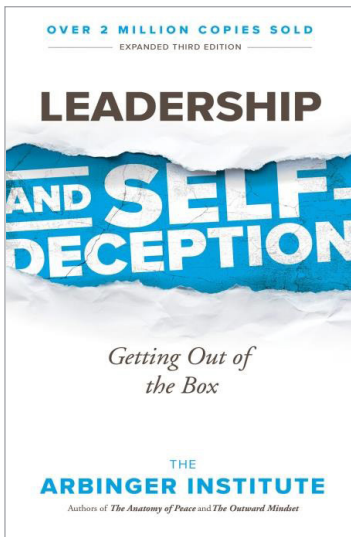


# EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

[www.convenebooksummary.com](http://www.convenebooksummary.com)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### The Arbinger Institute

*The Arbinger Institute is an international training and consulting firm.*

## Leadership and Self-Deception

### THE SUMMARY

Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2000, 2002

#### I. Self-Deception and the “Box”

It was two months ago to the day that I first entered the secluded campus-style headquarters of Zagrum Company to interview for a senior management position. After eight interviews and a three-week period of silence and self-doubt, I was hired to lead one of Zagrum’s product lines.

I was about to be introduced to a senior management ritual particular to Zagrum—a day-long, one-on-one meeting with executive vice president, Bud Jefferson. He was about to become my new boss.

I stood by the long bank of windows in the large third-floor conference room and admired the views of the campus between the leaves of the green Connecticut wood. 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 me his hand. “Please, sit down. Can I get something for you? Coffee, juice?”

“No, thank you,” I replied, “I’ve had plenty already this morning.” I settled in the black leather chair nearest me, and waited for Bud as he poured himself some water. He walked back with his water, bringing the pitcher and an extra glass with him. He set them on the table between us.

“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.

# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

"You have a problem—a problem you're going to have to solve if you're going to make it at Zagrum. The problem is that you don't know it."

"A problem? I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"I can help you, because I have the same problem." Bud rose from his chair—slowly, even solemnly. "To begin with, you need to know about a problem at the heart of the human sciences. Philosophers call it 'self-deception.' At Zagrum we have a less technical name for it—we call it 'being in the box.'"

"As a young lawyer, I was called to an important meeting in San Francisco for three months, leaving my wife and our 13-day-old baby at home. If you asked me at that time what my objective was, I would have said I was 'drafting the possible documents to protect our client and close the deal.'"

"But looking back, I see I was distracted, preoccupied and isolated. Yet if someone had suggested I hadn't caught the vision or wasn't fully engaged in the deal, I would have strongly disagreed. After all, I had left my new baby behind for this. I was working 20-hour days in a lonely hotel room. There was no one more committed to this project than I was!"

I nodded affirmatively. "Of course you would have felt that way."

"So I had a problem I didn't think I had—a problem I couldn't see. I could see matters only from my own closed perspective. I was in a box—cut off, closed up, blind. Does that make sense?" So I also had a bigger problem. The bigger problem was that I couldn't see that I had a problem."

Bud stood and stepped away from his desk. "There's nothing more common in organizations than self-deception," he said. "Think about a person you've worked with in the past who's been a major impediment to teamwork."

That was easy—Chuck Staehi, COO of my former employer. He was a jerk, plain and simple. He thought of no one but himself.

"Okay," Bud said, "here's the question: Does Chuck believe he's a problem?"

"No. Definitely not."

"Of all the problems in organizations, the inability to see that one has a problem is the most common—and the most damaging." Bud placed his hands on the back of his chair. "At Zagrum, Tom, our top strategic initiative is to minimize individual and organizational self-deception."

Bud refilled his water glass. "Have you ever heard of Ignaz Semmelweis?"

I shook my head.

