

# Identity, Self-Awareness, and Self-Deception: Ethical Implications for Leaders and Organizations

Cam Caldwell

**ABSTRACT.** The ability of leaders to be perceived as trustworthy and to develop authentic and effective relationships is largely a function of their personal identities and their self-awareness in understanding and making accommodations for their weaknesses. The research about self-deception confirms that we often practice denial regarding our identities without being fully aware of the ethical duties that we owe to ourselves and to others. This article offers insights about the nature of identity and self-awareness, specifically examining how self-deception can create barriers to self-awareness within both a personal and a business context.

**KEY WORDS:** identity, self-deception, self-awareness, ethical leadership, mediating lens, emotional intelligence

For more than three millennia, “knowledge of the self has been considered to be at the very core of human behavior” (Whetten and Cameron, 2007, p. 58). Personal identity and self-awareness have been identified as critical elements of effectiveness in creating relationships with others (Albrecht, 2006; Goleman, 2006a, b). Despite the importance of self-knowledge in our lives, we are often unknowingly and unintentionally guilty of self-deception (Warner, 2001) – with a potentially devastating impact on

our own lives and on others (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to offer insights about the nature of identity and self-awareness, specifically examining how self-deception can create barriers to self-awareness and conflict with one’s identity. Section “[Identity, self-awareness, and self-deception](#)” of this article draws on the academic literature about identity and self-awareness at the personal level and explains the construct of self-deception and how it occurs. Section “[Ethical duties to self](#)” presents five specific ethical implications associated with self-deception. Section “[Implications for business](#)” identifies how an understanding of identity, self-awareness, and self-deception applies within a business context. Section “[Contributions and future research](#)” concludes by listing the contributions of this article and opportunities for future research about identity-related issues.

## Identity, self-awareness, and self-deception

One’s identity defines how an individual affirms his/her worth to others and to self (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Josselson (1994, p. 82) indicated that identity is at its core psychosocial, as an “expression of self, for, with, against, or despite; but certainly in response to others.” One’s individual identity is a set of meanings applied to the self within a social role or situation that determines what it means to be who one is (Burke and Tully, 1977, p. 883). This set of meanings may be complex and “serves as a standard or reference” for evaluating oneself and one’s behaviors (Burke, 1991, p. 837). Brewer and Gardner (1996) explained that identity orientation may be at a

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*Cam Caldwell obtained a PhD from Washington State University where he was a Thomas S. Foley Graduate Fellow. He writes about ethical duties of leaders and organizations in expanding the ability of organizations to increase employee commitment and long-term wealth creation. He is currently Visiting Professor in the College of Business at Texas A & M University – Corpus Christi.*

personal (internal), relational (dyadic), or collective (group or organizational) level. At the organizational level, Albert and Whetten (1985) conceptualized identity as encompassing the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of an organization. At the personal or individual level, identity also encompasses those central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of an individual (Berger et al., 2006).

Academic discourse can depersonalize identity and fail to acknowledge the deeply personal importance of self-image (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Schiraldi, 2001) and the critical nature of self-assessment in evaluating our sense of worth and personal happiness (Langer, 1999; Strauss, 2005). How we act in specific situations is reciprocally related to one’s identity, the roles that we have identified as important, and the congruence between our behavior and how we believe we ideally should behave (Burke and Reitzes, 1981). Social identity is correlated with individual identity and deals with one’s perceived role as a member of a group as opposed to one’s identity as a unique individual (Stets and Burke, 2000). Flynn (2005) suggested that identity at the personal level was validated by comparing the self to others and by confirming one’s identity in context with how one believes (s)he is perceived by others.

Moral identity is also a fundamental part of who we are (Flanagan, 1991, p. 18) and encompasses our efforts to answer the three following questions: (1) “what is the right thing to do?” (2) “how is the best possible state of affairs achieved?” and (3) “what qualities make for a good person?” (Hart, 2005, pp. 166–168). Moral behavior is behavior which addresses ethical duties (Hosmer, 2007) and is socially responsible (Reed et al., 2007, p. 179). Moral identity encompasses the traits, feelings, and behaviors that an individual includes in his/her self-definition (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Brewer and Gardner, 1996). The degree to which an individual views moral duties is the most important determinant as to the likelihood that beliefs will be translated into actions (Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007, p. 1610). Reflecting on moral duties is critical to moral decision making and congruent behavior (Kurpis et al., 2008; Warner, 2001). Lennick and Kiel (2008, p. 209) suggest that moral intelligence encompasses three key responsibilities: (1) the responsibility to do no harm; (2) the responsibility to add current value;

and (3) the responsibility to add future value. Moral identity adds to our sense of who we are by articulating the degree to which we feel responsible for self, family, employer, community, and the other key stakeholders to whom we owe duties (Caldwell et al., 2008; Reynolds, 2008).

