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Leadership and Self-Deception Book Review

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Co-workers have been whispering. Snippets about “people problems” and success strategies reverberate in the ears of a new employee as he approaches the lobby.

Tom thinks he has finally made it. Years of hard work, recognized at last, have brought him to a senior management position at the top of the industry. Confidence flicks across his ordinarily stoic face. Uncooperative subordinates, bothersome competitors, an unappreciative spouse – none of those would-be obstacles could hinder his ascent to success.

Up the stairs, around the corner, and he strides inside the office.

Face to face with his new boss, Bud, Tom eagerly awaits the golden words of good news to drip from the lips of his indubitable benefactor. Instead, Tom hears, “You have a problem.”

Shock. His stomach keels over. Silence. Tom wonders, “What do you do when you’re confronted with someone you believe is lazy or incompetent?” Instead of interpersonal skills or behavioral solutions, the answer given to him could simply be stated, ‘Believe something better.’ Tom’s perspective was a false premise. We see his initial struggles to accept this, to embrace the concept that so many of our perceived impediments to prosperity in the home and at the workplace are a matter of personal choice. After all, he reasons, one cannot control what everyone else does, so how could the individual be responsible at all for others’ lack of compliance and empathy?

With that, we follow Tom into a surprisingly new perspective of the world, a venture that is strenuous, yet simple. This is no ordinary meeting with your chief, no lecture-style self-help book you expected.

In Leadership and Self-Deception, one finds all the utility of the business and self-improvement genres, all the while playing out as seamlessly as a familiar film or recent memory. Placed inside the internal stirrings of the fictional man Tom, we embark not on some foreign odyssey into professional and personal perspicacity but into our lives. The storyline unrolling through the pages offers a parallel to our own autobiographies, providing a perspective both hominal and homey. The Arbinger Institute has graced the oft-needed pinnacle of a mountain seldom scaled.

Leadership and Self-Deception is centered on one core issue, represented by the title’s second half. Early on, the question is posed to Tom, “So what do you do when you’re confronted with someone you believe is lazy or incompetent?” Instead of interpersonal skills or behavioral solutions, the answer given to him could simply be stated, ‘Believe something better.’ Tom’s perspective was a false premise. We see his initial struggles to accept this, to embrace the concept that so many of our perceived impediments to prosperity in the home and at the workplace are a matter of personal choice. After all, he reasons, one cannot control what everyone else does, so how could the individual be responsible at all for others’ lack of compliance and empathy?

This brings us to the thesis of the book. Self-deception, the way in which we justify our view of ourselves by
manipulating what we see in the world and others, “blinds us to the true causes of problems.” Even well-intentioned, hard-working, kind-hearted people lapse unawares into this self-deception in insidious ways beneath our radars. In fact, in all the mentor figures Tom meets -- primarily Bud, Kate, and Lou -- we find no example of perfection, which is to say that in this area, all can improve.

Over the course of several conversations and personal experiences, both at work and at home, Tom begins to understand how not to self-deceive, a condition referred to almost affectionately in the book as being “in the box.” Overcoming self-deception, then, is called “getting [and staying] out of the box.” The premise is that those who resist their instincts to help people are committing “self-betrayal,” as opposed to agents who choose to see and serve people. The irony is that whereas the latter strategy of turning outward proactively inspires leadership in others, one who espouses the all-too-common option of objectifying other people believes he or she is at the mercy of others. Such a person, as explained by Bud, “keeps inviting the very thing I’m blaming him for.”

In the expanded second edition of the book, one can also find a section directed to specific applications for business -- from hiring and building your team members to forming an organizational foundation to addressing tensions in the workplace well. But what about the student, not yet initiated into the world of business? What about the reader who does not have such pursuits in their plans? Because “being out of the box” is not merely some behavior or action for the business sector, it is a principle that can be applied in every situation, be that in interactions with potential employers, university professors, or even fellow classmates and friends. This approach to life and leadership can equally be adopted by those who have retired from the working world, nevertheless continuing onward as leaders in their families and communities.

Yet the value of Leadership and Self-Deception lies not in the content contained but in the experience. Against the light that enters Tom’s view progressively, we may evaluate our history and encounters. When Bud recounts how he had seen himself as the most diligent member of the team, I recall times when I likewise came to recognize the beam in my own eyes. Lou’s reflecting on how he had discounted (and nearly lost) his most valuable coworker resonates with similar regrets of my past. The reader may, like Tom, discover deep poignancy in moments of such paradigm shifts, yet when these are realized, what greater obstacle to leadership could remain? It is out from the dark nights of their own creation that stellar leaders emerge.

“So many of our perceived impediments to prosperity in the home and at the workplace are a matter of personal choice.”