

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

*Expanded second edition of  
the book that is changing lives  
and transforming organizations*

# LEADERSHIP AND SELF-DECEPTION



getting out  
of the box

The Arbinger Institute  
Authors of *The Anatomy of Peace*

An Excerpt From

***Leadership and Self-Deception:  
Getting Out of The Box,  
Expanded Second Edition***

FOR CONSULTING AND TRAINING IN CANADA AND BERMUDA  
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Excerpt from *The Anatomy of Peace*

About THE ARBINGER INSTITUTE

## *How to Use Leadership and Self-Deception*

We have been gratified and amazed at the range of uses that people have made of *Leadership and Self-Deception*. Although it is styled as a book about business, readers have recognized that its foundational ideas apply to every aspect of life—from building a lasting marriage, for example, to raising children, and from driving organizational success to achieving personal fulfillment and happiness. Whether at work or at home, the applications are wide and various.

It has been interesting to hear from readers about ways they are using the book. We have found that its many uses fall within five broad categories of human and organizational experience. We encourage you to add your own uses of the book to the discussion about the book's uses on Arbinger's online community, which you can access at [www.arbinger.com](http://www.arbinger.com).

The first area of application is in hiring. Many organizations use the book as a vital part of their applicant screening and hiring process. They require potential hires to read the book, and then they use post-reading discussions with these applicants to evaluate key characteristics of success that are difficult to assess using normal hiring processes.

A second broad area of application is what you might think of as leadership and team building. This application is pretty clear from the book itself, as the degree to which one is in the box toward others has huge implications about that person's ability to cooperate with and lead others. This is as true at home as it is at work.

A third area of application is conflict resolution. If you think about it, the one thing every party in a conflict is sure of is that the conflict is someone else's fault. This means that there can be no lasting solution to a given conflict unless those who are responsible break through the blindness of self-deception and begin to consider their own culpability. This, too, is as true at home as it is at work.

A fourth area of application is presented near the end of the book. The self-deception solution forms a foundation upon which organizations of all types can build robust systems of accountability and responsibility taking. The reason for this is that, once out of the box, people have no need to blame or to shirk responsibility. Getting out of the box therefore opens organizations to a level of disciplined initiative-taking that box-laden organizations can't achieve.

A final area of application might broadly be called personal growth and development. Getting out of the box improves everything in life—for example, thoughts about others, feelings about oneself, hopes for the future, and the ability to make changes in the present. For these reasons, the book has become very popular among personal coaches, counselors, and therapists.

In summary, then, the myriad ways in which people have used this book and its ideas fall within five broad areas of application: (1) applicant screening and hiring, (2) leadership and team building, (3) conflict resolution, (4) accountability transformation, and (5) personal growth and development. We discuss in more detail below some specific uses people have been making of this book in each of these areas.

## Applicant Screening and Hiring

Many organizations utilize the book in their hiring practices. Prospective employees are required to read the book as part of the application process. Interviewers then emphasize the importance of the book's companion ideas of seeing others as people and focusing on results. They stress that making things more difficult for others and treating others as objects is not tolerated and will be grounds for termination. This establishes clear expectations even before a person is hired and helps to filter out individuals who are unwilling to commit to the out-of-the-box way of working.

Here is what one of our client organizations wrote about this use of the book:

We require all applicants to read and come prepared to discuss *Leadership and Self-Deception* at the second interview. Specifically, we ask them to share what discoveries they made while reading the book. It helps us to more quickly assess the degree to which someone is willing to consider their contribution to problems they encounter in their work or with others—a key predictor of those who succeed in our company. Screening in this way has helped us achieve industry-leading low turnover among business unit leaders that has become one of our trademark competitive advantages. A careful reading of the book also helps us to better train leaders to recognize the signs and symptoms of resistant tendencies of potential new hires, which helps us to avoid costly new hires: defensiveness, inflated view of their own contribution to their success, blame, indulgence, etc. We

take this so seriously that we provide what we consider ongoing ‘graduate level’ training on applied *Leadership and Self-Deception* principles in hiring to ensure that our business unit leaders develop this crucial leadership competency.