Powers (1973) suggested that when people perceive their identities they implicitly create a feedback loop which they use to monitor and control their behaviors. Carver and Scheier (1981) developed a model of self-regulation and self-control that is used – both consciously and sub-consciously – to evaluate and control our behaviors. In describing how identity is heavily dependent on an ongoing comparison with an ideal standard of behavior, Burke (1991, p. 838) provided the model shown in Figure 1.

According to identity control theory, when an identity is established, a feedback loop is created which has four components (Burke, 1991). The identity cycle begins with the actions and meaningful behaviors, which make up the *output* of an identity (Burke, 1991). This output is an attempt to adjust individual behaviors to match the ideal internal standard which makes up how we view ourselves (Burke, 1991). Our behavior occurs within

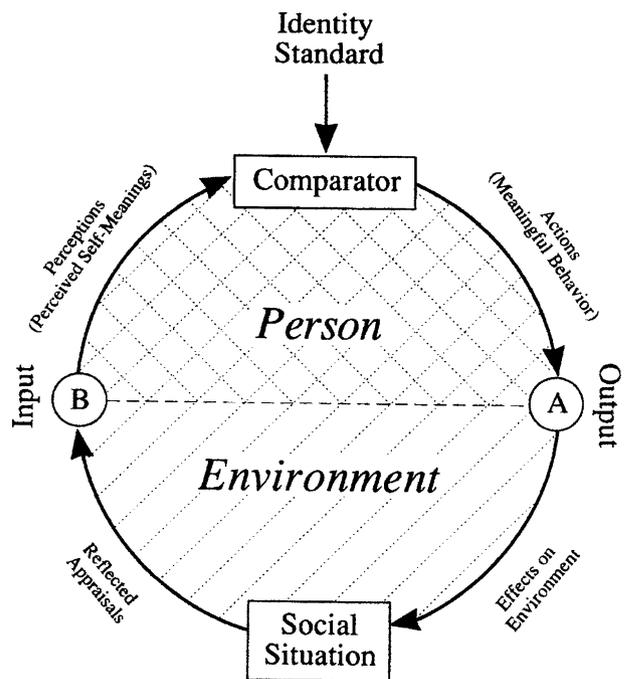


Figure 1. Identity process control system.

the context of a *social situation*. Typically, we use self-categorization and social comparisons from the feedback we receive from others to anticipate how to act (Stets and Burke, 2000). From the reflected appraisals of others, we perceive evaluated *input*, or our interpretation of how our actions and behaviors fit within the situation in which we have been engaged (Burke, 1991). Our interpretation of those appraisals is heavily influenced by the roles we historically play in groups (Stets and Burke, 2000). The *identity standard* is the ideal or *comparator* which makes up our expectations that are associated with self-defined roles which incorporate how we have defined ourselves and who we believe we ultimately are (Stets and Burke, 2000).

The process of self-assessment in evaluating our behavior is a complex calculus (Creed and Miles, 1996), typically occurring at the unconscious and sub-conscious levels (Weick, 1979) that we use to control our behavior to comply with whom we believe we are (Carver and Scheier, 1981; Stets and Burke, 2000). As Stets and Burke (2000, p. 225) summarized, “the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance.” In the self-assessment process, we compare ourselves to others who are both like us and different from us in determining our self-image and identities (Hafner, 2004). Reid and Deaux (1996) found that our social and personal identities may integrate both our self-perceptions and the attributes that make up those identities.

Whereas identity explains who we believe we are (Flanagan, 1991), self-awareness includes the degree to which we are sensitive to how we are perceived by others (Fletcher and Bailey, 2003). Self-awareness theory “suggests that individuals who are more cognizant of how they are perceived by others are better at incorporating information from others into their self-appraisals, and, ultimately, into their behavior” (Moshavl et al., 2003, p. 407). Identity and self-awareness are closely related constructs, with one’s identity being influenced by how one perceives duties and roles related to stakeholders and society (Stets and Burke, 2000). Applying identity and self-awareness to leadership effectiveness, Ashford (1989) explained that a leader’s

awareness of how subordinates perceived him/her had important consequences. Leaders are able to become more effective when they demonstrate that they are receptive to feedback from others (Kouzes and Posner, 2007). Self-awareness is a fundamental element of emotional intelligence and is critical to our ability to communicate with and build relationships of trust with others (Goleman, 2006a, b; Whetten and Cameron, 2007). Individuals high in self-awareness are skilled at self-monitoring and in adapting their behaviors to relate effectively with others (Shivers-Blackwell, 2006).

