that.

“Or are you sometimes disdainful toward the people around you? Do you ever scold them for their laziness or incompetence, for example?”

“I don’t know if I *scold* them,” I said weakly.

“So what do you do when you think others are incompetent?” Bud asked.

I shrugged. “I guess I try to get them to change in other ways.”

“So do you indulge people with kindness and other ‘soft stuff’ you can think of in order to get them to do what you want? Even though you still feel scornful toward them?”

I didn’t think that was fair. “Actually, I think I try pretty hard to treat people right,” I countered.

Bud paused for a moment. “I’m sure you do, Tom,” he said. “But let me ask you a question. How do you feel when you’re ‘treating them right,’ as you say? Are you still feeling that they’re a problem?”

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

“What I mean is, do you feel that you have to ‘put up’ with people—that you have to work pretty hard to succeed as a manager when you’re stuck with some of the people you’re stuck with?”

“Stuck?” I asked, stalling for time. The truth was, I understood what Bud was saying, but I disagreed with what I thought he was implying. I was trying frantically to find an acceptable way to defend myself. “I suppose it’s true that I think some people are lazy and incompetent,” I finally replied.

“Are you saying I’m wrong about that—that *no one* is lazy and incompetent?” My inflection on “no one” was too strong, and I cursed myself for letting my frustration show.

Bud shook his head. “Not at all. Some people are lazy. And I, for one, am incompetent at a whole bunch of things.” He paused for a moment. “So what do you do when you’re confronted with someone you believe is lazy or incompetent?”

I thought about it. “That depends. I’m pretty direct with some people, but with others that doesn’t work very well so I try to get them going in other ways. Some I try to encourage, and others I feel like I have to outsmart or outmaneuver. But I’ve learned to keep my smile most of the time, and that seems to help. I think I do a pretty good job with people, actually.”

Bud nodded. “I understand. But when we’re finished, I think you may feel differently.”

The comment unsettled me. “What’s wrong with treating people well?” I protested.

“Nothing. If that’s what one is actually doing,” Bud said. “But I think you might discover that you aren’t treating people as well as you think. You may be doing more damage than you know.”

“Damage?” I repeated. A rush of worry flushed my cheeks. Attempting to keep my emotions under control, I said, “I’m afraid you’re going to have to explain that to me.” The words sounded too combative, even to my own ear, and my cheeks flushed all the more.

“I’ll be happy to,” 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.”

3 Self-Deception

“Do you have kids, 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.”

Bud smiled. “Do you remember how you felt when Todd was born—how it seemed to change your perspective on life?”

I strained to find my way back to the memories of Todd’s birth—through the pain, through the heartache. Diagnosed at a fairly young age with attention deficit disorder, he had been a difficult child, and my wife, Laura, and I clashed constantly over what to do with him. Things had only gotten worse as he grew older. Todd and I didn’t have much of a relationship. But at Bud’s invitation, I attempted a remembrance of the time and emotion surrounding his birth. “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. “Would you mind if I told you a story that began with the birth of my first child, David?”

“Please,” I said, happy to hear his story rather than relive my own.

“I was a young lawyer at the time,” he began, “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. 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 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 DC before I reluctantly boarded a plane for San Francisco. I left my young family at the curb at Reagan 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, which was 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 open on my desk.

"I worked from 6 AM till after midnight 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 reprimanded 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.

“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 said, shaking my head, surprised at the ease with which I was about to harpoon Bud Jefferson. “It sounds like you were preoccupied with something else. It doesn't seem like you were engaged in the project at all.”

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

“I think that 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 said. “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 have to agree with you,” Bud said. “I had become a problem, no question about it. 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. “I doubt it. It's kind of tough to agree with people when they're criticizing you. You probably would have felt defensive if someone had accused you like that.”

“And consider the defenses I could have levied,” Bud said, nodding in agreement. “Think about it: Who left behind a new baby to go to San Francisco? I did. And who was working 20-hour days? I was.” He 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?”

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

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

“So let’s think about it again.” Bud rose again and began pacing. “Remember the problem. I was uncommitted, was 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 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 be 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 have been thinking that *I* had a bigger problem. Despite my efforts to stay coolly detached, my face and ears began to heat up.

“Tom, there’s a technical name for the insistent blindness I exhibited in San Francisco. Philosophers and psychologists 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 only from my own closed perspective, and I was

deeply resistant to any suggestion that the truth was other than what I was thinking. So I was in a box—cut off, closed up, blind. Does that make sense?”

I nodded.

“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 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 a guy like that.”

“Well, here’s the question: Does the person you’re thinking of believe he’s a problem like you believe he is?”

I shook my head vigorously. “No. Definitely not.”

“That’s usually the case. Identify someone with a problem, and you’ll be identifying someone who resists the suggestion that he has one. That’s self-deception—the problem of not knowing and resisting the possibility that one has a problem.

“Of all the problems in organizations,” Bud said, “self-deception is the most common and the most damaging.” He paused to let the point sink in. “Think about it, Tom. You can’t make headway solving problems if the people causing those problems refuse to consider how they might be responsible. So at Zagrum, our top strategic initiative is to minimize individual and organizational self-deception.”

Bud stood and began to pace. “To underscore why it’s so important to us,” he said, “I need to tell you about an analogous problem in medicine.”

4 *The Problem beneath Other Problems*

“Have you ever heard of Ignaz Semmelweis?” Bud asked. (He pronounced it “Ignawts Semelvice.”)