"In the mid-1800s, Semmelweis observed that the one in ten mortality rate among women in Vienna General Hospital resulted from doctors studying cadavers in the morning and treating live patients in the afternoon—the diseases were being transmitted on the hands of the doctors. He instituted a policy requiring that doctors wash their hands before examining any patient, and the death rate immediately fell to one in a hundred."

"What I'm suggesting, Tom, is the disease we call 'people problems'—from problems in leadership to problems in motivation and everything in between—are all caused by the same thing. There is a clear way to attack and solve these problems—not one by one, but in one disciplined stroke."

# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

"That's quite a claim," I said.

"After 10 years at the law firm, I left to become general counsel of Sierra Product Systems, which was then acquired by Zagrum. I became part of Zagrum's executive team. In my first major meeting, I was given several difficult tasks to complete by the next meeting—one of which seemed inconsequential, so I let it go. I'll never forget what happened next."

Bud turned toward me. "After the meeting, Lou Herbert, who was then president, walked me to my office. He asked how my move had been, whether my family was settled and happy, and how I was enjoying the challenges of my new job. Then he looked straight into my eyes. 'Bud, we're happy to have you with us,' he said. 'You're a talented and good man. But you won't ever let us down again, will you?'"

"He said that?" I asked incredulously. "He didn't scare you away?"

"I wasn't offended," Bud said. "In a way, I was even inspired. I said, 'No, Lou. I won't ever let you down again.' The question, Tom, is *why*—*why* did that work on me?"

"Maybe you knew that Lou cared about you so you didn't feel threatened?"

"That is extremely important," he said. "We can tell how other people *feel* about us, and it's to *that* that we respond."

Bud smiled. "Given a little time, we can always sense when we're being coped with, manipulated, or outsmarted. We can always detect the hypocrisy. We can always feel the blame, even when it's concealed beneath veneers of niceness. And we resent it. They provoke us to resist them. People respond primarily to how we're feeling about them on the inside. And how we feel about them depends on whether we're in or out of the box."

"So being in the box is our inner experience, not our outward behavior?"

"When we are in the box, we view others as objects," Bud said. "It's our desires that count, all others are secondary. We see their needs as less legitimate than our own. Out of the box, we see ourselves and others more or less as we are—as people. The secret of Zagrum's success is that we've developed a culture where people are invited to see others as people. And being seen and treated straightforwardly, people respond accordingly."

That didn't seem realistic to me. "But how we can conduct business in a fast and decisive manner if we see and treat others as people all the time?"

"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.' But let's think about that assumption. Is the distinction between being *in* the box and being *out* of the box a behavioral one?"

I wasn't certain. "Are there two ways that the same behavior can be done?"

Bud nodded. "It's possible to deliver a hard message and still be out of the box when doing it. But it can be done out of the box only if the person you are delivering the message to is a *person* to you."

"You're suggesting that we can be hard and invite productivity and commitment, or we can be hard and invite resistance and ill will—the choice isn't to be hard or not, it's to be in the box or not?"

# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

"It seems that way to me," Bud said. "There's something deeper than behavior that determines our influence on others—it's whether we're in or out of the box. You don't know much about the box yet, but when we're in the box, our view of reality is distorted—we see neither ourselves nor others clearly. We are self-deceived. And that creates all kinds of trouble for the people around us."

## II. How We Get *in* the Box

After a lunch break, Kate Stenarude joined our meeting. At Lou's retirement, she had been elevated to president and CEO of Zagrum. "I'm not often able to take part in these sessions," she said, "but I try to when my schedule allows. It's the thing I like most of all."

I told her I was amazed she and Bud were both going to spend their afternoon with me. "Isn't there any more important use of your time?"

She looked at me seriously. "This may sound funny, Tom, but there really isn't anything more important than this—at least not from our viewpoint. Nearly everything we do here at Zagrum—from our job formulations to our reporting process to our measurement strategies—is built on what you're now learning. Tell me about your experience today. How's it been going?"

"Well, other than being told that I'm in the box," I joked, "it's going great."

