

Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box

The Arbinger Institute

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“Boy, is he delusional.” Many people have probably made a similar remark, but isn’t it all too easy to look at others and diagnose their shortcomings and failures? If only these others would get out of the way life would be a smooth ride. The Arbinger Institute, a scholarly consortium and management training and consulting firm, introduces through this book their idea that “problems that typically prevent superior performance in organizations are the result of a little-known problem called ‘self-deception.’”

The concepts presented are useful not only for business leaders. One of the main problems discussed is the tendency for people to look at others as objects or obstacles, as opposed to simply other people, with the same needs, desires, fears, etc. In the workplace, this leads to conflict, emotional distance, and lack of motivation, just as it does at home. An example used points to the daily commute. Clenching the steering wheel, trying to make that meeting, the driver of the car ahead certainly seems like nothing but an obstacle. Zipping finally past, perhaps pausing momentarily to vent a little pent-up anger, who is that driver really? A familiar face. Instantly, the obstacle becomes none other than the kindly neighbor across the street; the obstacle becomes a real person.

While this seems like a simple concept, it’s really like peeling the skin of an onion to uncover more and more layers. According to the authors, people who are victims of self-deception are operating as if they are in a box. They are both trapped and blinded, unable to get out and unable to see what’s keeping them in it. Add to that the most devastating consequence—being completely focused on oneself and one’s own plight, and it’s seemingly impossibility to escape once in it.

Using an entertaining, novelistic approach to illustrate their theory, the authors take the reader through the trials of a newly hired executive at a highly successful and admired company. When his department is unable to show anticipated results, this hotshot is stunned to find out that he is actually the problem, rather than the incompetents beneath him. With further delving, he is also dismayed to find out his strained relationship with his wife and son may, too, have more to do with him than with them. Fortunately, getting out of the box is not as difficult nor as painful as staying in it, though readers may shed a few tears as they peel away their own layers. Recognizing one’s own self-deception is a bit more painful than recognizing others’ delusions, after all.

VICKI GERVICKAS (July / August 2000)

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