“No, I don’t think so. Is it a sickness or something?”

“No, no,” he said with a chuckle. “But close. Semmelweis was a European doctor, an obstetrician, in the mid-1800s. He worked at the Vienna General Hospital, an important re-search hospital, where he tried to get to the bottom of a horrendous mortality rate among women in the maternity ward. In the section of the ward where Semmelweis practiced, the mortality rate was 1 in 10. Think of it. One in every 10 women giving birth there died! Can you imagine?”

“I wouldn’t have let my wife near the place,” I said.

“You wouldn’t have been alone. Vienna General had such a frightening reputation that some women actually gave birth on the street and *then* went to the hospital.”

“I don’t blame them,” I said.

“The collection of symptoms associated with these deaths,” Bud continued, “became known as ‘childbed fever.’ Conventional medical science at the time called for separate treatment for each symptom. Inflammation meant that excess blood was causing swelling—so they bled the patient or applied leeches. They treated fever the same way. Trouble breathing meant the air was bad—so they improved ventilation. And so on. But nothing worked. More than half of the women who contracted the disease died within days.

“The terrible risk was well known. Semmelweis reported that patients were frequently seen ‘kneeling and wringing their hands,’ begging to be moved to a second section of the maternity ward, where the mortality rate was 1 in 50—still horrific, but far better than the 1-in-10 rate in Semmelweis’s section.

“Semmelweis gradually became obsessed with the problem—in particular with discovering why the mortality rate in one section of the

maternity ward was so much higher than the rate in the other. The only obvious difference between the sections was that Semmelweis's section—the section that performed the worst—was attended by doctors, while the other section was attended by midwives. He couldn't see why that would explain the difference, so he tried to equalize every other factor among the maternity patients. He standardized everything from birthing positions to ventilation and diet. He even standardized the way the laundry was done. He looked at every possibility but could find no answer. Nothing he tried made any measurable difference in the mortality rates.

“But then something happened. He took a four-month leave to visit another hospital, and upon his return he discovered that the death rate had fallen significantly in his section of the ward in his absence.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He didn't know why, but it had definitely fallen. He dug in to find the reason. Gradually, his inquiry led him to think about the possible significance of research done by the doctors on cadavers.”

“Cadavers?”

“Yes. Remember, Vienna General was a teaching and research hospital. Many of the doctors split their time between research on cadavers and treatment of live patients. They hadn't seen any problem with that practice because there was as yet no understanding of germs. All they knew were symptoms. And in examining his own work practices compared with the practices of those who had worked for him in his absence, Semmelweis discovered that the only significant difference was that he, Semmelweis, spent far more time doing research on the cadavers.

“From these observations, he developed a theory of childbed fever, a theory that became the precursor to germ theory. He concluded that ‘particles’ from cadavers and other diseased patients were being transmitted to healthy patients *on the hands of the physicians*. So he immediately instituted a policy requiring physicians to wash their hands thoroughly in a chlorine-and-lime solution before examining any patient. And you know what happened?”

I shook my head. “What?”

“The death rate immediately fell to 1 in 100.”

“So he was right,” I said, almost under my breath. “The doctors were the carriers.”

“Yes. In fact, Semmelweis once sadly remarked, ‘Only God knows the number of patients who went prematurely to their graves because of me.’ Imagine living with *that*. The doctors were doing the best they knew how, but they were carrying a disease they knew nothing about. It caused a multitude of debilitating symptoms, all of which could be prevented by a single act once the common cause of the symptoms was discovered—what was later identified as a germ.”

Bud stopped. He put his hands on the table and leaned toward me. “There is a similar germ that is spread in organizations—a germ we all carry to one extent or another, a germ that kills leadership effectiveness and teamwork, a germ that causes a multitude of ‘people problems,’ a germ that can be isolated and neutralized.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Just what we’ve been talking about,” Bud replied. “Self-deception—‘the box.’ Or, more precisely, self-deception is the disease. What we’re going to learn about is the germ that causes it. And what I’m suggesting, Tom, is that, like the discovery of the cause of childbed fever, the discovery of the cause of self-deception amounts to the revelation of a sort of unifying theory, an explanation that shows how the apparently disparate collection of symptoms we call ‘people problems’—from problems in leadership to problems in motivation and everything in between—are all caused by the same thing. With this knowledge, people problems can be solved with an efficiency that has never been possible before. There is a clear way to attack and solve them—not one by one but in one disciplined stroke.”

“That’s a bold claim,” I said.

“Indeed,” Bud responded. “But I don’t intend for you to take my word for it. I’m going to attempt to help you discover it for yourself. We need you to understand it because you need to make sure the strategies that follow from it are implemented in your division.”

“Okay,” I said.

“To begin with,” he said, “I think you might be interested to know how I failed at this when I first joined Zagrum.”

5 Beneath Effective Leadership

“After nine years at the law firm,” Bud began, “I left to become general counsel of Sierra Product Systems. Do you remember Sierra?”

Sierra had pioneered several of the processes that Zagrum had exploited to climb to its place at the top of the high-tech manufacturing heap. “Of course,” I replied. “Their technologies changed the industry. Whatever happened to them?”

“They were acquired—by Zagrum Company.”

“Really? I never heard that.”