"Bud's in the box too, you know," she said. "And so am I for that matter."

"But if everyone's in the box anyway," I said, "including successful people like you and Bud, then what's the point?"

"The point is that although we're still sometimes in the box, and probably always will be to some extent, our success has come because of the times and ways that we have been *out* of the box. The point of all of this isn't perfection. It's simply that we get better—better in systematic and concrete ways that improve the company's bottom line. That kind of leadership mentality—at every level of the organization—is what sets us apart."

"I'm starting to see that," I said. "Bud's been suggesting that success in an organization is a function of whether we're in the box or not and that our influence as leaders depends on the same thing."

"And I can't tell you how much I believe that," said Kate.

"Let me tell you a story," Bud said. "Years ago, when my son David was an infant, he started wailing in the middle of the night. I thought to myself, 'Get up and tend to David so Nancy can sleep.' But I didn't act on my thought. I call this 'self-betrayal'—I betrayed my own sense of how I should be toward another person."

"Self-betrayal is the most common thing in the world," Kate said. "Yesterday I got on an elevator at Rockefeller Center and as the door started to close I saw someone scurry around the corner. I had a sense I should catch the door for him. But I didn't. My last view was his outstretched, lunging arm."

"So our baby is crying," Bud said, "and I start to wonder if Nancy is just feigning sleep. What kind of mother would do that? I start to think of myself as a sensitive dad. And a victim. And a good husband to put up with a wife like that. Once I betray myself, I often find my thoughts and feelings will begin to tell me that I'm justified in whatever I'm doing or failing to do."

# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

“What if you’re right?” I asked. “What if she is lazy and inconsiderate?”

“When did Nancy seem to be worse to me, before I betrayed myself or afterward? The truth is that in self-betrayal, I’m making her out to be more lazy and inconsiderate than she really is. I’m using her faults to justify my misbehavior. And that’s something I’m doing, not something she’s doing.”

“Okay, I get that,” I said, nodding.

“Her faults seemed relevant only after I failed to help her. I focused on her faults when I needed to feel justified in mine. In fact, I minimized my faults and inflated my own virtue. So my view of reality becomes distorted—I’m not seeing Nancy clearly, and I’m not seeing myself clearly. So—when I betray myself, I enter the box.”

“You weren’t seeing *anything* clearly,” I said. “You became self-deceived.”

“Notice that I wasn’t irritated when I first thought I should help her,” Bud said. “But just moments later I viewed her as lazy and inconsiderate and myself as a victim. What’s the only thing that changed in those moments?”

“Your choice not to do what you felt you should do—your self-betrayal.”

“Yes,” Bud said. “As people, we have a sense of what other people might need and how we can help them. And if we have that sort of a sense and go against it, then I betray my own sense of what I should do for someone.”

“What if I don’t have a feeling that I betray? What if the baby cries and I elbow my wife and tell her to get the kid? There’s no self-betrayal there.”

“We carry some of our boxes with us,” Bud said. “Our self-justifying ways of seeing ourselves arise in our self-betrayal—when we need to be justified. If we are carrying a self-justifying image, there doesn’t have to be a feeling that we betray in that moment because we’re already in the box. So if you seem to be in the box in a given situation but can’t identify a feeling that you betrayed in that given moment, that’s a clue that you might already be in the box. You may be carrying around some self-justifying images.”

“So,” Kate said “if people act in ways that challenge the claim made by our self-justifying image, we see them as threats. If they reinforce the claim made by our self-justifying image, we see them as allies. If they fail to matter to a self-justifying image, we see them as unimportant. Whichever way we see them, they’re just objects to us. We’re already in the box.”

“Exactly,” Bud agreed. “And if I’m already in the box toward someone, I generally won’t have feelings to do things for them. So the fact that I have few feelings to help someone isn’t necessarily evidence that I’m out of the box. It may be a sign that I’m deep within it.”