Self-awareness involves having “a deep understanding of one’s emotions, as well as one’s strengths and limitations and one’s values and motives” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 40). Self-awareness incorporates the self-reflection capacity and thoughtfulness that Covey (2004) declared as necessary to discover one’s voice and incorporates the ability to understand one’s true nature and the freedom to choose how one consciously wishes to respond to life. Goleman et al. (2002, p. 40) placed high value on the ability “to think things over rather than react impulsively” and acknowledged this sensitivity to context and values to be a foundation for personal competence that enabled people to develop a clear understanding of the principles that ultimately form the basis of how they wish to live.

Boyatzis and McKee (2005) have noted that under times of stress, individuals become less self-aware and miss the signs from others that enable them to be effective in managing themselves and their relationships. Even skilled leaders who recognize the importance of tuning into the nuances of interpersonal relationships fall prey to the compelling problems, uncertainty, and often uncontrollable situations that hijack our physiological responses, exponentially increase stress, and cause inevitable self-awareness dysfunction (Dickerson and Kemeny, 2004). Sankar (2003) suggested that self-awareness and effective leadership required character in carefully examining the consistency of one’s personal attributes and behaviors in relationships with others.

The problem of congruence in how we assess ourselves is essential to self-awareness, one’s individual identity, and self-deception. As a form of cognitive dissonance, self-deception has been described as a discrepancy between the way in

which one knows she/he ought to act and how one actually behaves (Festinger, 1957). Brown and Starkey (2000) described self-deception as one of many ego defense mechanisms that enabled one to maintain self-esteem and the continuity of one's identity. Defense mechanisms such as projection, displacement, undoing, isolation, sublimation, and denial are virtually universal phenomena (Baumeister, 1998) and lead to feedback-avoiding behavior (Moss and Sanchez, 2004). Kunda (1990) suggested that anticipating a desired conclusion and viewing the world through a self-serving bias can directly affect the way in which people gather evidence and reach conclusions.

In discussing the nature of our mental models and pre-conceptions, Newman (1999, p. 60) explained:

When people assess the evidence available to them when they make judgments and decisions about important people, relationships, places, things, or issues, they may quickly (and happily) conclude that their pre-existing preferences are supported by the facts. At other times, the evidence may point in the opposite direction. A number of studies now indicate that this unpleasant psychological situation does not necessarily directly launch one into a search for preference-consistent information. Instead, it instigates a different reaction that indirectly leads people to their preferred conclusions: It leads to a more extensive search for and analysis of relevant information ... In plain language, discovering that one's preconceptions might be wrong is a cause for concern. That affective reaction, in turn, causes an increase in the intensity of cognitive processing, and that extra processing can potentially turn up new evidence that is more congenial to one's directional goals.

This tendency to believe in faulty preconceptions is consistent with several types of self-deception identified by Siegler (1962). Siegler (1962) identified eight rationalizations that frequently occur as part of self-deception. Those eight perceptions and their respective meanings are briefly summarized below:

- 1) *A pretense to others*. Claiming prior knowledge about the likelihood of an uncertain outcome may be either a rationalization or an attempt to look good in others' eyes.
- 2) *Discount of a failure*. Claiming to have known in advance that failure was likely may be an attempt to persuade oneself that one truly knew about an uncertain probability.
- 3) *Articulation of past fears*. Unwillingness to deal with uncertainty may result in claiming foreknowledge of a likely failure – but after that disappointment actually occurs.
- 4) *Inability to understand*. Although evidence of a fact contrary to what we may want to believe may be present, our failure to acknowledge a situation may legitimately reflect something we can not emotionally deal with or understand.
- 5) *Wanting reality to be different*. One's biases affect how we see the world and affect the formation of our beliefs so powerfully that we get dissuaded by wishful thinking.
- 6) *Intentional averting of attention*. We know intuitively that something is unbearably distressing and deliberately avoid addressing a painful issue so that we do not have to deal with it.
- 7) *Resolving to change*. At times, we acknowledge that we have not dealt with issues that we ought to have addressed in the past.
- 8) *Acknowledged regret*. We may express the fact that we should have been attuned to key information in the past, but overlooked key clues.

Understanding exactly how we engage in self-deception can enable us to avoid those tendencies that erode relationships with others and that lower our self-esteem (Covey, 2004; Goleman, 1985; Warner, 2001; Whetten and Cameron, 2007).

Fingarette (2000) suggested that the intent of self-deception is often an attempt to cope with the frustrations of life and to create meaning where incongruity seems to exist. In writing about self-deception as a coping mechanism, Goleman (1985, pp. 12–18) explained that self-deception was often a sub-conscious effort to avoid pain and anxiety, skewing our conscious awareness by filtering out painful information. Smith (2004, p. 3) described self-deception as “vital for psychological equilibrium” in enabling people to “soothe many of the stresses of life.” Maslow (1962, p. 57) reminded us that we deny reality and practice self-deception and similar defenses because “we tend to be afraid of any knowledge that would cause us to despise ourselves

or to make us feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful.”

