

# The Impact of Self-Deception on Leadership Effectiveness

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**ABSTRACT:** Self-deception in leadership occurs when leaders make mistaken assessments about themselves and act according to those assessments. Results can be unhealthy, if not destructive. To help mitigate this natural tendency, we first seek to characterize the overall life cycle of self-deceived leadership. Second, we offer a model, rooted in Scripture and research, explaining the behavioral root of self-deception. Finally, we present an alternate path toward leadership self-awareness, reinforcing a lifelong commitment to Christian spiritual formation.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership, self-deception, self-awareness, success narratives, spiritual formation

## INTRODUCTION

Successful people have very few reasons to change their behavior—and lots of reasons to stick with the status quo.... Their success has showered them with positive reinforcement, so they feel it's smart to continue what they've always done. Their past behavior confirms that the future is equally bright.... Then there's the arrogance, the feeling that "I can do anything," which develops and bulges like a well-exercised muscle in successful people, especially after an impressive string of successes. Then there's the protective shell that successful people develop over time which whispers to them, "You are right. Everyone else is wrong." These are heady defense mechanisms to overcome. (Goldsmith & Reiter, 2007, p. 28)

Any leadership role, business or otherwise, requires a special level of confidence. Leaders who are not driven to lead or reasonably assured of their leadership capability will likely falter. Several studies have proposed a positive relationship between leaders' self-efficacy, i.e., perception of competence and their leadership effectiveness (McCormick, 2001). This notion is reinforced, and even encouraged, by leadership experts. As Buckingham (2006) writes, "The key thing about leading is not only that you envision a better future but that you believe with every

fiber of your being, that you are the one to make this future come true" (p. 67).

Equally true, however, is the fact that many highly driven, bold, and self-assured leaders crash and burn. Numerous examples of "toxic leaders" have been catalogued by researchers documenting the often dark and dysfunctional side of overly self-confident, even narcissistic, leadership (Goldman, 2010; Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Shipman & Mumford, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Other researchers point to an ironic relationship between inability and overconfidence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), i.e., those leaders who are "often wrong but never in doubt." This is not new. Proverbs 26:12 states, "Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for them" (New International Version, 2011). History abounds with examples of highly driven, highly confident, and even highly gifted leaders who fail due to circumstances of their own making. In short, leaders' greatest strengths are often their greatest weaknesses (Hackston, 2019).

While multiple factors can contribute to this paradox, we assert that one key factor involves the leader's tendency toward self-deception. That is, leadership downfalls occur when leaders develop overstated beliefs about their personal strengths and success and then act accordingly. These patterns of self-deception emerge over time, forming a spiraling cycle that can begin in success and end in abject failure.

The study of self-deception in leadership is not new. However, in addition to the research noted below, we seek to explore these concepts using a distinctly biblical framework. Accordingly, we have three specific aims. First, we seek to characterize self-deception in leadership as a pattern or life cycle. Second, we seek to explain the pathology of self-deception using a confluence of research-based and biblical perspectives on human nature. Finally, we offer a grounded path toward self-awareness, reinforcing a life-long commitment to spiritual formation that can result in increased leadership effectiveness.

## UNDERLYING THEORY AND CONSTRUCT DEFINITION

This conceptual analysis integrates two primary research streams. First, we address self-awareness and, by extension, self-deception in the context of leadership theory. In so doing, we maintain that the development of self-awareness spans both the trait and behavioral domains. That is, while emotional intelligence generally, and self-awareness specifically, are commonly associated with leader traits and abilities, they also exist as a set of behaviors and competencies (Boyatzis, 2018). Thus, from this perspective, it is helpful to view leader traits, behaviors, and effectiveness as an integrated system (Derue et al., 2011).

Second, we address the self-serving attributional bias under the broader heading of cognitive bias theory. Specifically, we focus on people’s natural tendency to attribute success to themselves and failure to external factors (Allen et al., 2019). As noted by Shepperd et al. (2008), this bias exists from a natural motivation to self-enhance coupled with faulty cognitive processing, often moderated by the individual’s sense of self. This self-concept yields particular relevance when examining the field of self-conscious emotions; particularly those directly affecting personal identity.

