

Breaking the Cycle: A Response to “The Impact of Self-Deception on Leader Effectiveness”

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ABSTRACT: In their article “The Impact of Self-Deception on Leader Effectiveness,” Dr. Lane Cohee and Dr. Sam Voorhies apply a biblical perspective to the self-deception that often occurs in leadership and its many challenges to leader effectiveness. The authors propose leader self-deception follows an insidious life cycle that is fueled by a false success narrative that brings corruption and ultimately harms both the individual and the organization. The framework developed in the article is useful for exploring this important construct and the actions leaders should consider when desiring to overcome this impediment to personal and professional effectiveness. This response provides a critique of their article and considers potential areas for future exploration.

“If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions” (Galatians 6:3-4).

Self-deception is a topic frequently mentioned in Scripture. Such deception can take a variety of forms, including the failure to admit one’s sinful state (e.g., 1 John 1:8), trusting in riches (e.g., Revelation 3:17), acting in hypocritical ways (e.g., James 1:26), and false identities (e.g., 2 Corinthians 11:13). An underlying theme throughout Scripture dealing with self-deception is the pride that often accompanies this gripping vice and the imminent destruction that follows (e.g., Proverbs 16:8). In their article “The Impact of Self-Deception on Leader Effectiveness,” Dr. Lane Cohee and Dr. Sam Voorhies apply a biblical perspective to the self-deception that often occurs in leadership and its many challenges to leader effectiveness. They conceptualize self-deception in leadership as a leader’s positive assessment of the self, despite specific evidence suggesting otherwise. The authors propose leader self-deception follows an insidious life cycle that is fueled by a false success narrative that brings corruption and ultimately harms both the individual and the organization.

Self-serving bias (i.e., the tendency to take credit for successes while making external attributions for failures) is at the core of self-deception. As individuals gain power in organizations, they tend to engage in higher levels of self-serving bias (Lammers & Burgmer, 2019). It is perhaps not surprising that self-deception may be particu-

larly problematic for corporate leaders. The self-deception model developed by Cohee and Voorhies is useful when considering how this process occurs. They suggest early corporate successes motivate organizational leaders to preserve their favorable reputations by developing success narratives reflecting self-serving bias. Ironically, the desire to preserve this pristine image despite personal shortcomings results in the leader’s self-destruction. The authors indicate hubristic pride may be particularly instrumental in leaders’ self-deception. Proudful leaders have little inclination to engage in self-awareness and seek feedback concerning areas for improvement. Such leaders are prone to maintaining a high degree of defensiveness and display an unwillingness to accept correction.

While the authors present a useful model in understanding self-deception in leadership, it remains unclear how this construct is substantially different from related leadership constructs, such as leader hubris. For example, Picone, Dagnino, and Minā (2014) discuss CEO hubris as an overestimation of executives’ capabilities and performance. They identify (as of 2014) 182 articles that have been published examining managerial hubris. Many of the antecedents (e.g., recent company success, praise by others, superiority beliefs) of managerial hubris are similar to the conditions promoting leader self-deception. Interestingly, there are differences in the causal mechanisms posited for leader failure. Exaggerated risk-taking and poor strategy formulation are thought to undermine the hubris leader’s performance (e.g., Picone, Dagnino, & Minā, 2014). Cohee and Voorhies, however, seem to

suggest the lack of acknowledgment of one's failures and personal shortcomings underpin the imminent destruction for the leader engaged in self-deception.

Cohee and Voorhies demonstrate the importance of interrupting the self-deception cycle by contrasting two prominent leaders in Scripture: King Saul and King David. Their manuscript details how both men experienced early leadership success and yet suffered from self-deception in exercising their authority. On multiple occasions Saul disobeyed the instruction of the Lord and failed to repent (see 1 Samuel). The story of Saul's leadership and refusal to heed the instructions of the prophet Samuel offers a cautionary tale of a prideful ruler who became entrapped in a self-deception cycle that facilitated his rapid demise. On the other hand, David overcame the self-deception involving his affair with Bathsheba by gaining self-awareness and responding to the reprimand from his advisor, the prophet Nathan (see 2 Samuel). Cohee and Voorhies use the contrast in the leaders' responses to their own deception to reinforce the important role that humble self-assessment serves in breaking the cycle of self-deception. The authors imply this accounted for the difference in leader effectiveness. Cook (2020) suggests a more fundamental contributor for the contrast in the leaders' outcomes—fear of the Lord. He concludes it was the fear of the Lord that led to David's mournful repentance, and the lack of reverence for God's commands sealed Saul's fate. How such fear influences introspection and acknowledgment of leader shortcomings is not well understood and may be useful to explore in future research.