Peck (1983, pp. 104–105) noted that frequently those who deceive others or themselves do so unwittingly and, often, without a conscious awareness of their motives for their deceptions. Philosopher and theologian Buber (1980, p. 11) commented about the subtle nature of self-deception in writing about “the uncanny game of hide and seek in the obscurity of the soul, in which it, the single human soul, evades itself, avoids itself, hides from itself.” Peck (1983, p. 119) describes our efforts in “defending and preserving the integrity of our own sick selves” as inherent within the definition of evil and suggests that a by-product of self-deception is to destroy the spiritual growth and welfare of ourselves and/or others. Self-deception is a warping of perception that elevates a distorted view of reality and self-interest above the desire for the truth (Peck, 1983, p. 121). The great danger of this warped view of reality is that those who practice it are unable to identify how they can create relationships healthy to themselves and to others and are insensitive to the feedback that the world offers (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005).

One of the foremost means of self-deception is to treat others as an object or a means, rather than as a valued individual or end (Warner, 2001, p. 46). Citing the study of Buber (1971), Warner explained that our identities and our relationships with others becomes distorted when we reduce people to commodities or objects. People lose their unique value, and we destroy our ability to create life-enhancing relationships that betray both ourselves and others (Warner, 2001, pp. 50–53). Buber (1971) had noted that when we treat people like an *I-It*, we depersonalize them and deny our obligation to them – as opposed to treating them like an *I-You* that acknowledges not only their identity but our moral duties to them as well. Part of our self-deception, then, is to deny our humanity and to undervalue the importance of creating resonating relationships with others (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005). Ultimately, this undermining of our ability to create powerful relationships robs us of the richness of a life that is personally fulfilling and that enables us to accomplish our potential – both in terms of serving others and in becoming what we have the capacity to achieve (Covey, 2004, p. 5).

### Ethical duties to self

Self-deception is a denial of the duty owed to the self when it causes an individual to avoid confronting the need to modify one’s behavior (Peck, 1983). The purpose of this section is to identify five ethical duties owed to the self which enable individuals to deal more productively with themselves, with others, and with the world around them.

(1): *We owe ourselves the duty to understand how vulnerable we can be when we are unwilling or unable to address incongruity in our lives*

The ability to confront the realities about life and about ourselves begins with a willingness to thoughtfully take a personal inventory of who we are, what we believe, and the importance of truth in our lives (Ackerman, 2005). Because self-deception is implicitly difficult to recognize (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005), we owe ourselves the duty of understanding how common self-deception can be (Fingarette, 2000). In writing about the dissonance of self-deception, Boyatzis and McKee (2005, p. 47) describe it as follows:

We end up seeing the world in very black-and-white terms, and we slowly lose the ability to see ourselves, or those around us, realistically. We miss a lot. Then, when things do go wrong, it is very easy to continue to blame others, and feel sorry for ourselves as things deteriorate – especially when the downturn feels like a surprise and follows a period of denial.

The inability to “define reality” (DePree, 2004, p. 11) and to tune in emotionally to ourselves and to others is particularly destructive for leaders (Goleman et al., 2002). Self-awareness includes the ability to *recognize* and evaluate what is happening within oneself and with others, but the most critical components of self-awareness and empathy are in how we *respond* to and *apply* information about emotions in guiding our lives and in building high trust relationships (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997). Self-deception results in an inability to care for our own long-term welfare (Peck, 1983), and short-circuits our ability to understand reality, resulting in what Albrecht (2006, p. 34) called “dumbness and numbness.”

The consequence of self-deception is to deny truth and create a reality that masks one’s identity,

destroys trust, erodes relationships, and ultimately diminishes the quality of one's life (Mele, 2001). Recognizing the importance of truth seeking, integrity, and congruence in our lives is a key indicator of emotional and spiritual health (Greenberg, 1985; Peck, 1998), in addition to being essential in creating relationships of trust (Hosmer, 1996; Kouzes and Posner, 2003; Mayer et al., 1995). By recognizing how vulnerable we can be to self-deception, we acknowledge our humanness and demonstrate a commitment to personal integrity.

(2): *In recognizing and identifying self-deceptive behavior, we need to acknowledge the underlying internal factors that cause us to deny reality*

The process of thoughtfully examining the consistency of our behaviors enables individuals to explore the beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and motivations that cause them to be self-deceptive (Taylor, 2006). According to the Theory of Reasoned Action, behaviors are a by-product of our beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. Figure 2 shows this relationship.