Defining the construct of self-deception may seem elusive if for no other reason than the number of ethical/religious, psychological, sociological, and epistemological writings surrounding the topic (Bahnsen, 1979). However, in plain terms, self-deception may be reduced to “seeing the world the way we wish it to be rather than the way it is” (Triandis, 2011). In the context of self-reflection and self-analysis, this translates to “a positive belief about the self that persists despite specific evidence to the contrary” (Chance et al., 2011).

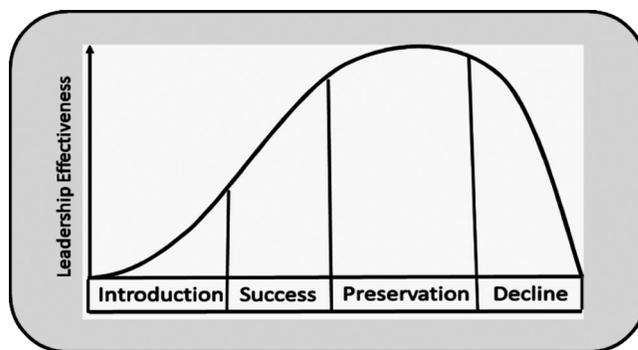
As Mele (1997) postulates, our level of self-deception may be directly proportional to the motivation we have to believe something is true. Therefore, in order to preserve a certain belief, we often “do not see what it is we do not see” (Goleman, 1985, p. 13). Furthermore, in the context of leadership, the Arbing Institute (2002) concludes that self-deception often translates to “the state of not knowing and resisting the possibility that there is a problem, while one may be the problem oneself” (Pienaar, 2016, p. 136).

Finally, as Baumeister and Leith (1997) note, “Self-deception is spotted only by comparing patterns of aggregated observations” (p. 107). That is, self-deceptive behavior seldom operates as an isolated event. As such, we have chosen to represent these patterns in the context of extended life cycles.

## THE LIFE CYCLE OF LEADERSHIP SELF-DECEPTION

“Who has deceived thee so often as thyself?” (Franklin & Peirce, 1849, p. 9). Like Benjamin Franklin, many of us intuitively realize that one of life’s most obvious yet paradoxical realities lies in our baffling ability to convince ourselves of things that are largely untrue. This pattern of self-deception appears in all aspects of life, from romantic affections to ethical ponderings. Yet, unlike a golfer who occasionally “forgets” the water shot while filling out his scorecard, we suggest that in leadership self-deception often follows a longer-term life cycle. This life cycle is conceptualized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: A Conceptual Life Cycle of Leadership Impacted by Self-Deception**



Key characteristics of each phase of this life cycle follow:

1. Introduction—The leader enters into leadership roles. This phase will be marked by inexperience combined with potential self-doubt or naïve overconfidence.

2. Success—The leader experiences real, and often early, successes in their leadership experience. A pattern of success emerges, and the leader’s reputation develops.
3. Preservation—The leader increasingly takes credit for successes (a phenomenon we label the “success narrative”), while disregarding failures by blaming them on external factors. The leader ceases to acknowledge personal flaws and enlists others to reinforce the leader’s narrative.
4. Decline—Absent corrective restraint, the leader descends into professional and even personal self-destruction, often significantly and negatively impacting those being led.

Clearly, Figure 1 reflects the life cycles of many projects, products, and even businesses. However, a leader’s effectiveness need not follow this pattern. The key, as we will see, lies in the leader’s willingness to grow from self-deception to honest self-awareness.

Not surprisingly, the biblical narrative provides several examples of self-deception in action, including such notable figures as King David, the prophet Elijah, and the apostle Peter. However, Scripture’s most detailed description of the entire life cycle may be found in the story of King Saul, as recorded in the book of 1 Samuel. Table 1

correlates the life cycle phases of Figure 1 to key events in Saul’s leadership story.

Saul’s ultimate decline was rapid, but the self-deceptive leadership patterns leading to this demise emerged very early. By figuratively, and even literally, setting up a monument in his own honor (1 Samuel 15:12), Saul quickly entered a trajectory of doing anything required to maintain his success narrative and kingship. His passionate plea for Samuel to “honor me before the elders of my people and Israel” (1 Samuel 15:30) exposed his true motive and quickly became the driving force for the rest of Saul’s life. This was particularly evident when it came to the threat posed by David. Clinging to his reputation caused Saul’s ultimate undoing.