“The deal was sort of complicated. But the long and short of it is that Zagrum acquired most of Sierra’s useful intellectual property—patents and so on. That was 16 years ago. At the time, I was COO of Sierra and came to Zagrum as part of the deal. I had no idea what I was getting into.” Bud reached for his glass and took a drink. “At the time, Zagrum was a bit of a mystery. But I was introduced to the mystery of Zagrum in a hurry—in my second major meeting, to be exact.

“Being intimately familiar with the key acquisitions from Sierra, I joined Zagrum as part of the executive team. In my first meeting, I was given several difficult assignments to complete before the next meeting in two weeks. It was a heavy load, learning the business and all.

“At last, on the night before the next meeting, there was only one assignment that I’d yet to complete. It was late, and I was tired. Given all I’d accomplished and been through to do it, this one remaining assignment seemed inconsequential. So I let it go.

“At the meeting the next day, I reported my achievements, made recommendations, and shared the important information I had gathered. Then I told the group that because all my time had been taken up with these other assignments, not to mention all the obstacles I’d encountered, there was one assignment I hadn’t yet completed.

“I’ll never forget what happened next. Lou Herbert, who was then president of the company, turned to Kate Stenarude, who at the time

occupied the position I have now, and asked *her* to take that assignment for the next meeting. The meeting then continued with others' reports. Nothing more was made of it, but I noticed that I was the only person in the group who had left something undone.

"I spent the rest of the meeting lost in my own thoughts—feeling embarrassed, feeling small, wondering if I belonged, wondering if I *wanted* to belong.

"The meeting closed, and I packed my documents into my briefcase as others chatted. I didn't feel part of the group at that moment and was quietly slipping past some of my bantering colleagues toward the door when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"I turned and saw Lou smiling, gazing at me with his gentle yet penetrating eyes. He asked if I'd mind if he walked with me back to my office. To my surprise after what he had just done to me in the meeting, I replied that I would welcome it."

Bud paused for a moment, pulling himself from the memory. "You don't know Lou, Tom, and probably haven't been here long enough to know the stories, but Lou Herbert is a legend. He was personally responsible for taking a mediocre, inconsequential company and making it into a juggernaut—sometimes in spite of, and sometimes even because of, his weaknesses. Everyone who worked at Zagrum during his era was fiercely loyal to him."

"I've heard a few stories, actually," I said. "And I remember from my work at Tetrix how even the top folks there seemed to admire him—Joe Alvarez in particular, the Tetrix CEO, who considered Lou the pioneer of the industry."

"He's right," Bud agreed. "Lou *was* the industry pioneer. But Joe doesn't know the extent of his pioneering. That's what *you're* going to learn," he emphasized. "Lou's been retired for years now, but he still comes around a few times a month to see how we're doing. His insight is invaluable. We still keep an office for him.

"Anyway, I knew much of his legend before I joined the company. So perhaps you can understand my warring emotions after the meeting I just described. I felt that I'd been slighted, but I was also supremely worried about Lou's opinion of me. And then he asked if he could walk me to my

office! I was glad to have him walk with me but also afraid—of what, though, I didn't know.

"He asked me how my move had been, whether my family was settled and happy, and how I was enjoying the challenges at Zagrum. He was saddened to hear that Nancy was having a hard time with the move and promised to call her personally to see if there was anything he could do—a call he placed that very night.

"When we arrived at my office, before I could turn to go in, he took me by both shoulders with his strong, lean hands. He looked straight into my eyes, a look of gentle concern written in the lines across his weathered face. 'Bud,' he said, 'we're happy to have you with us. You're a talented man and a good man. You add a lot to the team. But you won't ever let us down again, will you?' "

"Are you kidding me?" I asked incredulously. "He said *that*?"

"Yes."

"Nothing against Lou," I said, "but I think that was a little uncalled for, given all you'd done. You can scare away a lot of people saying things like that."

"That's true," Bud agreed. "But you know something? It didn't happen that way for me. With Lou, in that moment, I wasn't offended. And in a way, I was even inspired. I found myself saying, 'No, Lou. I won't. I won't ever let you down again.'

"Now I know that sounds corny. But that's the way it was with Lou. He very rarely did things by the book. If 100 people had tried to do what Lou did to me in that meeting and afterward, only 1 in 100 could have invited my cooperation, as Lou did, rather than my resentment. By the book, it shouldn't have worked. But it worked anyway. And with Lou, it usually did. The question, Tom, is *why*—*why* did it work?"

That was a good question. "I don't know," I finally said, shrugging my shoulders. Then, almost as an afterthought, I said, "Maybe you just knew that Lou cared about you, so you didn't feel as threatened as you might have otherwise."

Bud smiled and sat down again in the seat across from me. "So you think I could *tell* that—how Lou was feeling about me."

"Yeah, I think you probably could."

“And so you’re saying, then, Tom, that I was primarily responding to how Lou was regarding me—at least to how I thought he was regarding me—and that his regard, to me, was more important than merely his words or his actions. Is that what you’re suggesting?”

I pondered the question for a moment, thinking about the things I cared about in my interactions with others. I *did* pay attention to how I thought others were seeing me—what my wife, Laura, was thinking about me, for example, or whether I thought she was just thinking of herself. My responses to her and to others always seemed to be informed by what I thought they were thinking of me. “Yes, I guess I *am* suggesting that,” I agreed. “If I feel like someone is just thinking of himself, I usually discount everything he says.”