The Theory of Reasoned Action in Figure 2 shows the interrelated nature of beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) while helping to explain the complexity of the “conceptual calculus” used in sense-making associated with human behavior (Creed and Miles, 1996, p. 16). Examining the differences between how we behave and what we claim to believe or intend to do is essential to understanding ourselves and our identities (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

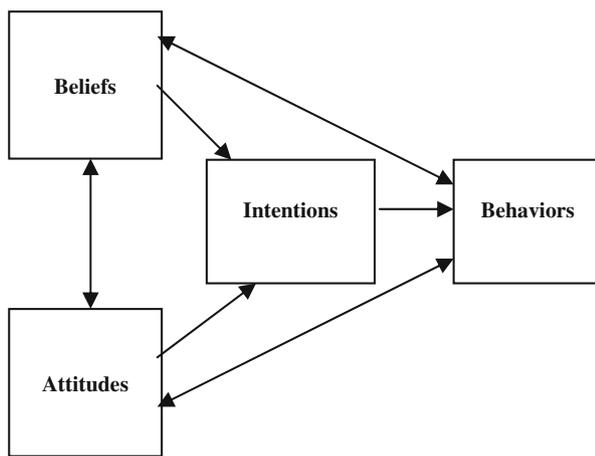


Figure 2. Theory of reasoned action.

Beliefs are cognitive perceptions that “represent the information” that a person has about an object, and attitudes are emotional responses that interrelate constantly with cognitive beliefs (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, pp. 12–14). Within the context of self-deception, one's beliefs and attitudes become subjective interpretations of the self within a complex world (Jun, 2005). Intentions reflect the articulated or unarticulated personal motivation that an individual will carry out a specific behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, pp. 14–17). Intentions are likely predictors of actual behavior, but intentions do not equate perfectly with that behavior. When we believe that a specific behavior reflects our values but do not behave congruently with those values, our actions are dissonant with our beliefs and espoused intentions.

The eight rationalizations identified by Siegler (1962) put us in a position of denial about truth in attempt to adjust to that which is uncomfortable. Horowitz (1983, p. 136) identified nine predictable consequences of this denial:

- *Avoided associations* which short-circuit connections to the event or issue.
- *Numbness* or the inability to process appropriate emotional reactions.
- *Flattened response* or the constriction of expectable emotional reactions.
- *Dimming of attention* or the inability to focus clearly on thoughts or sensations.
- *Daze* or defocused attention that avoids acknowledging the significance of events.
- *Memory failure* or the inability to recall events, details, or specific facts.
- *Disavowal* in thinking or saying that obvious meanings are not so.
- *Blocking through fantasy* by avoiding reality and substituting what might or could be.

The danger of these responses is that they are palliatives that defer our ability to deal effectively with reality and move forward in our lives (Goleman, 1985). Understanding the factors that cause us to deny reality is critical for us to recognize the root causes of self-deception. Possessing an accurate assessment of ourselves is critical to goal achievement and enables individuals to “inoculate against self-deception” (Taylor, 2006, p. 647).

(3): *We owe ourselves the duty to thoughtfully examine our core beliefs and to reflect upon those beliefs on a regular basis*

Examining our core beliefs is fundamental to developing a clear understanding of our values and goals and the assumptions upon which those values and goals are based (Caldwell et al., 2002). A classic definition of self-deception is that an individual “believes in two contradictory beliefs” at the same time without acknowledging that a conflict exists (Mele, 2001, p. 92). The challenge in knowing ourselves is our willingness to engage “in objective self-examination, and also accepting whatever personal shortcomings” that may be uncovered by that self-examination process (Morris et al., 2005, p. 1340). The willingness to conduct this self-examination requires both a personal confidence and authentic humility, but allows an individual to more accurately assess the magnitude of the variance between one’s self-assessment and the evaluations of others (Rowan et al., 2002).

Caldwell and Hayes (2007) suggested that inventorying six core beliefs about self, others, the nature of the divine, the past, current reality, and the future were critical to self-assessment and self understanding. Such an inventory enables one to define reality in understanding both the self and one’s duties to others. Formally going through the process of identifying key issues from the perspective of these six core beliefs provides an opportunity to raise our understanding about these issues from the unconscious to the conscious level – a process that is essential to confronting our self-deceptions (Mele, 2001).

Goffee and Jones (2006) observed that our responsibility to achieve self-knowledge and the self-awareness associated with how we are observed by others is a key to becoming more authentic and to knowing our identities. Ackerman (2005) has identified the importance of clarifying and understanding our core beliefs as a critical element to self-understanding, goal achievement, and the undertaking of self-correcting action – including the vital process of understanding how we deceive ourselves. Gilovich (1991) noted that our ability to accurately view the world requires that we understand ourselves and our preconceived biases that cause us to distort reality. Goleman (1985, p. 106) has explained that each individual sees the world through a “schema (which

implicitly selects what will be noted and what will not.” Understanding who one is and what one believes allows an individual to be aware of blind-spots that can distort reality, impair relationships and decision quality, and severely impact the quality of one’s life (Goleman, 1985).