The authors provide many useful tactics leaders can take to mitigate the potential for hubristic pride and self-deception. These include maintaining a Christ-centered self-concept and seeking timely direct feedback from others.

Such advice stimulates a few questions:

1. *What influences the willingness of hubristic leaders to engage in humble self-assessments, given their predisposition to engage in continuous self-deception?* Cohee and Voorhies suggest being receptive to feedback is critical to breaking the self-deception cycle. Indeed it is! Yet, this receptivity requires the renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2) and humility (Proverbs 15:33). Given the trait-based dimension of hubristic pride underpinning self-deception and the previous corporate successes that have reinforced inflated narratives of the self, some might be skeptical about the likelihood of such radical change in hubristic leaders. The authors note the importance of having an identity rooted in Christ. By extension, might this suggest Sabbath observance, Scripture reading, and worship are

useful practices in transforming one's identity and growing in one's humility? Direct examination of faith-based practices may be useful in exploring this transformation.

2. *How does the leader's power and previous deception influence the feedback provided by others and what actions can leaders take to overcome feedback challenges?* Corporate leaders often have the ability to terminate, reprimand, and otherwise directly influence the financial and career prospects of subordinates. Additionally, leaders' previous self-serving behavior may have alienated those around them. The power and trust dynamics existing in fractured superior-subordinate relationships may prevent honest feedback from being communicated. The authors suggest a few useful practices when confronting these issues, including acknowledging behavioral blind spots and engaging in non-defensive and transparent behaviors. Future research may explore the potential mediating impact of psychological safety (i.e., individuals' beliefs concerning their likelihood of being punished for taking certain risks, such as voicing concerns or opinions; Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001). Research suggests leaders' behavior influences psychological safety, which in turn impacts follower feedback behavior (Chughtai, 2016). Future studies may examine how leader self-deception influences psychological safety in subordinates.
 3. *What characteristics of followers are likely to influence their willingness to rebuke deceptive leaders?* The authors provide a useful contrast of King Saul and King David when discussing the importance of interrupting the self-deception cycle. While David repented of his sin when confronted by the prophet Nathan, he did not preemptively acknowledge his shortcomings or solicit such feedback. The authors note how Nathan boldly confronted David when none of his other advisors would. This narrative highlights the important role of the follower in proactively (and properly) rebuking the leader's self-deception. Yet, it remains unclear what factors account for followers' willingness to engage in such action that places them in a highly vulnerable position. Examination of the employee voice literature may provide some guidance here.
- Cohee and Voorhies should be commended for providing a useful, faith-informed framework to understand

the insidious cycle of self-deception. Their discussion provides for an initial examination of this important construct and actions leaders should consider when desiring to overcome this impediment to personal and professional effectiveness. Leaders intent on immersing themselves in teams and organizations that are committed to avoiding self-deception may consider such priorities when hiring and selecting employees with whom they will frequently interact. Singh (2008) notes, “[I]ndividuals with exaggerated self-images have a pronounced weakness for those who resemble them. Hence, at the time of selection, they tend to look for their mirror images, or clones” (p. 734). Furthermore, individuals gravitate towards establishing and enhancing relationships with others that verify their self-views (e.g., Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). Overcoming self-deception may be contingent upon surrounding one’s self with a diverse set of individuals that are not predisposed to endorse one’s behaviors. The leader must also look inward and consider the authors’ call for humble self-awareness. Devoting time to worship and grounding one’s self in the word of God may help convict individuals of one’s own shortcomings and demonstrate one’s need for repentance.

As the authors note, self-deception is an issue with which many individuals struggle. Sadly, Christian business faculty and business leaders are not immune to the harvest that will be reaped if we fail to disengage in the cycle of self-deceptive behavior. May we heed the advice offered by Cohee and Voorhies and seek to cement our identity squarely in Christ. Let us be receptive to the feedback offered by the Holy Spirit through Scripture and the gentle (and sometimes forceful) rebukes of those around us. They have the ability to transform us as individuals and as leaders.

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