Bud nodded. “We had a good example of that here a couple of years ago. Two people over in Building 6 were having a hard time working together. One of them, Gabe, came to me to talk about it and said, ‘I don’t know what to do here. I can’t get Leon to respond and cooperate with me. It doesn’t matter what I do; Leon doesn’t seem to think that I have any interest in him. I go out of my way to ask about his family. I invite him to lunch. I’ve done everything I can think of doing, but nothing helps.’

“‘I want you to consider something, Gabe,’ I said to him. ‘Really think about it. When you’re going out of your way to do all those things for Leon so that he’ll know you have an interest in him, what are you most interested in—*him* or his opinion of *you*?’

“I think Gabe was a little surprised by the question. ‘Perhaps Leon thinks you’re not really interested in him,’ I continued, ‘because you’re really more interested in yourself.’

“Gabe finally understood the problem, but it was a painful moment. It was up to him, then, to figure out what to do about it, applying some of the things that you and I are going to cover today—ideas, by the way, that apply as much to our relationships at home as they do to our relationships at work. Let me give you an example of that, closer to home.”

Bud smiled at me. “You’ve probably never had an argument with your wife, now, have you?”

I burst out in a too-eager laugh. “Just a couple.”

“Well, my wife, Nancy, and I were in the middle of one of those a number of years back. It was the morning, before work. As I recall, she was

upset that I hadn't cleaned the dishes the night before, and I was upset that she was so upset about it. Do you get the picture?"

"Oh yeah, I've been there," I said, thinking of the argument I'd had with Laura that very morning.

"After a while, Nancy and I had actually worked our ways to opposite sides of the room," Bud continued. "I was tiring of our little 'discussion,' which was making me late for work, and decided to apologize and put an end to it. I walked over to her and said, 'I'm sorry, Nancy,' and bent down to kiss her.

"Our lips met, if at all, only for a millisecond. It was the world's shortest kiss. I didn't intend it that way, but it was all either of us could muster.

" 'You don't mean it,' she said quietly, as I backed slowly away. And she was right, of course—for just the reason we've been talking about. The way I really felt came through. I felt wronged, burdened, and unappreciated, and I couldn't cover it up—even with a kiss. But I remember wandering down the hall toward the garage, shaking my head and muttering to myself. Now I had more evidence of my wife's unreasonableness—she couldn't even accept an apology!

"But here's the point, Tom: Was there an apology to accept?"

"No, because you didn't really mean it, just like Nancy said."

"That's right. My words said, 'I'm sorry,' but my feelings didn't, and it was the way I was feeling—revealed as it was through my voice, my gaze, my posture, my level of interest in her needs, and so on—it was *that* that she was responding to."

Bud paused, and I thought of that morning with Laura: her face, a face that once radiated energy, concern, and love for life, now obscured by resignation to a deep hurt, her words tearing holes in whatever convictions I still held for our marriage. "I don't feel like I know you anymore, Tom," she had said. "And what's worse, I get the feeling most of the time that you don't really care to know *me*. It's like I weigh you down or something. I don't know the last time I felt love from you. It's all coldness now. You just bury yourself in your work—even when you're home. And to be honest, I don't really have strong feelings for you, either. I wish I did, but everything is just kind of blah. Our life together isn't really together at all. We just live our lives separately while living in the same house, passing each other

every now and then, inquiring about calendars and common events. We even manage to smile, but it's all lies. There's no feeling behind it."

"As you suggested, Tom," I heard Bud say, calling me back from my troubles, "we often can sense how others are feeling toward us, can't we? Given a little time, we can tell when we're being coped with, manipulated, or outsmarted. We can detect the hypocrisy. We can feel the blame concealed beneath veneers of niceness. And we typically resent it. In the workplace, for example, it won't matter if the other person tries managing by walking around, sitting on the edge of the chair to practice active listening, inquiring about family members in order to show interest, or using any other skill they may have learned in order to be more effective. What we'll know and respond to is how that person is *regarding* us when doing those things."

My thoughts turned to Chuck Staehli again. "Yeah, I know what you're talking about," I said. "Do you know Chuck Staehli, the COO over at Tetrix?"

"About six-foot-four, thinning reddish hair, narrow intense eyes?" asked Bud.

"That's him. Well, it took me about two minutes with him to know that he felt the world revolved around him—and if not the world, then certainly everyone in his organization. I remember, for example, being on a conference call with Joe Alvarez after a hectic October spent fixing a bug in one of our products. It was a Herculean effort that consumed nearly all of my time and 80 percent of the time of one of my groups. On the call, Joe offered congratulations for a job well done. Guess who accepted all the praise?"

"Staehli?"

"Yes, Staehli. He barely acknowledged us—and it was in such an undervalued way that it was worse than if he hadn't. He just lapped it all up and basked in the glory. I think in that moment he really thought he *was* responsible. It made me sick, quite frankly. And that's just one of many examples."

Bud was listening with interest, and suddenly I became aware of what I was doing—criticizing my old boss in front of my new one. I felt that I should shut up. Immediately. "Anyway, it just seemed that Chuck was a

good example of what you're talking about." I leaned back in my chair to signal that I was done, hoping that I hadn't said too much.

If Bud was alarmed by anything, he didn't show it. "Yeah, that's a good example," he said. "Now compare Staehli with Lou. Or, more precisely, compare the *influence* that each of them had on others. Would you say, for example, that Staehli inspired in you the same kind of effort, the same level of results, as Lou inspired in me?"