## **Leadership and Team Building**

We have heard from companies too numerous to count how simply sharing *Leadership and Self-Deception* with their workers has dramatically improved cooperation and teamwork across their organizations. Some of these organizations mandate or encourage all their people to read the book, while others concentrate on managers of a certain rank. Some organizations follow up with formal and informal discussion groups where colleagues help each other to apply the ideas to their work situations. Many of these organizations also engage Arbing’s help, and we support their efforts with training and consultation around the leadership and team building applications of our work.

The results are dramatic. From line leaders to global CEOs, we frequently hear how the book has totally changed the way these leaders see themselves and interact with their teams. We have heard from many people, for example, about how their company CEO or immediate supervisor has improved as dramatically as Lou improved in the book. One leader wrote, “We are not going into the box as often, and when we do get in the box, we come out much more quickly because we recognize the red flags and feelings that coincide with the box. Our meetings are less contentious and people are more patient with each other. It’s as if a kind of oil, of sorts, has flowed over all of us and lubricated the company,

enabling us to be more honest about ourselves and more respectful of others.”

One company wrote to tell us that when they hire new business unit leaders, they engage them in a condensed version of Bud’s encounters with Tom in the book. They, like the characters in *Leadership and Self-Deception*, affectionately call these “Bud Meetings.” In these meetings, they teach their people, among other things, about the problem of self-deception and its impact on one’s work, stress the need to be able to focus fully on results rather than on oneself and justification, and orient their people to the way they will be required to focus on results that is based on the teachings in the book.

Uses of the book for team building and leadership purposes have not stopped at company doors, however. People who read the book for work typically bring it home and pass it around in their families as well. Couples and families often read the book together and apply their learning to their family situations. We often hear from people who say that their home lives have been greatly enriched by the book. At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, one executive reported that the book saved his son’s life. Another who suffered from depression confided that it very likely saved his own.

One executive shared the following after reading the book:

I am afraid that my words won’t convey the impact three hours of reading has just had on my life, my leadership, and my future. I have to tell you that there haven’t been too many life-changing moments while I have been reading, but today I had one. This book is so compelling that I handed it to my wife when I came home and feel like I need to share it with my entire team. I’m going to have a book

reading with my team and then get into a discussion about it. I'll probably need to read it a couple more times myself, though, as I'm sure I don't get it yet . . . just like Tom.

We could go on, as the uses people have made of the book to build relationships and increase cooperation are nearly endless. When using the book in this way, however, we have learned an important tip: The book's title can seem accusing. For this reason, it is often helpful when giving the book to another to say something like, "Here is a book that will help you to see how to deal with me when I'm really being a jerk." There's nothing accusing in that invitation. People will read it and learn whatever it is they are prepared to learn.

## **Conflict Resolution**

The police department in one of the major cities in the United States has used the ideas in *Leadership and Self-Deception* and its companion book, *The Anatomy of Peace*, to completely change the way they interact with the public in highly volatile situations. For example, when making a drug bust, their understanding of the importance of their way of being and seeing others as people has given them a means of quickly de-escalating tensions and restoring calm and order, minimizing trauma to innocent parties while quickly securing the cooperation of their targets.

This approach combines the ideas regarding being out of the box from *Leadership and Self-Deception* with the Peacemaking Pyramid from *The Anatomy of Peace*. Once a door is broken in, for example, and the suspects are apprehended, the police officers immediately begin to attend to the

needs of the suspects and others who might be on the scene. Do they need some water, for example, or do they need to use the restroom? Are they comfortable? Is there anything else the officers can do for them? And so on. They report that since they have begun focusing on seeing all the people they encounter—even suspects—as people, community complaints about police behavior have dropped essentially to zero. Although this approach may make for less dramatic TV than the public is accustomed to seeing, it has proved to make for far more effective law enforcement.