The story of Saul provides a sad account of a leader who began well and ended tragically because he was unwilling to accept his shortcomings. This “success delusion,” as Goldsmith and Reiter (2007) call it, is hardly limited to kings from 3,000 years ago. Countless modern examples begin with overstated success narratives and crash land in business or personal failures (Goldman, 2010; Lipman-Blumen, 2006). “Toxic leadership” is a modern mantra describing numerous leaders who begin with notable success and end with notable failure. Like Saul, an unwillingness to accept feedback or deal with per-

**Table 1: King Saul and the Life Cycle of Self-Deception**

Phase	Key Elements in Saul’s Kingship (1 Samuel)
Introduction	Chapters 9–10 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A head taller than the rest”; chosen and anointed as Israel’s first king</li> <li>• Assumed the role with humility and modesty, if not insecurity.</li> <li>• Experienced outward transformation when anointed by God’s Spirit.</li> </ul>
Success	Chapter 11 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rescued Jabesh from the Ammonites.</li> <li>• Led successful campaigns against Moab, Ammon, Edom, the kings of Zobah, and the Philistines (see the list in 1 Samuel 14:47).</li> </ul>
Preservation	Chapters 13–26 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrongly assumed Samuel’s priestly role for fear of human abandonment.</li> <li>• Demanded starvation of his troops, nearly leading to his son’s execution.</li> <li>• Spared the “good things” from the Amalekite plunder, disobeying God but denying it; engaged in blame-shifting and rationalization.</li> <li>• Exhibited increasing jealousy over David’s ascendance and reputation.</li> <li>• Led multiple attempts to assassinate David and preserve his kingship.</li> </ul>
Decline	Chapter 28 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consulted a medium, invoked Samuel’s spirit from the grave, and was told of his impending death.</li> <li>• Lay shaken and famished on the floor, reduced to nothing.</li> <li>• Took his own life in battle with the Philistines; his sons killed alongside him.</li> </ul>

sonal flaws is frequently a common denominator of such leaders. Self-deception rules when reality is overshadowed by a false story line.

This pattern can be accentuated when it is reinforced by devotees. For example, when Al Dunlap became CEO of Sunbeam in 1996, the move was heartily greeted by analysts and shareholders alike, who drove the share price up nearly 50 percent in one day (Lipman-Blumen, 2006). Dunlap had created a decades-long success narrative as a turnaround master who had “delivered eight turnarounds on three continents” (p. 91). Sunbeam, according to Dunlap, would be his ninth. Although his turnaround methods were eventually exposed as largely fraudulent, he had mastered the propagation of a success narrative that he clearly believed and others helped deliver.

As demonstrated by Sunbeam’s ultimate bankruptcy in 2002, leaders journeying the path of self-deception may not only be falsely congratulating themselves for their organization’s success, they may actually be the principal cause of its failure. Like the doctors observed in Ignaz Semmelweis, the Hungarian pioneer of antiseptic procedures, leaders may unknowingly be carrying the germs that are killing their followers (Arbinger Institute, 2018).

This pattern is not limited to individuals; rather it can extend to entire organizations. In his analysis of the life cycles of declining businesses, Collins (2009) cites five stages: hubris born of success, undisciplined pursuit of more, denial of risk and peril, grasp for salvation, and capitulation to irrelevance or death. Collins highlights the tendency of the organization’s leadership to overestimate their trajectory toward paths of success and underestimate their capability to fail. This pattern of “arrogant neglect” seems to have at its origin one primary source—a wrong view of self, driven by hubristic pride.

## THE PATHOLOGY OF SELF-DECEPTION

At face value, most people do not deny the reality of self-deception. Although some philosophers quibble over whether self-deception is truly possible, most of us accept it a priori, simply because it is so easily observed—at least in others. Bahnsen (1979) writes, “The writers, philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists of the modern age equally manifest that the notion of self-deception is a common one” (p. 2). In his dissertation on the topic, Bahnsen catalogs a sample of no less than 50 world-renowned authors, philosophers, and religious writers who illustrate self-deception’s working

in some detail. Accepting the existence of self-deception does not prove particularly challenging, but seeing it within ourselves and understanding why we engage in it can prove more elusive.