That was easy. "No way," I said. "Staehli didn't inspire hard work or devotion at all. Don't get me wrong. I worked hard anyway because I had a career of my own to worry about. But no one ever went out of their way to help him."

"Notice that some people—like Lou, for example—inspire devotion and commitment in others, even when they're interpersonally clumsy," said Bud. "The fact that they haven't attended many seminars or that they've never learned the latest techniques hardly matters. They seem to produce anyway. And they inspire those around them to do the same. Some of the best leaders in our company fall in this category. They don't always say or do the 'right' things, but people love working with them. They get results.

"But then there are other people—like Chuck Staehli, as you described him—who have a very different influence. Even if they do all the 'right' things interpersonally—even if they apply all the latest skills and techniques to their communications and tasks—it won't matter. People ultimately resent them and their tactics. And so they end up failing as leaders—failing because they provoke people to resist them."

Everything Bud was saying seemed true when applied to Chuck Staehli, but I wondered whether he was going too far. "I get what you're saying," I said, "I think I even agree with it. But are you suggesting that people skills don't matter at all? I'm not sure *that's* right."

"No. I certainly don't mean to suggest that. But I *am* suggesting that people skills are never *primary*. In my experience, they can be valuable when used by people like Lou—they can reduce misunderstandings and clumsiness. But they're not so helpful when used by people like Staehli, as you described him, for they just create resentment in the people one is trying to 'skill' or 'smooth' into doing something. Whether or not people skills are effective depends on something deeper."

"Deeper?"

“Yes, deeper than behavior and skill. That’s what Lou—and my reaction to him—taught me the day of that second meeting here at Zagrum. *And* what he taught me at the beginning of the very next day when he and I met for a daylong meeting.”

“You mean—?”

“Yes, Tom,” Bud answered, before I had voiced the question. “Lou did for me what I’m now beginning to do for you. They used to be called ‘Lou Meetings,’ ” he added with a grin and a knowing look.

“Remember, I have the same problem that you have.”

6 *The Deep Choice That Determines Influence*

“So what’s this something deeper?” I asked curiously.

“What I’ve already introduced to you—self-deception,” Bud replied. “Whether I’m *in* or *out* of the box.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, wanting to know more.

“As we’ve been talking about, no matter what we’re doing on the outside, people respond primarily to how we’re feeling about them on the inside. And how we’re feeling about them depends on whether we’re in or out of the box concerning them. Let me illustrate that point further with a couple of examples.

“About a year ago, I flew from Dallas to Phoenix on a flight that had open seating. While boarding, I overheard the boarding agent say that the plane was not sold out but that there would be very few unused seats. I felt lucky and relieved to find a window seat open with a vacant seat beside it about a third of the way back on the plane. Passengers still in need of seats continued streaming down the aisle, their eyes scanning and evaluating the desirability of their dwindling seating options. I set my briefcase on the vacant middle seat, took out that day’s paper, and started to read. I remember peering over the top corner of the paper at the people who were coming down the aisle. At the sight of body language that said my briefcase’s seat was being considered, I spread the paper wider, making the seat look as undesirable as possible. Do you get the picture?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Good. Now let me ask you a question: On the surface, what *behaviors* was I engaged in on the plane—what were some of the things I was *doing*?”

“Well, you were being kind of a jerk, for one thing,” I answered.

“Now that’s certainly true,” Bud agreed, breaking into a broad smile, “but that’s not quite what I mean—not yet, anyway. I mean, what specific actions was I taking on the plane? What were my actions or behaviors?”

I pictured the situation. “You were ... taking two seats. Is that the kind of thing you mean?”

“Sure. What else?”

“Uh ... you were reading the paper. You were watching for people who might want to sit in the seat next to you. To be very basic, you were sitting.”

“Okay, good enough,” said Bud. “Here’s another question: While I was doing those behaviors, how was I seeing the people who were looking for seats? What were they to me?”

“I’d say that you saw them as threats, maybe nuisances or problems—something like that.”

Bud nodded. “Would you say that I considered the needs of those still looking for seats to be as legitimate as my own?”

“Not at all. Your needs counted, and everyone else’s were secondary—if that,” I answered, surprised by my bluntness. “You were kind of seeing yourself as the kingpin.”

Bud laughed, obviously enjoying the comment. “Well said, well said.” Then he continued, more seriously, “You’re right. On that plane, if others counted at all, their needs and desires counted far less than mine. Now compare that experience with this one: About six months ago, Nancy and I took a trip to Florida. Somehow there was a mistake in the ticketing process, and we weren’t seated together. The flight was mostly full, and the flight attendant was having a difficult time trying to find a way to seat us together. As we stood in the aisle trying to figure out a solution, a woman holding a hastily folded newspaper came up behind us, from the rear of the plane, and said, ‘Excuse me—if you need two seats together, I believe the seat next to me is vacant. I’d be happy to sit in one of your seats.’

“Now think of this woman. How would you say that she saw *us*—did she see *us* as threats, nuisances, or problems?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It seems like she just saw you as people in need of seats who would like to sit together. That’s probably more basic than what you’re looking for, but—”

“On the contrary,” Bud said, “that’s a terrific way to put it. She just saw us as people—we’re going to come back to that in a moment. Now let’s compare the way this woman apparently saw others with the way I saw those who were loading onto the plane in my story involving the briefcase. You said that I saw myself as kind of the kingpin—more important than others, with needs that were greater.”