(4): *We have the responsibility to evaluate the stresses that cause us to become vulnerable to self-deception, acknowledge those stress factors, and seek to mitigate the potentially destructive influences of stress in our lives*

People avoid the discomfort of information that conflicts with their preferred view of the world by an unconscious effort to minimize anxiety (Smith, 2003). Goleman (1985, p. 22) has explained that self-deception occurs in three steps: (1) the mind seeks to protect itself against anxiety by dimming awareness; (2) this dimming mechanism creates a blind spot or a zone of blocked attention and self-deception; and (3) these blind spots occur at each major level of behavior from psychological to social. The mind unconsciously warps reality in self-deception, including how one views the self and one’s role within a specific context to create a version of reality that reduces anxiety by pretending that an anxiety-producing alternative reality does not exist – even when evidence of that alternative reality is present (Litz, 2003).

The mind tunes out threats “to short-circuit stress arousal” in situations where anxiety has become so painful that the unconscious mind believes that it cannot cope (Goleman, 1985, p. 43). In writing about the internal conflicts created by self-deception, Sartre (1956) examined the spiritual conflict present within the human soul. He observed that the unacknowledged conflict between contradictory beliefs amounted to a surrendering of one’s integrity as the reflective consciousness suffers an “inner disintegration in the heart of being” (Sartre, 1956, p. 70). Covey (2004, p. 53) has reminded us that our inability to honor our moral conscience is spiritually destructive and makes it impossible to fulfill our identity and find our voices. Thus, our obligation to the self is to attempt to understand and mitigate stresses in an effort to maintain the moral and spiritual ability to preserve our personal integrity (Finagrette, 2000). Finagrette (2000, p. 135) suggested that at the level that individuals deepens their

insight into self-deception, ‘we are left with the paradoxical truth that the self-deceiver “in his heart” knows what he sincerely denies.’ As Kierkegaard (1959, p. 267) observed, self-deception is a crisis of spirit and a form of betraying of the self – but is an attempt to “bring about a proportionality in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues.”

Because the nature of self-deception is often unconscious, the task of self-monitoring our stress, anxiety, and assumptions about reality is often difficult to undertake (Mele, 2001). At the same time, the self-serving bias that is so much a part of self-deception is universally common and applies to virtually everyone (Gilovich, 1991). Only when we consciously make the effort to explore our schemata, scripts, and frames for viewing the world and to acknowledge the stresses and conflicts that create anxiety in our lives are we likely to attune ourselves to the ongoing self-deception and denial that is present in our unconscious mind (Goleman, 1985). Understanding those stresses by an ongoing effort to know ourselves, acknowledging the impact of stress in reducing decision quality, and seeking to mitigate stress to reduce self-deceptive behavior are essential responsibilities that will enable each of us to honor our true identities, increase our inner harmony, and maintain our personal integrity (Mele, 2001).

(5): *We owe ourselves the responsibility to periodically examine whether our conduct is consistent with the beliefs we proclaim and to confront incongruities between our beliefs and our behaviors*

In order to be effective, especially in establishing congruence between our behaviors and beliefs, we need to clearly understand the often unspoken assumptions about our beliefs and values that actually determine how we behave (Schein, 2004; Warner, 2001). In noting that self-deception occurs at both the individual and organizational levels, Schein’s (2004, pp. 137–150) research confirms that our unspoken assumptions often are “undiscussable” and tacitly off limits for examination. At the same time, Schein (2004, p. 318) observed that achieving congruence between behaviors and our actual assumptions was critical to both individual credibility and organizational effectiveness.

Goleman (1985, p. 224) referred to subtly agreed upon ground rules for self-deception as “questions

that can’t be asked” – whether of ourselves or between parties. This same “conspiracy of silence” often protects inept members of professional groups, such as physicians or psychiatrists, from the damning testimony of their peers (Goleman, 1985, p. 225). Turning internally, our unconscious minds are unwilling and unable to deal with questions that we cannot ask ourselves about because we are not presently able to deal with the disappointments, the anxieties, and the stress created by acknowledging that we are being intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually dishonest (Finagrette, 2000). Lacking the courage and integrity to acknowledge the conflicts between two incongruous ideas, we internally justify our choice by incorporating a subtle moral calculus that allows us to believe that we have somehow chosen a greater good (cf. Creed and Miles, 1996; Weick, 2001; Weick et al., 2005).

White (1988) explained that the self-justification often associated with self-deception involves examining our responsibility for an event’s occurrence and denying responsibility for the unanticipated events that are caused by our actions. Ultimately, those who practice self-deception must acknowledge that their decisions can have a profound impact upon themselves and upon others (Finagrette, 2000; Mele, 2001). Building into our individual lives and our organizational systems an inventorying process for monitoring self-deception seems to be a moral imperative in a time when self-deception can have profound potential consequences in individual lives and for society at large (Goleman, 1985). It is in bridging the concept of identity, self-awareness, and self-deception from the individual to the organizational and societal levels that is often most challenging for organizational leaders (Covey, 2004, pp. 70–81).