## Evidence from Research

To unpack this, both research and biblical frameworks prove instructive. Within social sciences, the fulcrum of self-deceptive paths centers on what researchers call the self-serving attributional bias or, simply, the self-serving bias. As previously stated, this bias reflects the natural tendency for people to attribute success to self and failure to external factors. As Sedikides et al. (1998) note:

Individuals self-enhance. They believe that they are more trustworthy, moral, and physically attractive than others and that they are above-average teachers, managers, and leaders. One mechanism through which individuals maintain such unduly positive beliefs is through the self-serving bias (SSB). The SSB refers to individuals taking responsibility for successful task outcomes but blaming circumstances or other persons for failed task outcomes. For example, students will take credit for passing a difficult examination but will attribute failing the examination to its difficulty or the instructor’s tough grading policy. (p. 378)

Not surprisingly, the self-serving bias tends to emerge when success or failure can directly impact the leader’s self-esteem. As Allen et al. (2019) state, “[I]f there is no potential to damage self-esteem (i.e., it is a meaningless encounter), then there is little reason to make self-serving attributions” (p. 1027).

As leaders grow in their self-efficacy, i.e., belief in their ability to succeed, they increasingly enlist an entire history of achievement for support (Watt & Martin, 1994). This historical pattern tends to feed a general self-efficacy expectancy. That is, as leaders develop a historical record of success, it increases their general self-efficacy and their expectation to achieve future predictable outcomes. The problem, however, lies in the leader’s attribution of historical success. Returning to the self-serving bias, leaders can easily contaminate their historical record through false attribution. In short, they read their own press releases. Successes are more highly attributed to self, while failures are more highly attributed to external causes. This can naturally steer leaders to fallacious self-efficacy, that is, an overstated belief that they will drive positive behaviors and outcomes.

While false attribution provides some explanation for self-deception, we are left with a critical question: Why

are some leaders more susceptible to self-deception than others? Research indicates the difference may be found in the leader's self-concept. Self-concept, according to Robins and Shriber (2009), consists of "our beliefs about who we are, our worth as a person, and our aspirations for the future" (p. 887). Although conceptual differences exist between self-efficacy and self-concept, the two constructs substantially overlap (Bong & Clark, 1999). This may be particularly true among leaders who are prone to assess personal worth through their ability to master certain professional behaviors and outcomes.

The overlap between a leader's self-efficacy and self-concept becomes important when we consider key constructs that can derail the leader. While there are many possible factors, such as personality dimensions, one construct tends to dominate many of the negative elements we associate with self-deceived leadership. That construct is hubristic pride, or a tendency toward haughtiness, arrogance, and superiority (Yeung & Shen, 2019).

In psychological research, hubristic pride belongs to a family of emotions termed self-conscious emotions, due to their evocation based on self-reflection and self-evaluation (Robins & Schriber, 2009; Tangney, 2015; Tracy & Robins, 2004). This family consists of shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride, of which pride is further divided into two categories: authentic (or achievement-oriented) and hubristic. Within this family, researchers have postulated that shame and hubristic pride tend to mirror each other because they both center on the "I am" of self, versus the "I have done" of specific actions (Robins & Schriber, 2009). That is, they are the two emotions most tightly connected to an individual's self-concept.

Our previous writings have focused on the negative effect that both shame and hubristic pride may have on a leader's self-concept (Cohee & Voorhies, 2020). Here we focus more squarely on the effects of hubristic pride. We associate it with self-deception for several reasons.

First, traits such as egotism, boastfulness, presumption, and self-centeredness are often associated with hubristic pride. Individuals demonstrating these traits often "have been found to harbor unrealistic expectations regarding fame and success and have a greater tendency to overgeneralize positive events as indicators of future success" (Yeung & Shen, 2019, p. 608).

Second, hubristic pride appears to require internal attributions to a stable, global sense of self. That is, according to Tracy and Robins (2004), hubristic pride attaches to an unchanging element of ourselves crossing multiple dimensions, e.g., "I am a consistently excellent

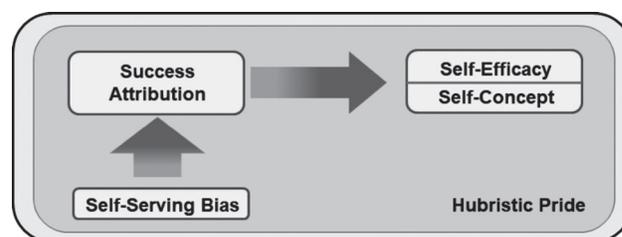
student across all disciplines of study." This lends itself to a more sweeping set of self-attribution errors.