“Our self-justifying image lies to us,” Kate says. “It tells me I’m focused on one thing—for example, when I think of myself as the sort of person who does things for others—but in having that image, I’m actually focused on myself.”

“So far,” Bud said, “we’ve examined the internal experience of someone who’s in the box. But as you can imagine, my box can have quite an impact on others. Since I’m in a defensive posture, carrying self-justifying images that I’m always ready to defend against attack, I am already blaming others. By blaming, I provoke others to get in the box, and they

# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

blame me for blaming them unjustly. But because, while I'm in the box, I feel justified in blaming them, I feel that *their* blame toward me is unjust and I blame them even more. But they're in the box, so they feel justified in blaming *me* even more."

"This raises an astonishing point, Tom," Kate said. "When I'm in the box, I *need* others to be a problem in order to feel justified in always seeing them as a problem. The behavior I complain about is the very behavior that justifies me—it's my proof they are blameworthy and I am the innocent one. We call this collusion—we are giving each other reason to stay in the box."

"Well," I said, "if we're in the box, we'll be inviting others to be in the box as well, and we'll end up with all kinds of conflict that gets in the way of what we're trying to do."

"Which is what?" Bud asked.

"We're trying to be productive and reach company goals—to achieve results."

"But what is it about the box that keeps us from focusing on results?"

All of a sudden the answer hit me. "You can't focus on results because in the box you're focused on yourself."

"Exactly, Tom. When we're in the box, we can't focus on results. We're too busy focusing on ourselves instead. Even most of the people you've encountered who you think are result-focused really aren't. They value results primarily for the purpose of creating or sustaining their own stellar reputations. And you can tell because they generally don't feel that other people's results are as important as their own. Most people aren't nearly so happy when other people in the organization succeed as they are when they themselves do. So they run all over people trying to get their *own* results—with devastating effects. They might beat their chests and preach focusing on results, but it's a lie. In the box, they are just focused on themselves—like everybody else. But in the box they can't see it—like everybody else."

"When I blame someone for a problem our company is having," Kate added, "I'm not doing it because they need to improve, I'm blaming them because their shortcomings justify *my* failure to improve. So collusion spreads far and wide, and coworkers position themselves against coworkers, and the people who came together to help an organization succeed will actually end up delighting in each other's failures and resenting each other's successes."

"In San Francisco, my symptoms included lack of commitment and lack of engagement," Bud said. "What are some of the other common people problems in organizations?"

"Conflict," I said. "Lack of motivation. Stress. Poor teamwork. Backbiting. Lack of trust. Lack of accountability. Communication problems . . ."

"When my son was crying in the night, we concluded that my anger and stress and conflict with Nancy did not emerge until after I chose to not do what I felt I should do. I believe if we go down this list, we'll find that all these problems are caused by self-betrayal. So the solution to the self-betrayal problem *is* also the solution to all these people problems."

"But tending a baby is not the same as tending a company, is it?"

"You're right that people at work aren't betraying themselves in the same way. However, a lot of people are failing to do things for coworkers that they feel they should do, and every time that happens, the same elements spin out of control. Every time we betray ourselves, we go in the box."



# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

## III. How We Get out of the Box

Kate excused herself for a prior commitment. Bud and I agreed to reconvene the following morning.

At 8:15 a.m. Bud wasn't in the conference room and I was wondering if I'd heard him correctly when the doors burst open. An elder gentleman entered with a hearty smile. "Tom Callum?" He extended his hand. "I'm Lou Herbert."

Dumbstruck, I said, "This is incredible. I've heard so much about you."

"I know. It's almost like I'm already dead, isn't it?" He said with a grin. "Look, Tom, go ahead and sit. Bud asked me to get started with you before he gets here." He gestured toward a seat and took the seat across from me.

"The story of Zagrum's turnaround starts with my youngest boy, Cory, who's now almost 40. He was a handful. Drugs, drinking—you name it, he did it. Everything came to a head when he was arrested for selling drugs during his senior year in high school."