I nodded.

“Is that the way this woman seemed to see herself and others?” he asked. “Did she, like me, seem to privilege her own needs and desires over the needs and desires of others?”

“It doesn’t seem like it, no,” I answered. “It’s sort of like from her point of view, under the circumstances, your needs and her needs counted about the same.”

“That’s how it felt,” Bud said, nodding. He got up and walked toward the far end of the conference table. “Here we have two situations in which a person was seated on a plane next to an empty seat, evidently reading the paper and observing others who were still in need of seats on the plane. That’s what was happening on the surface—behaviorally.”

He opened two large mahogany doors in the wall at the far end of the table, revealing a large whiteboard. “But notice how different this similar experience was for me and for this woman. I minimized others; she didn’t. I felt anxious, uptight, irritated, threatened, and angry, while she appeared to have had no such negative emotions at all. I sat there blaming others who might be interested in my briefcase’s seat—maybe one looked too happy, another too grim, another had too many carry-ons, another looked too talkative, and so on. She, on the other hand, seemed not to have blamed but to have understood—whether happy, grim, loaded with carry-ons, talkative, or not—they needed to sit *somewhere*. And if so, why shouldn’t the seat next to her—and in her case, even her *own* seat—be as rightly theirs as any others?

“Now here’s a question for you,” Bud continued. “Isn’t it the case that the people getting on both planes were people with comparable hopes, needs, cares, and fears, and that all of them had more or less the same need to sit?”

That seemed about right. “Yes. I’d agree with that.”

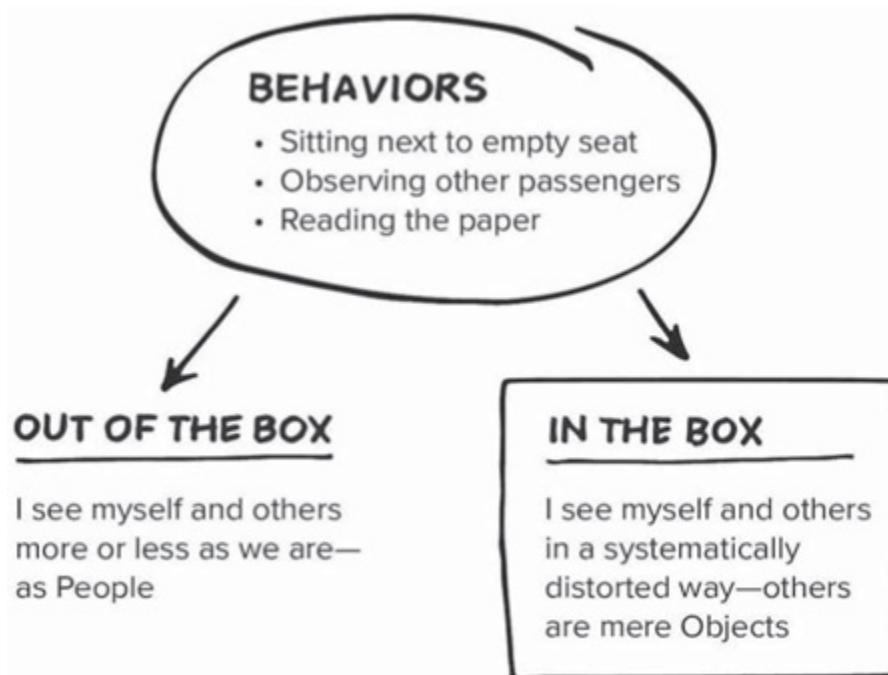
“If that’s true, then I had a big problem—because I wasn’t seeing the people on the plane like that at all. My view was that I somehow was entitled or superior to those who were still looking for seats. Which is to say that I wasn’t really seeing them as people at all. They were more like objects to me in that moment than people.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I agreed.

“Notice how my view of both myself and others was distorted from what we agreed was the reality,” Bud said. “Although the truth was that all of us

were people with more or less the same need to sit, I wasn't seeing the situation that way. So my view of the world was a systematically incorrect way of seeing others and myself. I saw others as less than they were—as objects with needs and desires somehow secondary to and less legitimate than mine. But I couldn't see the problem with what I was doing. I was self-deceived—or, in the box. The lady who offered us her seat, on the other hand, saw others and the situation clearly, without bias. She saw others as they were, as people like herself, with similar needs and desires. She saw straightforwardly. She was out of the box.

“So the inner experiences of two people,” he went on, “although they exhibited the same external behaviors, were entirely different. This difference is important enough that I want to emphasize it with a diagram.” At this, he turned to the board and spent a minute drawing the following:



“It’s like this, Tom,” Bud said, stepping to the side of the board so that I could see. “Whatever I might be ‘doing’ on the surface—whether it be, for example, sitting, observing others, reading the paper, whatever—I’m being one of two fundamental ways when I’m doing it. Either I’m seeing others straightforwardly as they are—as people like me who have needs and desires as legitimate as my own—or I’m not. As I heard Kate put it once: One way, I experience myself as *a* person among people. The other way, I

experience myself as *the* person among objects. One way, I'm out of the box; the other way, I'm in the box. Does that make sense?"

I was thinking about a situation that had occurred a week earlier. Someone in my department had made herself into a terrible nuisance, and I couldn't see how this in-the-box and out-of-the-box distinction applied. In fact, if anything, the situation seemed to undercut what Bud was talking about. "I'm not sure," I said. "Let me give you a situation and you tell me how it fits."