Finally, heightened hubristic pride tends to parallel narcissistic characteristics that consistently advance self-promotion, elevate successes, and treat failure as both externally caused and irrelevant (Tracy & Robins, 2004).

In summary, we maintain that elevated levels of hubristic pride provide fertile soil for the self-serving bias to falsely inflate leaders' self-efficacy/self-concept, resulting in overconfidence in their abilities and unawareness of their personal defects. Conversely, lower levels of hubristic pride can lead leaders to take a more tempered view of their self-efficacy and be more open to feedback and self-correction.

Figure 2 conceptualizes the key contributors to self-deceptive leadership patterns. This model is supported by both research and evidence from the biblical record.

**Figure 2: A Conceptual Model of Elements Related to Leadership Self-Deception**



### Evidence from Scripture

First, the Bible treats self-deception as a natural human condition. We are told in Jeremiah 17:9 that "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure." James 1:22 warns against merely listening to the word and "so deceiving yourselves." The church at Laodicea falsely concluded about itself, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing," when in fact they were "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). In these passages, self-deception is in full view.

Similarly, the Bible speaks extensively of pride, almost always in terms of hubris. Exceptions exist—for example, the apostle Paul offers the Corinthian church an opportunity to "take pride in us" (2 Corinthians 5:11–13), based on the authenticity of the apostle's message. Similarly, Paul encourages the Galatian church to test their own actions so they might "take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else" (Galatians 6:4). These mirror what modern researchers would term authentic pride.

## INTERRUPTING THE LIFE CYCLE OF SELF-DECEPTION

However, within biblical chronicles, discussion of authentic pride represents the exception versus the rule. Typically, the biblical sin of pride, which emerges in Genesis 3, is clearly rooted in hubris. The Bible speaks squarely to its danger. The “pride that comes before disgrace” (Proverbs 11:2) is hubristic. The “pride that goes before destruction” (Proverbs 16:18) is hubristic. The Bible provides multiple examples of pride’s downfall amongst powerful leaders. The likes of Haman (Esther 3–7) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4) prove instructive, as does the story of King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26.

Uzziah’s story is noteworthy because it so closely follows the life cycle of self-deception described in Figure 1. Elevated to kingship at age 16, Uzziah spent his formative years seeking God under the instruction and counsel of Zechariah the prophet, who “instructed him in the fear of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 26:5). This noble beginning was followed by a flourishing period of military successes and prosperity. Uzziah’s fame spread “as far as the border of Egypt, because he had become very powerful” (2 Chronicles 26:8). Then things radically shifted. After he became powerful, “his pride led to his downfall” (2 Chronicles 26:16). He neglected godly counsel, entered the temple of the Lord, and attempted to assume a priestly role that was not rightfully his. When confronted over this sin of presumption, he became angry and “raged against the priests” (2 Chronicles 26:19). Uzziah’s downfall was swift. Cursed with leprosy, he was immediately cut off from the people and replaced as ruler by his son Jotham (2 Chronicles 26:21). What happened? As Tarrant (2011) notes:

There are hints in the text that at some point on the road to the top, [Uzziah] stopped seeking the Lord and the spiritual mentoring of Zechariah. This suggests a lessening dependence on God and a growing reliance upon himself and his own strength and wisdom. (p. 2)

In other words, once he achieved success, hubristic pride inflated Uzziah’s self-estimation, causing him to lose sight of God as the source of his success. He created a false success narrative, leading to overconfidence in his abilities and inattentiveness to his personal defects. Uzziah’s self-serving bias was in full view. The life cycle of self-deception had run its course.

Interrupting the life cycle of self-deception is not easy. Resistance to change often stems from deep-rooted affective, cognitive, and behavioral components (Forsell & Åström, 2012). However, because such resistance is not static, and the leader’s self-awareness (or lack thereof) is comprised of both trait and behavioral elements (Boyatzis, 2018; Derue et al., 2011), authentic change is possible. A biblical view of human nature disavows behavioral determinism (Dose, 2009). Therefore, as we’ve noted, the life cycle of self-deceived leadership need not run its full course. How can this be achieved?