He paused for a moment, his eyes looking far away. "He spent a full year in the youth detention facility up in Bridgeport. He came home, fell back into the wrong crowd, and within three months was arrested for shoplifting. I pushed for plea bargain that involved a 90-day wilderness treatment and survival program in the high country of Arizona. I took him there to be 'fixed' and after he was loaded into a white Suburban with the other kids, my wife and I attended an all-day parents session before heading home. It was there in Arizona I learned what you learned yesterday"

"That day I realized I was in a box. I had taken my wife for granted. I had driven my son away. I had hurt some of the most important people in my company. It's amazing when I think back on it now. I felt betrayed by all of them. 'To hell with them,' I told myself. 'To hell with them all.'"

"But I recovered my sight in Arizona. I saw in myself a leader who was so sure of the brilliance of his own ideas that he couldn't allow brilliance in anyone else's, a leader who felt he was so 'enlightened' that he needed to see workers negatively in order to prove his enlightenment, a leader so driven to be the best that he made sure no one else could be as good as he was. I was a lonely man. My box was destroying everything I cared about."

"So how *do* you get out of the box?"

"You already know."

"I do?"

"Think about it. As I sat there regretting how I'd acted toward my wife, my son, and my coworkers, what were they to me? In that moment, was I seeing them as people or as objects?"

"In that moment, they were people to you."

"Yes. My blame, resentment, and indifference were gone. I was seeing them as they were, and I was regretting having treated them as *less* than that. So in that moment, where was I?"

"You were out of the box."

# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

“Exactly. In the moment I felt the keen desire to be out of the box for them, I was *already* out of the box toward them. To feel that desire for them *is* to be out of the box toward them. But there is also a second question: How do we *stay* out of the box once we’re out?”

Bud slipped into the conference room. “Don’t let me interrupt,” he said.

Lou gave him a smile. “It helps to understand how we *don’t* get out of the box. If I could successfully change the other person, if I did my best to cope with them, if I leave or try to stay away from them, if I tell them how I feel, or if I implement new skills or techniques, or if I change my behavior—will any of those things get me out of the box?”

“But wait a minute,” I said. “You’re saying anything I try to do or any effort I make to get out of the box will fail?”

“That’s what we’re saying,” said Bud.

Lou nodded calmly. “You can’t get out by continuing to *focus on yourself*—which is what you do when you try to change your behavior in the box. The box is deeper than behavior. If you can do it in the box, it can’t get you out.”

“In the box,” Lou continued, “everything we think and feel is part of the lie of the box. The truth is, we change in the moment we cease resisting what is *outside* our box—others. By ‘resisting,’ I mean that my self-betrayal isn’t passive. In the box, I’m actively resisting what the humanity of others calls me to do for them. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.”

“In the moment we cease resisting others, we’re out of the box—liberated from self-justifying thoughts and feelings. This is why the way out of the box is always right before our eyes—*because the people we’re resisting are right before our eyes*. We can stop betraying ourselves toward them—we can stop *resisting* them.”

“But what can help me do *that*?” I asked.

“Toward any one person or group of people, I’m either in or out of the box at any given moment. But since there are many people in my life—some toward whom I may be in the box more so than toward others—in an important sense I can be both in *and* out of the box at the same time. In toward some and out toward others. This simple fact can give us leverage to get of the box in the areas of our lives where we may be struggling.”

“If nothing else,” Bud said, “it can help us question our own virtue.”

“So,” Lou continued, “although it’s true that there is nothing we can do from within the box to get ourselves out, in the out-of-box moments provided by our out-of-box relationships, there are a whole host of things we can do—things that can help us reduce our in-the-box moments and heal our in-the-box relationships. Healing happens in those moments when we begin seeing and feeling differently toward a person, because we no longer have the need to blame them or inflate their faults.”

