



## Why Do Leaders Deceive Themselves?

*The secret of rulership is to combine a belief in one's own infallibility with the power to learn from past mistakes. ~ George Orwell*

As much as we'd like to believe that we're rational human beings, we can all too easily mislead ourselves. Self-deception is a process that encourages us to justify our false and invalid beliefs.

Individuals, organizations and communities experience self-deception – the root of most problems, according to the Arbinger Institute, a Utah-based consulting firm.

It's human nature to blame others, externalize causes and deny our role in organizational struggles. This tendency is so pervasive that few of us escape its reach, and self-deception intrudes into every aspect of our lives. Nowhere is it more destructive than at the top of the leadership food chain.

As someone responsible for influencing others, consider this: Self-deception blinds you to the true source of most conflicts. Once you're caught in its trap, all of the "solutions" you propose will likely make matters worse. You'll find that your self-deception:

- Obscures the truth about yourself
- Corrupts your view of others and your circumstances
- Destroys your credibility and the trust others have in you
- Inhibits your ability to persuade others
- Thwarts wise decision-making

The extent of your self-deception determines how much your happiness and leadership efforts will be undermined. Without some form of intervention, your performance will suffer, and your subordinates will remain unengaged.

### *A Message from Nancy...*

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?

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Fortunately, recognizing this leadership trap can inoculate you against its consequences. If, however, you believe that guarding yourself against wishful thinking will prevent self-deception, you may be in for a bumpy ride. Ongoing vigilance is required to preserve immunity, note Arbibinger's experts in *Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box*. Awareness will:

- Sharpen your vision
- Reduce feelings of conflict
- Enliven the desire for teamwork
- Redouble accountability
- Enhance your ability to achieve results
- Boost job satisfaction and overall happiness

You can then leverage your leadership strengths, view yourself and others more positively, and resolve resistant personal and professional relationship problems.

## Are You “In” or “Out” of the Box?

*Leadership and Self-Deception* features an entertaining story about an executive who is facing challenges at work and home. His exploits expose the psychological processes that conceal our true motivations and intentions from us and trap us in a “box” of endless self-justification. Most importantly, the book shows us the way out.

When you're “in the box,” you are speaking with your interests and goals in mind. Through the lens of self-justification, you'll find external factors and other people to blame. You'll deny responsibility for problems and fail to identify your part in perpetuating them. In your interactions, you'll try to change other people and convince them to do what you would do.

When you're “out of the box,” there's room for openness, authenticity, and interest in and empathy for other people. You'll seek the true basis for problems, including your own participation. You'll be less interested in assigning blame or judgment, or being locked into unproductive battles. You can give up any delusions that trap you and force you to defend yourself. You can channel your energy into becoming self-aware, identifying needs and achieving results.

## The Lake Wobegon Effect

In Garrison Keillor's fictional community of Lake Wobegon, “the women are strong, the men

are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”

As it turns out, this depiction is not limited to Lake Wobegon. One of the most documented findings in psychology is the average person's ability to believe extremely flattering things about himself. We generally think that we possess a host of socially desirable traits and that we're free of the most unattractive ones.

Most people – some high-achievers, more than others – deem themselves to be:

- More intelligent than others
- More fair-minded
- Less prejudiced
- Better drivers

This phenomenon is so common that it is now known in social-science circles as the “Lake Wobegon Effect.”

A survey of 1 million high-school seniors found:

- Seventy percent thought they were above average in leadership ability.
- Only 2% thought they were generally below average.
- Sixty percent thought they were in the top 10%.
- Approximately 25% thought they were in the top 1%.

A survey of university professors found that 94% thought they were better at their jobs than an average colleague.

While confidence and a fair view of one's capabilities and strengths are essential, overconfidence and an elevated sense of worth lead to fragile relationships. When we focus on proving ourselves, we spend far too much time on defending and justifying our behavior. We cut ourselves off from opportunities to understand our colleagues. Our ego prevents us from communicating an interest in others. In other words, we lack empathy.