Logically, if the fertile soil of self-deception lies in hubris, its antidote is found in humble self-awareness. This is what Jesus termed “poverty of spirit” (Matthew 5:3). While modern views of humility may connote images of weak and unassertive people suffering from damaged self-esteem, biblical humility is quite the opposite. Biblical humility lies in having a proportionate view of self in light of God and others. As Guinness et al. (2000) note, humility in the biblical sense is a form of clear-sightedness. Clear-sightedness is not a leadership weakness but rather a strength. To assist in developing that clear-sightedness, we offer three perspectives designed to interrupt the false success narratives that often accompany self-deceived, hubristic leadership.

### Time and Chance Happen to Them All

First, to break the stranglehold of the false success narrative, self-aware leaders must recognize that successful outcomes may have much less to do with the leaders themselves than they naturally presume. As the writer of Ecclesiastes notes, “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all” (Ecclesiastes 9:11). While this should not be taken to mean that talent and ability have nothing to do with outcomes, it clearly speaks to a world full of much less human causality than we naturally assume. Any leader professing Christian faith should acknowledge that ultimately “[t]he king’s heart is in the Lord’s hand” (Proverbs 21:1) and “[i]n their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps” (Proverbs 16:9).

This concept is finding increasing traction in academic literature. In their well-publicized article on the role of randomness in success and failure, Pluchino et al. (2018)

state, “It is rather common to underestimate the importance of external forces in individual successful stories” (1850014-1). By cataloging numerous seemingly uncorrelated attributes such as names and birthdates with professional success, they note, “There is nowadays an ever-greater evidence about the fundamental role of chance, luck or, more in general, random factors, in determining successes or failures in our personal and professional lives” (1850014-2).

Again, this is not to argue that no causal effects exist between talent and outcome. Most research accepts a relationship between leadership quality and organizational performance. However, both Scripture and research advise us toward greater caution when attributing successful outcomes primarily to our leadership skill.

### **Acknowledging our Behavioral Blind Spots**

Emotional intelligence—that is, self-awareness, other-awareness, emotional regulation, and social adaptability—continues to gain prominence in leadership instruction (Emotional Intelligence, 2020). A key element of self-awareness is recognizing that all leaders possess behavioral blind spots. Unless the leader identifies and addresses those blind spots, they are logical entry points for self-deception.

Since 1955, the Johari Window has been used extensively in human resource development to, amongst other things, help leaders recognize their blind spots (Nair & Naik, 2010). The Johari Window is divided into four quadrants. Each quadrant represents one of the following categories: things both the individual and group know (arena), things the individual does not know but the group knows (blind spot), things the individual knows but the group does not (façade), and things neither the individual nor group knows (unknown).

One objective of using the window is to employ group input in such a way as to minimize personal blind spots. A common example of such feedback is “360° assessment” (i.e., gathering information from supervisors, peers, subordinates and other co-workers). As a personal example, in an early supervisory role, Sam received honest input from supervisees during a 360° assessment that he was not a good listener. That is, he tended to speak too much and interrupt others. Previously, Sam had considered himself to be a good listener who had even taught classes on the subject. But the supervisee input exposed a leadership blind spot.

However, input is not enough. For the entire development process to succeed, the leader must seek to opti-

mize both exposure and feedback (Nair & Naik, 2010). Exposure relates to the leader’s willingness to operate in non-defensive, trusting, and open ways, which enhance mutual understanding. Feedback involves active solicitation of information the group may have but the leader does not. That is, exposure often accompanies vulnerability, while feedback often accompanies accountability.

In our example, Sam’s initial response to his colleagues’ input was denial and defensiveness. He felt the assessment misrepresented his true listening ability. However, only after speaking with family members who confirmed the supervisees’ assessment, did Sam’s exposure increase. In retrospect, Sam’s initial self-deception was so strong that it took trusted family members and significant self-reflection to overcome his automatic desire to deny and ignore the supervisee feedback. Over the course of his career, Sam increased, and continues to use, feedback as a means of improving his overall leadership effectiveness.