"Fair enough," he said, taking his seat.

"I have a conference room around the corner from my office where I often go to think and strategize. The people in my department know that the room is like a second office to me and are careful now, after a few altercations over the last month, not to schedule it without my knowing. Last week, however, someone in the department went in and used it. Not only did she use the room without scheduling it, but she erased all my notes from the whiteboard. What do you think of that?"

"Under the circumstances, I'd say that was pretty poor judgment on her part."

Nodding, I said, "I was peeved, to say the least. It took me a while to reconstruct what I had done, and I'm still not sure that I have everything right."

I was about to tell more—about how I immediately had her called into my office, refused a handshake, and then told her without even asking her to sit down that she was never to do that again or she would be looking for a new job. But then I thought better of it. "How does self-deception fit into *that* scenario?" I asked.

"Let me ask you a few questions," Bud answered, "and then maybe you can tell me. What kinds of thoughts and feelings did you have about this woman when you found out what she'd done?"

"Well ... I guess I thought she wasn't very careful."

Bud nodded with an inquisitive look that invited me to say more.

"And I suppose I thought it was stupid of her to do what she did without asking anybody." I paused and then added, "It was pretty presumptuous of her, don't you think?"

"Certainly not very wise," Bud agreed. "Anything more?"

"No, that's about what I remember."

“Let me ask you this, then: Do you know what she wanted to use the room for?”

“Well, no. But why should that matter? It doesn’t change the fact that she shouldn’t have been using it, does it?”

“Perhaps not,” Bud answered. “But let me ask you another question: Do you know her name?”

The question caught me by surprise. I thought for a moment. I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard her name. Had my secretary mentioned it? Or did she say it herself when she extended her hand to greet me? I searched my memory, but there was nothing.

But why should that matter, anyway? I thought to myself, emboldened. *So I don’t know her name. So what? Does that make me wrong or something?* “No, I guess I don’t know it, or I can’t remember,” I said.

Bud nodded. “Now here’s the question I’d really like you to consider. Assuming that this woman is, in fact, careless, stupid, and presumptuous, do you suppose that she’s *as* careless, stupid, and presumptuous as you accused her of being when all this happened?”

“Well, I didn’t really accuse her.”

“Not in your words, perhaps, but have you had any interaction with her since the incident?”

I thought of the ice-cold reception I gave her and the offer of her hand rebuffed.

“Yeah, just once,” I said meekly.

Bud must have noticed the change in my voice, for he dropped his voice slightly and lost his matter-of-fact tone. “Tom, I want you to imagine that you were her when you met. What do you think she felt from you?”

The answer, of course, was obvious. She couldn’t have felt worse if I’d hit her with a two-by-four. I remembered the tremor in her voice and her uncertain yet hurried steps as she left my office. I wondered now for the first time how I must have hurt her and what she must be feeling. I imagined that she must now be quite insecure and worried, especially since everyone in the department seemed to know about what had happened. “Yeah,” I said slowly, “looking back on it, I’m afraid I didn’t handle the situation very well.”

“Then let me come back to my prior question,” Bud said. “Do you suppose that your view of this woman at the time made her seem worse

than she really was?”

I paused before answering, not because I wasn't sure, but because I wanted to collect my composure. “Well, maybe. But that doesn't change the fact that she did something she shouldn't have, does it?” I added.

“Not at all. And we'll get to that. But right now, the question I want you to consider is this: Whatever she was doing—be it right or wrong—was your view of her more like *my* view of the people on the plane or more like the view of the woman I told you about?”

I thought about that for a moment.

“Think of it this way,” Bud added, pointing at the diagram on the board. “Were you regarding her as a person like yourself, with similar hopes and needs, or was she just an object to you—as you said, just a threat, a nuisance, or a problem?”

“I guess she might've been just an object to me,” I said finally.

“So now, how would you say this self-deception stuff applies? Would you say you were *in* or *out of* the box?”

“I guess I was probably *in* it,” I said.

“That's worth thinking about, Tom. Because this distinction,” he said, pointing again at the diagram, “reveals what was beneath Lou's success—and Zagrum's, for that matter. Because Lou was usually out of the box, he saw straightforwardly. He saw people as they were—as people. And he found a way to build a company of people who see that way much more than people in most organizations do. If you want to know the secret of Zagrum's success, it's that we've developed a culture where people are simply invited to see others as people. And being seen and treated straightforwardly, people respond accordingly. That's what I felt—and returned—to Lou.”

That sounded great, but it seemed too simplistic to be the element that set Zagrum apart. “It can't really be that simple, can it, Bud? I mean, if Zagrum's secret were that basic, everyone would have duplicated it by now.”

“Don't misunderstand,” said Bud. “I'm not minimizing the importance of, for example, getting smart and skilled people into the company or working hard or any other number of things that are important to Zagrum's success. But notice—everyone else has duplicated all of *that* stuff, but they've yet to duplicate our results. And that's because they don't know

how much smarter smart people are, how much more skilled skilled people get, and how much harder hardworking people work when they see, and are seen, straightforwardly—as people.

“And don’t forget,” he continued, “self-deception is a particularly difficult sort of problem. To the extent that organizations are beset by self-deception—and most of them are—they can’t see the problem. Most organizations are stuck in the box.”