## Attributing Success and Failure

The vast majority of people attribute their successes to themselves and their failures to external circumstances. This self-serving bias

is a feeble attempt to positively reinforce our sense of worthiness and self-esteem.

It's not just a matter of believing what we want to believe. Such flights of fantasy are reined in by real-world experiences and our need to perceive them accurately (when we can). Our motivations drive us to subtly process information relevant to a given belief. We collude with our subconscious to cherry-pick information that supports our self-image.

## Self-Image: Gathering Evidence

**O**ur preferred perceptions and opinions lead us to test hypotheses that are slanted toward our chosen direction. By consulting the “right” people, we increase our chances of hearing what we want to hear.

We're not consciously distorting information, but we have considerable opportunities to jiggle various criteria and arrive at conclusions that favor our biases. We slyly assign meanings to information, finding creative ways to frame it so we achieve comforting, ego-pleasing conclusions.

## Managerial Self-Deception

**T**ry telling a colleague or subordinate that he has a problem, and the depth of his self-deception will become clear.

Helping others see what they're unwilling to recognize is a widespread leadership challenge. It's especially tricky when we observe it in others, yet are unable to acknowledge it in ourselves.

Even the most astute managers, no matter how much leadership training or executive coaching they've had, can harbor self-deceiving tendencies. All it takes is elevated stress for this occupational virus to sideline you—and it's usually contagious, spreading throughout the work force.

Managers often pride themselves on how well they listen and show interest in subordinates' family members. Some have received training in how to express “authentic” empathy. But people have keen internal radar systems, and they almost always detect efforts to manipulate them. If they think their boss is trying to outsmart them or clumsily demonstrating a learned management skill, they can smell the hypocrisy a mile away. It's exceptionally difficult to feign genuine interest.

No matter what we do on the outside, people primarily respond to how we feel about them on the inside.

It takes honesty and empathy to generate performance gains.

Always remember that no matter how nice you are when “suggesting” an improvement, your employees will have an internal reaction. That said, there's no need to go overboard and kill them with kindness. You can be firm, yet invite a productivity or commitment upgrade.

## Less Confidence, More Leadership Success

**I**n business psychology, the prevailing wisdom has assumed that a high degree of self-confidence leads to promotions and leadership success.

New studies, however, prove otherwise, writes business psychologist Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic in “Less-Confident People Are More Successful” (*Harvard Business Review* blog, July 2012).

A moderately low level of self-confidence is more likely to make you successful, Dr. Chamorro-Premuzic asserts.

Don't confuse this with a very low degree of self-confidence. Excessive fear, anxiety and stress will inhibit performance, impede decision-making and undermine interpersonal relationships.

But *low-enough* self-confidence can work in your favor because it:

1. **Makes you pay attention to negative feedback and be self-critical.** This means you're open to learning and improving. Most of us tend to listen to feedback and ignore the negative in favor of the positive. If you want to overcome deficits, you must listen to both positive and negative comments.
2. **Motivates you to work harder and prepare more effectively.** If you really want to achieve leadership success, you will do whatever it takes to bridge the gap between the status quo and your professional goals.
3. **Reduces your chances of coming across as arrogant or delusional.** People with lower levels of self-confidence are more likely to admit their mistakes instead of blaming others — and they rarely take credit for others' accomplishments.

If you're serious about becoming a strong leader, lower self-confidence can serve as a strong ally, inspiring you to work hard, conquer limitations and, put simply, avoid being a jerk.

## Inspired Leadership

When you're courageous enough to question your own behavior and motives, you extend the privilege to others. We model the behaviors we wish to see in others. Of course, our employees may resist any type of critique. Avoiding blame and judgment opens the door to cooperation and productivity.

Help yourself and your staff by:

1. Reading Arbinger's *Leadership and Self-Deception*.
2. Working with an executive coach to pinpoint areas of self-deception.
3. Asking yourself, "What's my part in any given problem?"
4. Identifying ways to set aside your ego and achieve optimum results.



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