Hubris resists both exposure and feedback. For example, Uzziah’s downfall was marked by a total unwillingness to accept correction, driving him to the point of rage. He is not alone. Lipmen-Blumen (2004) states that a key characteristic of toxic leadership is “stifling constructive criticism and teaching supporters (sometimes by threats and authoritarianism) to comply with, rather than to question, the leader’s judgment and actions” (p. 20). Unless leaders are willing to embrace exposure and feedback with humility, toxic behavior is often their destiny.

### **A Self-Concept that is Neither Inflated nor Deflated**

When contrasting the concepts of ego and humility in leadership, Buckingham (2006) writes, “If you want to develop a budding leader, don’t tell him to deflate his ego into humility, to lessen his dreams, to downplay his belief in himself. This is confusing, negative advice” (p. 69). While we believe Buckingham misrepresents the true concept of humility, we appreciate his sentiment. How do leaders maintain the self-efficacy, and even boldness, to effectively lead if they have been “deflated?”

Ironically, Paul the apostle, whom Buckingham cites to reinforce his point, actually provides the answer. As summarized by Keller (2014), Paul’s discourse from 1 Corinthians 3:21 to 4:7 provides invaluable insight about an identity rooted in Christ. In short, egos that are either inflated or deflated are dangerously fragile. The inflated ego lives in a world of hubris and overconfidence. The deflated ego lives in a world of shame and lack of confidence. Both are fragile because they ultimately depend on affirmation and validation from transient, finicky,

external sources. Paul's view of himself was different. He was not ultimately affirmed by his record of success, the approval of the crowd, or even his opinion of himself. In Christ, Paul was ultimately affirmed by God's opinion of him. God's absolute stamp of approval and praise provided Paul with a self-concept that was neither inflated nor deflated. It was not inflated because Paul knew God's affirmation was a free, undeserved gift of grace. Neither was it deflated, because Paul's ultimate approval and affirmation came from the king of the entire universe. This allowed him to be simultaneously modest and bold, humble and confident.

The power of this self-concept cannot be overstated. It is a self-concept that can handle success, praise, and recognition without becoming overly attached to them. It is simultaneously a self-concept that can handle criticism and correction without becoming overly defensive. It is a self-concept that does not live in the highs and lows of circumstances. It is a self-concept that, Keller (2014) notes, can handle success or failure. While this type of self-concept is difficult to achieve, even amongst Christ followers, it is uniquely available in Christ. The key to this biblical humility, as some have stated, is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less.<sup>2</sup>

### **A BIBLICAL CASE OF SELF-DECEPTION INTERRUPTED**

The biblical record of King David provides an excellent case of self-deception interrupted. As recorded in 1 Samuel, from his earliest days David was known as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). His identity was firmly rooted in his relationship with God, enabling him to endure severe criticism and stress in the midst of overwhelming circumstances (1 Samuel 17:28, 23:7–24:22, and 26). He consistently attributed his many successes to God (1 Samuel 17:34–37 and 17:45–47) and would not raise a hand against Saul as God's anointed ruler, even at the risk of his own life (1 Samuel 24:6, 10 and 26:11). Even in the midst of great success (1 Samuel 18:7), David displayed uncommon humility (1 Samuel 18:18).

However, David was not immune from the peril of self-deception. As recorded in 2 Samuel, by the time he was securely on the throne, David apparently became too comfortable (2 Samuel 11:1). His resultant sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband (2 Samuel 11:2–27) demonstrated a moral corruption and abuse of power rivaling any failing committed by King Saul. What separated the leadership destinies of the two men? We

believe it was honest accountability and David's restored awareness of the truth.

After a year-long cover-up and denial of transgression, God used the prophet Nathan to boldly confront the king when none of his other followers would. However, unlike Saul when rebuked by Samuel (1 Samuel 13), David responded with heartfelt contrition. Psalm 51 provides one of the most honest self-appraisals and appeals for spiritual renewal in the biblical record. And while his moral lapse brought severe consequences (2 Samuel 12:11 and 14), David's decline was interrupted by two elements: a strong adviser willing to speak the truth and David's own self-awareness, enabling him to honestly listen and humbly acknowledge his failings.

Whether operating in the corporate or faith sectors, we maintain that these elements—honest feedback and the humility to receive it—hold the key to overcoming the overconfident, hubristic, success narratives that often propel leadership descent.