Many judges in mediation situations are requiring the parties to read *Leadership and Self-Deception* or *The Anatomy of Peace* before proceeding with their mediations. We have heard many stories of parties who settled their differences on their own after reading one or both of these books. Even where this doesn't happen, the concepts in the books provide a common language and understanding that enables the mediation to proceed effectively. In addition, judges and mediators say that the books equip them to remain out of the box—and therefore be more effective—even when the parties are tearing into each other and things are most difficult. These professionals have discovered that being out of the box is the quality that determines the helpfulness of every mediation skill they have ever learned.

The book is used not only in mediations, but also more broadly within the legal justice system. One practitioner wrote, “Imagine using these concepts to help a client see that a problem previously viewed as insurmountable is actually amenable to a solution short of litigation. Or imagine using the ideas to help a client understand why a negotiation tanked, and to suggest a party-to-party approach that

could get it back on track. As an example of this kind of application, after reading *Leadership and Self-Deception*, a company CEO called his counterpart at a supplier that his company was suing. He suggested that they meet to see if they could resolve their differences. Not only did they resolve their differences without going to court, but they agreed to keep doing business together!

The book's utility in conflict situations is not limited to the legal justice system, of course. We frequently hear from people who say that their marriage was saved by their reading the book, for example, or that the book enabled them to resolve differences with a boss or colleague. A group of teachers at a school reported that their conflict-laden work environment was transformed into a culture of cooperation merely by having everyone read the book and then meet over a number of sessions to talk about what they had learned. Similarly, the leaders of a major U.S. corporation were able to resolve a costly labor/management dispute after they and their counterparts at the union read the book.

The reason this book has been so instrumental in helping people to resolve conflict is that it opens readers to how they have helped to create the very problems they have attributed to others. This is the essence of the self-deception solution—discovering how each of us has the problem of not knowing we have a problem. This is the realization that makes conflict resolution possible.

### **Accountability Transformation**

Managers often use the book to help rehabilitate employees who will lose their jobs unless some serious changes are

made. In many cases, the book has helped these employees to see problems they had never been able to see and to take the corrective steps necessary to save their careers.

For example, a gentleman in his 50s had worked in the same company for nearly three decades. Although he was talented, interpersonal problems kept him from moving up in the company. As he was passed over for promotions year after year, he grew angry. Finally, a young man a full generation younger was promoted to be his boss, and the man's anger turned to rage. His former boss gave him a copy of *Leadership and Self-Deception* in the hopes that the man would see himself clearly for perhaps the very first time.

He read the book twice. The first time through, he thought it naïvely ignored what to him was the dominant issue in most companies—politics. On the second reading, however, he started to open up to the possibility that he was at least partially responsible for his fate. He began asking some of his longtime colleagues for feedback about how he affected those around him. Unlike in years past, he just listened without trying to defend himself. He was humbled by what he heard and began to hold himself accountable for issues he had always blamed on others.

A position as a temporary supervisor of a historically low-performing team opened up. He asked for the opportunity to lead that group. His first day on the job, he told his team: "I can promise one thing to you. Every day, I will try my hardest to see and treat you as people. You can count on that. If I don't, you come and let me know so I can change." The team broke production records the first month. The next month they were the only team in the company to exceed their goals. They continued improving every month

thereafter, and the man's peer supervisors wondered how it had all happened.

What happened, of course, was that the man began holding himself accountable rather than waiting around for others to hold him accountable. And that single change changed everything. It is the transformation that *Leadership and Self-Deception* invites.

In this spirit, one CEO, after reading *Leadership and Self-Deception*, fired himself and hired a more able person to take his place. Another, instead of writing a blistering memo that would have made a whole division of his company into scapegoats, wrote an apology to his company for mistakes he himself had made that had set them up to fail. The company rallied behind him with new commitment and vigor.

The book led another CEO to institute a new way of tackling problems in the company. Whereas before, he would go to the person he thought was causing the problem and demand that that person fix it, the CEO began to consider how he himself might have contributed to the problem. He then convened a meeting including each person in the chain of command down to the level where the problem was manifest. He began the meeting by identifying the problem. He laid out all the ways he thought he had negatively contributed to the culture that had produced the problem and proposed a plan to rectify his contributions to the problem. He invited the person directly below him to do the same thing. And so on down the line. By the time it got to the person most immediately responsible for the problem, that person publicly took responsibility for his contributions to the problem and then proposed a plan for what he would do about it. In this way, a problem that had gone on literally for years

was solved nearly overnight when the leaders stopped simply assigning responsibility and began holding themselves strictly accountable. This is now the model in that company for solving every problem encountered.

