

Power, Self-Deception, and Conflict

What an Outward Mindset Makes Possible

Marcy Fetzer, PhD, SHRM-SCP

Leadership Communication Ecology

The Arbinger Institute, established in 1979 by Dr. C. Terry Warner, is best known for its work on mindset, leadership, and relational accountability. Its framework is especially useful for thinking about conflict because it begins with a deceptively simple claim: many leadership problems are not primarily behavior problems, but problems of self-deception. In Arbinger's more recent articulation of its framework, self-deception is described as not knowing that one has a problem, while the outward mindset is framed as seeing other people as people who matter as much as we do. That distinction matters because it shifts attention away from technique alone and toward the deeper question of how people are seeing one another, justifying their own behavior, and failing to recognize the effects they have on others.

This perspective aligns closely with the reality of conflict in organizations, where the visible issue is often not the full conflict. What appears to be a disagreement about productivity may in fact be a disagreement about trust. What appears to be a concern about standards may actually be a concern about control. What appears to be a conversation about performance may, at a deeper level, be a conversation about whether one person's fear has become another person's daily reality. In this sense, self-deception and power often travel together. A leader may believe they are being careful, fair, or highly engaged, while those around them experience the same behavior as monitoring, pressure, or mistrust.

This is where Arbibinger's insight becomes especially useful for conflict communication. In many organizational conflicts, the problem is not only what is said, but the communicative pattern through which people speak and listen. Turn-taking, for example, is often treated as a neutral feature of conversation: one person speaks, another responds, and the exchange continues. Yet in practice, turn-taking reveals a great deal about power. Who interrupts? Who closes down a line of inquiry? Who is allowed to finish a sentence? Who must justify their words more than others? Who is expected to remain calm, while another person is permitted to be forceful? These patterns are not merely stylistic. They shape whether a conversation is collaborative, defensive, or coercive.

An arrogant, authoritative leader may unconsciously use turn-taking to maintain control rather than to understand. Such a leader may dominate the floor, redirect questions before they are fully developed, or respond so quickly that no real exchange can occur. In these moments, communication appears to be happening, but mutual understanding is being blocked. The leader may think they are being efficient, decisive, or intellectually rigorous. Others may experience the same behavior as dismissal or domination. Arbibinger's language helps explain this gap: the leader is not seeing the other person as fully real in the conversation. The other becomes a function of the leader's needs rather than a participant whose perspective deserves space.

By contrast, a humble leader treats turn-taking as more than a procedural detail. This leader understands that the order and texture of conversation matter because they communicate respect. Rather than rushing to correct, the humble leader pauses long enough to hear the full concern. Rather than treating disagreement as a challenge to authority, the leader treats it as an opportunity to learn what others are seeing that may otherwise remain hidden. This does not mean the leader abandons confidence or avoids hard decisions. It means that confidence is paired with curiosity, and authority is exercised without the need to dominate the exchange.

The difference between these two leadership styles becomes especially clear in conflict communication. The arrogant, authoritative leader often uses the conversation to secure position, while the humble leader uses the conversation to seek understanding. The first leader may hear feedback as threat; the second may hear it as information. The first may seek to win the exchange; the second may seek to preserve truth and working trust. The first may leave others speaking cautiously or not at all; the second may create conditions in which candor feels possible. In this sense, humility is not a soft interpersonal quality detached from leadership effectiveness. It is a communicative discipline that allows conflict to be addressed before it hardens into distrust.

Conflict communication is therefore not only about the content of disagreement. It is also about the conditions under which disagreement is allowed to surface. In healthy communication, turn-taking creates room for complexity. It gives people time to articulate concerns, ask clarifying questions, and revise assumptions. It signals that the speaker is being heard and that the listener is willing to be changed by what is said. By contrast, when turn-taking is distorted by self-deception, the conversation becomes performative. People speak in order to survive, not in order to understand. They wait for openings not to contribute meaningfully, but to avoid being cut off. Over time, this produces a culture in which silence is safer than honesty.

The relationship between self-deception and power becomes even clearer in this context. Power does not only shape who gets heard; it shapes how people interpret being heard. A leader may allow others to speak while still controlling the meaning of the exchange through tone, facial expression, selective agreement, or immediate reframing. In such cases, turn-taking exists in form but not in substance. The structure of conversation remains intact, but the relational reality is unequal. Arbibinger's framework helps identify this as a problem of mindset rather than a mere communication skill deficit.

An outward mindset changes that dynamic by requiring the leader to treat the other person's voice as intrinsically important rather than strategically useful. This does not mean the leader abandons authority or avoids hard decisions. It means that authority is exercised in a way that makes room for the humanity of others. In practice, that may look like slowing the exchange, inviting fuller responses, tolerating disagreement without immediate correction, and recognizing that the goal of conflict communication is not to win the exchange but to preserve truth, dignity, and working trust.

Seen this way, turn-taking becomes more than a technical feature of conversation. It becomes a moral practice. When a leader honors turn-taking well, they signal that another person's experience is not a threat to be managed but information to be engaged. When they do not, conflict often escalates because people stop believing that speaking honestly is safe or worthwhile. The communication problem then becomes a power problem, and the power problem becomes a relational one.

Arbibinger is helpful precisely because it keeps these layers together. It reminds us that conflict cannot be fully understood without attending to the mindset behind it, the power dynamics within it, and the communicative patterns that reproduce it. An arrogant, authoritative leader may not simply be difficult in conversation; they may be organizing the conversation around self-protection. By contrast, a humble leader organizes the conversation around learning, accountability, and the shared task of understanding what is true. Once that difference is in view, turn-taking, listening, and response become more than conversational habits. They become signs of whether a leader is protecting the self or serving the work.

The larger implication is that leadership is never merely a matter of influence or authority. It is a matter of perception. To lead well is not only to make decisions, but to see people accurately enough to make those decisions responsibly. Arbibinger's contribution is to show that conflict often reveals the quality of that seeing. When leaders are inward, they distort conversation in order to protect themselves. When they are outward, they make space for truth to emerge, even when truth is inconvenient. The difference between those two orientations is not only ethical. It is practical, relational, and organizational. It determines whether conflict becomes a site of domination or a site of understanding.

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