### Implications for business

As experts in both academia and business have examined the keys to organizational effectiveness, they have confirmed the importance of a clear understanding of oneself as a key factor in interpersonal relationships and organizational outcomes (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005; Collins, 2001; Collins and Porras, 2004; Goleman, 2006a, b; Pfeffer, 1998). Understanding insights about identity, self-awareness,

and self-deception has practical implications for business in six important ways:

(1): *Developing a clear insight into ourselves and how we are perceived is fundamental to establishing effective relationships*

The ability to be self-aware and to understand the nuances of who we are and how we relate to people are fundamental elements of emotional and social intelligence (Albrecht, 2006; Goleman, 2006a, b). The evolving demands placed upon today's leaders are increasingly acknowledged as related to the ability of the leader to resonate with others (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005). Knowing oneself and being open to feedback are essential to being perceived as genuine and authentic (George et al., 2007; Sparrowe, 2005). Self-deception destroys the ability to perceive oneself accurately and creates a false belief about oneself (Sartre, 1956; Wood, 1988).

(2): *Identifying a clear understanding of oneself and how we are seen by others provides valuable insight in being able to manage social contracts that exist*

Honoring commitments and recognizing the importance of the social contract are important in maintaining interpersonal trust and in being perceived as an effective leader (Caldwell and Hayes, 2007). Attuning oneself to feedback from others about implicit duties that are owed is a fundamental element of understanding the nature of social contracts and demonstrates one's commitment to honoring the relationship between the parties (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005). Self-deception may include the denial of obligations owed within a relationship and can undermine one's reputation for integrity and honesty (Arbinger, 2002). Rousseau (1995) affirmed that the duties of social and psychological contracts are frequently not articulated and the nature of self-deception is such that the selective rationality of self-delusion allows us to ignore information that conflicts with how we want to see the world (Finagrette, 2000; Smith, 2004). The risk to the self-deceiver is that in ignoring feedback the resulting self-inflicted injury can destroy trust and even ruin individual careers (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005; Cole, 1980).

(3): *Conducting a regular personal inventory or self-assessment can be a powerful aid to goal attainment*

The ability to be effective at self-monitoring and self-leadership has been acknowledged as an important element for successfully setting and achieving goals (Carver and Scheier, 1998; Neck and Houghton, 2006; Oettingen, 1996). Using a model of self-assessment such as the six beliefs model (Caldwell and Hayes, 2007) provides individuals with a structured and highly conscious way to tease out their beliefs, values, and priorities which are key to goal achievement. Self-monitoring by examining inconsistencies between our beliefs and our intentions (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) also provides an opportunity to reflect on why we may be falling short in reaching proclaimed goals – and whether those goals are really what we value in our lives. Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) have identified the importance of our perception of the self in maximizing goal attainment. When our view of who we are at the unconscious level is inconsistent with our espoused goals, our ability to focus rationally on what we want to achieve is hampered by our self-deceptions (Mele, 2001).

(4): *Acknowledging the incongruence of our behaviors with our commitments can help organizations avoid destroying trust*

The trust literature affirms that sustaining trust is dependent upon a leader's ability to be consistent and congruent (Joseph and Winston, 2005; Mayer et al., 1995). Behavior that is incongruent with proclaimed values erodes trust, while living those values creates a reputation for honesty and trustworthiness (Stephenson, 2004). Because self-deception causes an individual to be insensitive to the nature of his or her commitments by unconscious rationalization, the self-deceiving person is more prone to overlook duties owed to others (Sanford, 1988).

The stress and denial accompanying self-deception can cause previously successful individuals to fail to recognize the vulnerability and distrust that they engender by their lack of awareness of how they are being perceived (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005). Leaders who violate commitments and lose trust must honor promises, rebuild relationships, and model personal integrity if they expect to rebuild lost trust (Schoorman et al., 2007; Stephenson, 2004). When leaders do not acknowledge the lack of

congruence between their words and their actions, they destroy trust and undermine faith in the organization (Schein, 2004) and in themselves (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

*(5): Understanding the characteristics of self-deception in individual and organizational relationships increases one's awareness of the likelihood of being vulnerable to engaging in self-deceptive behavior*

The Arbinger Institute (2002) has noted that the blind spots of human behavior and the very nature of self-deception make it difficult to recognize when our behavior is self-deceptive and self-defeating. Consciously examining behaviors, motives, and assumptions is critical to identifying the traps that are endemic in unconscious self-deception (Mele, 2001). Goleman (1985) has suggested that we have a strong moral and ethical obligation to be aware of the dangers of self-deception in our lives. Lennick and Kiel (2008) identify confronting reality and dealing responsibly with consequences as fundamental elements of moral intelligence. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) have encouraged leaders to attune themselves to understanding how they are perceived and comparing that feedback with their conception of themselves. Advocating our increased attention to that with which we are engaged, Finagrette (2000) noted the moral threats implicit in self-deceptive behavior.