### **IMPLICATION FOR READERS**

Growth in self-awareness and interruption of self-deceptive patterns result not from singular events, but from a sustained journey. For Christians, this journey consists of consistent, recurring investment in the spiritual formation of who we are, first as believers and then as leaders. Only through this process can we hope to lead wholeheartedly out of a love for Christ, rather than secondary motives (Grimes & Bennett III, 2017)

Our previous writings have focused on the process of developing a transformed self-concept rooted in our union in Christ (Cohee & Voorhies, 2020). To this, we add a few additional recommendations.

First, if we as leaders think we might be suffering from self-deception, we probably are and if we do not think we are suffering from self-deception, we almost certainly are. Some level of self-deception is nearly inevitable. To minimize it, as previously mentioned, the simplest and most direct solution is to ask for feedback. Such requests should be regular, genuine, and receptive to change. We should make such requests from our spouses, children, staff, supervisors, employees, and peers. When we receive their feedback, we should be willing to accept their point of view and express our appreciation, without feeling the need to defend or explain ourselves. Finally, we should give ourselves several days to process and pray over any feedback that may challenge our self-perceptions or success narratives.

Second, we should ask trusted friends and advisors to observe particular situations where we may be struggling as leaders. We should seek specific feedback regarding our relational and behavioral skills. These situationally based reviews may center on areas like our listening abilities, our ability to deliver affirmation, our ability to receive differing viewpoints, and our non-verbal messaging. Returning to our vulnerability to “not see what it is we do not see,” we should learn to depend on the voices of strong advisers willing to speak the truth.

Third, we should consider various assessments that can objectively identify our personality and other trait-based attributes. Nearly all assessments consist of derivative strengths and weaknesses that can prove informative. Additionally, most assessments contain a dyadic element that enlightens us about how we relate to other, differing personalities. Of note, personality and skills-based assessments should not be self-assessed; rather they should be delivered and debriefed by others who are trained in the assessment instrument.

Finally, and most importantly, we should seek unobstructed intimacy with God, immersing ourselves in his means of grace. By his Spirit, we should strive to extend our devotions and worship beyond reading a daily Bible passage and saying a quick prayer. Our spiritual disciplines should be recurring and multilayered—directing our thoughts toward God’s Word, work, and ways. Only through sustained spiritual engagement can we learn to hear God’s voice (John 10:27) and incline our ears to his sayings (Proverbs 4:20) because his Word is truth (John 17:17).

## CONCLUSION

In their chapter “The Success Delusion, or Why We Resist Change,” Goldsmith and Reiter (2007) catalog typical characteristics of successful leaders who are busy building their success narratives. They note that such leaders overestimate their contribution to projects, take credit for successes that belong to others, maintain elevated opinions of their professional skills over those of their peers, ignore self-created failures, and exaggerate their financial contributions to the firm.

These anecdotal observations, which are based on the behavior of many actual and proven leaders, reinforce the power of self-deception and its tendency to work consistently and insidiously over an extended life cycle. Sometimes, Goldsmith asserts, the “success delusion” may even temporarily benefit leaders by instilling them

with confidence, no matter how undeserved it may be. However, he concludes:

Our delusions become a serious liability when we need to change. We sit there with the same godlike feelings, and when someone tries to make us change our ways we regard them with unadulterated bafflement. (Goldsmith & Reiter, 2007, p. 17)

In other words, self-deception will take its toll. It blinds us to the need for self-improvement. Worse yet, it often helps us down the path of self-destruction—professionally and personally. The most insidious part of it all is that self-deception is, by definition, difficult to detect in ourselves.

The antidote to self-deception rooted in hubris is increased self-awareness rooted in biblical humility. Again, this humility is not a call to milquetoast, impotent leadership. Instead it is a call to a self-aware, clear-minded view of the true magnitude of our leadership success, the true existence of our blind spots, and our true identity in Christ. It is a humility that is simultaneously modest yet confident, unpretentious yet strong.

In the end, it is a humility in leadership best reflected by Jesus Christ himself.

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### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These occurrences are not limited to well-known corporate leaders. Recently, a number of high-profile Christian leaders have resigned, taken leaves of absence, or been dismissed for unhealthy, abusive, or toxic leadership.
- <sup>2</sup> This quote is often attributed to C.S. Lewis, but its origin is unclear.

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