Because of the basic ‘otherness’ of the people who continually stand before us, *and* because of what we know as we stand out of the box in relation to other people, our box can be penetrated by the humanity of others. We know in that moment what we need to do—we need to honor them as *people*. And in that moment—the moment I see another as a person, with needs, hopes, and worries as real and legitimate as my own—I’m out of the box.”



# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

"You might think about it this way," Bud interjected. "Think about my crying baby story. Once I have a sense of something I should do to help another person, where I am in the sequence of events?"

"You're at the beginning again—at the initial feeling."

"Exactly," Bud said. "I'm back out of the box. I can now choose the other way. I can now choose to honor that sense rather than betray it. And that, Tom, is the key to *staying* out of the box."

Lou nodded his agreement. "You stay out of the box by doing for others what you feel you should do."

"Are you saying that in order to stay out of the box, I have to always be doing things for others?"

Lou smiled, as if expecting the question. "Let's think about driving. What would you say is your standard attitude toward other drivers on the road?"

"I'm indifferent to the people in cars far ahead and far behind me," I said. "I generally drive safely and considerately around the cars that are nearer me."

"Do these behavioral changes strike you as overwhelming or burdensome?"

"Well, no."

"The basic obligation we have to relate to other drivers and see them as people doesn't mean we're bombarded with burdensome obligations."

"I see what you mean," I said.

Lou leaned forward. "Now, as we've been talking about, in order to stay out of the box, it's critical that we honor what our out-of-the-box sensibility tells us we should do for these people. However—and this is important—this doesn't mean that we should end up doing everything we feel would be ideal. For we have *our* own responsibilities and needs that require attention, and it may be that we can't help others as much or as soon as we wish we could. But we do the best we can under the circumstances—and we do that because when we're out of the box, seeing others as people, that's what we want to do."

"When we're feeling overwhelmed, it generally isn't caused by our obligation to others." Lou looked at me steadily. "It's our in-the-box desperation to prove something about *ourselves* that we find overwhelming. If you look back over your life, I think you'll find that's the case—you've probably felt overwhelmed, overobligated, and overburdened far more often *in* the box than *out*."

Lou smiled and then settled back in his chair, looking past me, out the window. Bud and I waited for him to speak.

"Tom," he said, "most people when they start a job have about the same feelings about it that you did. They're grateful for the employment and for the opportunity. They want to do their best—for their company and for the people in it."

"But interview those same people a year later, and their feelings are usually very different. Their feelings toward many of their coworkers frequently resemble the feelings Bud had toward Nancy in the story he told about their baby crying. And you'll often find that people who formerly were committed, engaged, motivated, looking forward to working as a team, and so on, now have problems in many of those areas. And who do you suppose they think caused those problems?"

# Leadership and Self-Deception

---

“Everyone else in the company,” I answered. “The boss, coworkers, the people who report to them, even the company, for that matter.”

“Yes. But now we know better,” he said. “When we blame, we blame because of ourselves, not because of others. Does blame help the other person get better?” Lou shook his head. “My blame keeps inviting the very things I’m blaming that person for. Because in the box, I need problems.”

“Your success as a leader, Tom, depends on being free of self-betrayal. Only then do you invite others to be free of self-betrayal themselves. Only then are you *creating* leaders yourself—coworkers whom people will respond to, trust, and want to work with. You owe it to your people to be out of the box for them. You owe it to Zagrum to be out of the box for them.”

“Tom,” he said, putting his hands on my shoulders. “The thing that divides fathers from sons, husbands from wives, neighbors from neighbors—the same thing divides coworkers from coworkers as well. Companies fail for the same reason families do. And why should we be surprised to discover that it’s so? For those coworkers I’m resisting are themselves fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters.”

“A family, a company—both are organizations of *people*. That’s what we know and live by at Zagrum.”

“Just remember,” he added. “We won’t know who we work and live with until we leave the box and join them.”