That claim hung in the air as Bud reached for his glass of water and took a drink. “By the way,” he added, “the woman’s name is Joyce Mulman.”

“Who ... what woman?”

“The person whose hand you refused. Her name is Joyce Mulman.”

7 *People or Objects*

“How do you know her?” I asked worriedly. “And how’d you hear about what happened?”

Bud smiled reassuringly. “Don’t be fooled by the distance between buildings. Word travels fast. I heard about it from a couple of your quality team leaders who were discussing it over lunch in the Building 5 cafeteria. It seems you made quite an impression.”

I struggled to keep my composure and control my expression.

“As for knowing her,” Bud continued, “I don’t really, except that I try to know the names of as many people as I can around the company. It gets more difficult by the month with all of our growth, though.”

I nodded, amazed that someone in Bud’s position would worry about knowing the name of someone who was at Joyce’s level in the company.

“You know those pictures we take for clearance badges?”

I nodded.

“Well, the executive team members receive copies of all those pictures, and we try to familiarize ourselves with, if not completely memorize, the faces and names of the people who join the company.

“I have found, at least with me,” he continued, “that if I’m not interested in knowing a person’s name, I’m probably not really interested in the person as a person. For me, it’s a basic litmus test. Now, it doesn’t necessarily work the other way around—that is, I can learn and know people’s names and have them still be just objects to me. But if I’m unwilling even to try to remember someone’s name, that itself is a clue to me that he or she is probably just an object to me and that I’m in the box. Anyway, that’s why I know her—or at least how I know *of* her.”

As Bud talked, my mind was taking inventory of the people in my division. I realized that of the 300 or so people in my part of the company, I knew only about 20 by name. *But I’ve been here only a month!* I said to myself in protest. *What more could you expect?* But I knew better. I knew that what Bud said about himself was true of me as well. The amount of

time I had worked at Zagrum was a red herring. The truth was, I hadn't really *tried* to learn anyone's name. And as I thought about that now, it seemed clear that my lack of interest in as basic an issue as others' names was a pretty clear indication that I probably wasn't seeing them as people.

"I guess you think I really messed up," I said, my thoughts turning back to Joyce.

"It's not important what I think. What's important is what *you* think."

"Well, I'm kind of torn. On the one hand, I feel I owe Joyce an apology. But on the other hand, I still think she shouldn't have gone in that room and erased everything without checking first."

Bud nodded. "Do you suppose it's possible that you're right on both counts?"

"What? That I was wrong and right at the same time? How can that be?"

"Think of it this way," offered Bud. "You're saying that Joyce shouldn't just haul off and erase things that other people have written without finding out if that's okay first. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"That seems perfectly reasonable to me as well. And you're saying that the right thing in the situation was to tell her that she must never do that again. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's the way it seems to me."

"Me too," said Bud.

"Then what did I do wrong?" I asked. "That's exactly what I did."

"Yes, that *is* what you did," Bud agreed, "but here's the question: Were you in the box or out of the box when you did it?"

All of a sudden, a light went on for me. "Oh, I get it. It's not that I did the wrong thing necessarily but that I did what I did—maybe even the 'right' thing—in the wrong way. I was seeing her as an object. I was in the box. That's what you're saying."

"Exactly. And if you do what might on the surface be considered the right thing, but do it while in the box, you'll invite an entirely different and less productive response than you would if you were out of the box. Remember, people primarily respond not to what we do but to how we're *being*—whether we're in or out of the box toward them."

This seemed to make sense, but I wasn't sure it was realistic for the workplace.

“Is there something you’re wondering about?” Bud asked.

“Not really,” I said without conviction. “Well, I *am* struggling with one thing.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“I’m just sitting here wondering how you can conduct a business seeing others as people all the time. I mean, won’t you get run over doing that? I can see it applying to family life, for example, but isn’t it a bit unrealistic to think that you have to be that way at work too, when you’ve got to be fast and decisive?”

“I’m glad you asked that,” Bud said. “It was the next thing I wanted to talk about.” He paused and then said, “First, I want you to think of Joyce. The way you handled the situation, I’d imagine that she won’t ever be using your conference room again.”

“Probably not.”

“And since that’s what you wanted to convey to her, you might think that your meeting with her was a success.”

“Yeah, in a way I guess that’s right,” I said, feeling a bit better about what I’d done.

“Fair enough,” Bud said. “But let’s think beyond the conference room. Do you think that by being in the box when you conveyed your message, you invited in her *more* enthusiasm and creativity about her work or *less*?”

Bud’s question caught me up short. All of a sudden, I realized that to Joyce Mulman, I was like Chuck Staehli. I remember being dressed down by Staehli, who seemed always in the box as near as I could tell, and I knew firsthand how demotivating it was to work with him as a result. To Joyce, I must seem no different from Staehli. The thought was terribly depressing.

“I guess that’s right,” I answered. “I might’ve solved the conference room problem but created other problems in its wake.”

“It’s worth thinking about,” Bud agreed, nodding. “But your question actually goes to something deeper than that. I’ll try to address it.”

He stood up again and resumed his pacing. “Your question assumes that when we’re out of the box, our behaviors are ‘soft,’ and when we’re in the box, our behaviors are ‘hard.’ That’s why you wonder, I take it, whether one can actually sustain a business being out of the box all the time. But let’s think a little harder about that assumption. Is the distinction between being *in* the box and being *out of* the box a behavioral one?”