This level of personal accountability in an organization should be every leader's dream. What our experience tells us, and what we try to communicate in this book, is that in order to move from merely dreaming about a culture of responsibility-taking and accountability to actually experiencing it, the accountability has to start with the leader—whether that leader is the CEO, a division VP, a line manager, or a parent. The most effective leaders lead in this single way: by holding themselves more accountable than all.

## Personal Growth and Development

*Leadership and Self-Deception* was discovered early on by prominent members of the personal and executive coaching professions. It is now a staple book for many coaching programs, as coaches find it to be a highly valuable tool in helping their clients with personal growth issues. The book is also widely used by therapists and counselors, as mental health practitioners find that the model connects with people in ways that significantly improve the effectiveness of their services.

The book is used as a foundational text in many university and business school courses as well. Professors find that the ideas in the book provide an important foundation for many areas of study—from ethics to business management to organizational behavior to psychology.

A prominent pharmacy school in the United States has all of its first-year students read the book for orientation. Faculty

members then meet in two-hour sessions with the students to discuss the concepts and their relevance to the profession.

Another university offers *Leadership and Self-Deception* and *The Anatomy of Peace*, along with a supporting course, to all of its students as part of an effort to build community across cultures.

Many treatment programs supply copies of the books to the family members of their clients in order to help those key caregivers to reengage with their sons and daughters and other loved ones in more healthy and loving ways.

We hear frequently from readers who engage with others around these materials. These engagements take many forms. In Japan, for example, “out of the box” clubs in cities around the country provide a space where readers can help each other around these concepts. In the United States, initiatives on college campuses under the banner of “Arbinger U” give students a way to gather and discuss these ideas. Arbinger offers a global community on the Web as well, where readers from around the world meet to discuss and explore the theoretical and practical implications of the work. That community can be accessed through Arbinger’s Web site at [www.arbinger.com](http://www.arbinger.com) or directly by going to <http://arbingercommunity.ning.com>.

Those who want to take the next step can engage an Arbinger coach for personal help in applying *Leadership and Self-Deception* in their daily and professional lives. Coaching can be arranged through Arbinger’s Web site or by calling Arbinger directly at 801-292-3131. In addition, one- and two-day Arbinger workshops are available in cities around the world on various topics. Longer advanced training is also available. Training options are detailed on Arbinger’s Web site at [www.arbinger.com](http://www.arbinger.com).

## *Share Your Story*

What has happened in your life since reading *Leadership and Self-Deception* or *The Anatomy of Peace*? What are you doing differently at work, for example? What has happened for you and for others as a result of changes you have made or initiatives you have taken?

What's different for you now in your home life as well? Has a relationship improved as a result of changes you have made since reading one or both of these books? Have you been able to solve a problem that has been bothering you for a long time?

Wherever the material has led you, we would love to hear your story. And so would others who are trying to stay out of the box. Honest stories, simply told, are gifts. They offer us the opportunity to see others, ourselves, and our circumstances anew, freed from the twin burdens of blame and justification. Such stories clarify vision and speak courage to fear.

To this end, we invite you to e-mail your stories to us at [stories@arbinger.com](mailto:stories@arbinger.com). [If you would prefer to voice record rather than write your stories, please see the instructions on our Web site ([www.arbinger.com](http://www.arbinger.com)).] With your permission, we will post these stories on our Web site where others can learn from them. Some of these narratives may be included in collections of stories that Arbinger publishes. Others may become the inspiration for story lines within future books written in the style of *Leadership and Self-Deception*.

Whether you share a story, give the book to a friend or colleague, or simply desire to continue your quest to stay out of the box, come join us. We'd love to hear and learn from you.

this material has been excerpted from

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