*(6): Examining moral duties enhances an understanding of the breadth of obligations owed to other parties and makes those duties specific*

The nature of identity, self-awareness, and self-deception provides an opportunity to enrich our understanding of moral duties implicit in human relationships (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005; Goleman, 1985). Hosmer (1995, 1996) reminded organizational leaders that relationships based upon trust are fundamentally ethical assumptions. Caldwell and Hayes (2007) explained that in evaluating relationships each individual makes inferences about the ethical behaviors of others via a subjective mediating lens which consists of a complex but individually personal ethical component. Identifying the underlying ethical assumptions implicit in each person's mediating lens allows individuals to identify the duties that they owe and helps to clarify moral

responsibilities (Caldwell and Clapham, 2003; Caldwell and Hayes, 2007). Self-deception is the unconscious process of choosing not to acknowledge implicit moral duties owed to ourselves and to others (Finagrette, 2000; Goleman, 1985; Mele, 2001).

By understanding how identity, self-awareness, and self-deception apply within a business context, individuals and organizations can enhance relationships, build trust and commitment, and improve organizational outcomes.

### Contributions and future research

The primary contribution of this article is that it provides a practical insight into the importance of examining our identity, increasing self-awareness, and confronting our self-deceptions. Although much has been written about self-deception over the last five decades, the practical implications of self-deception are often difficult to acknowledge simply because self-deception is fundamentally an unconscious phenomenon (Finagrette, 2000). Identifying the practical implications of self-deception provides justification for academicians and practitioners to invest more efforts into understanding this important element of our daily lives. Although we may sheepishly acknowledge that we catch ourselves in self-deceptions (Arbinger Institute, 2000; Warner, 2001), the implications of our choices often escape us until we look back in shock at our failure to honor what we reluctantly acknowledge were ethical duties (Goleman, 1985).

In addition to providing insights about the ethical implications of self-deception, this article offers the following contributions:

- 1) *Affirms the importance of attuning ourselves to feedback from others.* Great leaders resonate with others because they know themselves and are attuned to what others think and feel (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005). Learning how to be more aware of the perceptions of others is a skill set that will benefit those who seek to be more effective as leaders or in any relationships (Albrecht, 2006; Goleman, 2006a, b).
- 2) *Confirms the importance of the mediating lens.* The individual subjective ability to define

social contracts, assess the trustworthiness of others, and impose a set of ethical duties in relationships is an implicit part of human relationships (Caldwell and Hayes, 2007; Creed and Miles, 1996; Weick, 1979). Understanding how that lens impacts interpersonal relationships is an important part of self-assessment, relationship building, and leadership.

- 3) *Validates the importance of ongoing ethical self-assessment.* Those who lead others take upon themselves a profound set of moral obligations (Hosmer, 1995, 1996). Identifying our assumptions about the duties that leaders owe to others is an implicit responsibility that often gets lost in the details of day-to-day administration, resulting inevitably in inconsistencies between how we act on what we claim are our values (Schein, 2004).

Although it may be difficult for academicians and practitioners to measure the sub-conscious and unconscious nature of self-deception (Finagrette, 2000), many research opportunities exist related to self-deception. Practitioners interested in improving trust within their organizations have the opportunity to measure attitudes of employees about leaders and perceived trust in context with providing leaders training about self-deception. Academicians have the opportunity to research and explore methods for training individual employees and organizational leaders about self-deception, self-awareness, and the application of those concepts within an organizational context. The greatest value in studying self-deception may very well lie in increasing our awareness of the factors and frameworks that perpetuate this dysfunctional and self-destructive practice (Warner, 2001).

## Conclusion

David Livingstone Smith (2004, p. 146) has observed that “the conscious mind is relatively blind to the nuances of social behavior.” By understanding more about ourselves and our unconscious tendencies to self-deceive, we can improve our ability to build relationships, strengthen organizations, and confront the fears that cause us to live beneath our potential. Brower (1964, p. 156) wisely observed

that “self-examination is a preparation for insight, a groundbreaking for the seeds of self-understanding which gradually bloom into changed behavior.” Making the commitment to explore the inner reaches of our hearts and minds allows us to be true to ourselves and enables us to honor the duties we owe to self, others, and the society in which we live (Warner, 2001).

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*Department of Business and Legal Studies,  
Paul Quinn College,  
Dallas, TX, U.S.A.  
E-mail: cam.caldwell@gmail.com*

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