

Author Talks: Shankar Vedantam on the power and paradox of self-deception

The host of *Hidden Brain* on NPR discusses the lies we all tell ourselves and the role they play in easing everyday life.



In this edition of *Author Talks*, McKinsey Global Publishing's Raju Narisetti chats with Shankar Vedantam, the host of NPR's *Hidden Brain* podcast, about his new book, *Useful Delusions: The Power and Paradox of the Self-Deceiving Brain* (W.W. Norton, March 2021). In the book, Vedantam and coauthor Bill Mesler argue that, paradoxically, self-deception—normally believed to do harm to us, to our communities, and to the planet—can also play a vital role in our success and well-being. An edited version of the conversation follows.

Understanding self-deception

We're all liars, aren't we?

As I've written this book, I have noticed numerous cases in my own life when my behavior has deviated from rational choice. Let me give you a couple of examples. A few years ago, my dad was dying from lung cancer, and he was going downhill very quickly. And I would see him periodically every couple of months. And each time I saw him, he looked much sicker. He looked much worse than he did the previous time.

Now all of us have been in situations like this. We've seen people going through terminal illnesses. This is extraordinarily painful for the person who's going through it and for the family as well. But my dad would eagerly ask me each time he saw me how I thought that he was doing.

And when he asked me that question, I invariably lied. I told him, "I think things look like they're going pretty well. In many ways, things seem to be looking up and are going better than we could have anticipated. It sounds like you might [end up being] one of the lucky ones."

Now someone could look at what I said and say, "You know, you're a cruel, heartless person for lying to your dad." But I think most of us in this situation would see that what I did was, in fact, a human thing to do. When we are speaking to people whom we love, whom we care about, and they're experiencing

great suffering, we don't often feel that it's our job to tell them the exact truth.

When a friend comes up to you and says, "You know, I'm going through a divorce," you don't tell your friend, "Well, you're going through a divorce because you were a terrible partner. Serves you right." You tell your friend, "I'm really sorry for what's happened to you. I'm sure that things are going to look up in the future. Let's maybe sit down and talk about how we can make things better for you."

That's what makes you a good friend. One last example: some months ago, I was traveling away from my home when I started to experience a loss of vision in one eye. Now, I have a family history of retinal problems, and it turned out that I was suffering a retinal detachment.

For those who are not familiar with this, the retina is the screen behind the eye. It allows you to see, and so, when the retina comes off its hinges, you can essentially lose your vision altogether. Now I was very far from my home. I didn't have doctors nearby. I eventually managed to find an eye doctor who very kindly opened his practice for me at 9:00 p.m. on a Tuesday night. He diagnosed me with a retinal detachment, and he said, "You need to go into surgery in the next few minutes or you're going to lose your eye."

Now at that point, I didn't have a chance to get a second opinion. I didn't have a chance to look up reviews and see whether he was a good doctor or a bad doctor. I did what all of us do in a situation like this. When you're drowning and someone throws you a lifeline, you don't question that lifeline.

You grab onto that lifeline, you hold onto it, you believe in it. And that's exactly what I did. I trusted the doctor. As it turned out, he was a brilliant surgeon. He ended up saving my eye, for which I'm profoundly grateful. But it reminded me in that moment of great vulnerability, I did not respond with reason and logic.

I responded with trust and with faith. When we go through vulnerable times, we need to reach out to other people. When other people are going through vulnerable times, we need to reach out to them. In some ways, that idea is at the core idea of *Useful Delusions*—when we see the delusions of other people, it's easy to sit in judgment of them. It's easy to be contemptuous of them. But it is far more helpful and far wiser to be empathetic to them, to be compassionate, and to be curious about how it is they came to be thinking the way they do.

What were you hoping to accomplish with this book?

The problem that I was trying to address grew out of what I've seen for many years as a journalist. We in the news media have often covered various events, and we would present facts to the public. And very often, these facts would not have the effect that we thought they were going to have.

I'll give you an example. During the four years of the Trump presidency, *The Washington Post* catalogued more than 30,000 lies and falsehoods that came out of the Trump White House. The net effect of all of this was that Donald Trump received 11 million more votes in 2020 than he did in 2016.

And examples like this prompted me to ask the question, "What exactly are facts doing? When we provide people with facts and information, are

people actually processing the information the way we think they're processing the information? Or is it in fact the case that their minds are shaping and filtering that information in all kinds of ways?" My book is trying to grapple with questions like these, about how the brain, in some ways, invents realities of its own—sometimes for good and sometimes for ill.

What surprised you when researching this topic?

The thing that surprised me most when researching the topic had to do with my own mind. I think of myself as being a deeply logical and rational person. And the idea that self-deception can ever be good for you is something that I find not only counterintuitive but also deeply disturbing.

I've spent much of my career trying to fight self-deception, both in my own head as well as in the minds of the general public. And so, I was disturbed to find there are many, many domains where certain self-deceptions can be good for us.

I'm sure we'll talk about some of these, but among them would be our personal relationships. It helps, for example, to have slightly delusional views about the people you love, your partner, your children, your parents. It helps to see them in a positive light. When we look at them through rose-tinted glasses, not only are we happier in those relationships, but those relationships are likely to last longer.

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The truth about lying

Should we aim to dismantle self-deception or embrace it?

There's a question that's often raised: Is self-deception a bug or is it a feature? And the answer to that question really is, it's both. Self-deceptions can help us lead more functional lives, but they can also lead us in very, very bad directions.

When it comes to politics, for example, self-deception can prompt us to believe the claims that politicians are making before an election, even when those claims are patently false. One way I think we can overcome and fight these self-deceptions is to practice what scientists call the scientific method—to actually subject claims to rigorous analysis and to ask for evidence for the things that we believe.

Now, very often, most of us are very good at asking our opponents to provide evidence for the things they believe. In other words, we use skepticism as a weapon, as a tool, to win arguments. One of the things I think you can do to dismantle self-deception in your own brain is to apply the tools of skepticism to yourself and to your own thinking.

The great physicist and scientist Richard Feynman said, "The first rule in science is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool." And I think that is an important insight. All of us believe that other people are prone to self-deception. The very nature of self-deception makes it very hard for us to see when we ourselves are its victims.

What role does self-deception play in the workplace?

One of the questions that's sometimes asked of me is, "What are the implications in your book for business settings? Does it have implications for how companies should be run, for how transparent they should be?" And the answer to that question is yes.

Many of us believe—and for a long time, I believed this myself—that more transparency is always a good thing. That the more transparent we could be, the better things would be. And in general, I think that's a good principle. But it is the case that in many, many dimensions of our lives, it actually is helpful to at least shade the truth a little bit.

Let me give you the simplest of examples. When we talk to one another in the workplace, it's really important for us to be civil to one another, to be polite to one another, to phrase requests as requests rather than commands or orders. Now you could argue that, in some ways, this is a form of deception.

It would be more honest for the boss simply to tell the underling, "Go out and do this," rather than say, "Would you have a couple of minutes to help me with a favor that I need?" But the reason we do this, and the reason we speak in these indirect ways, is because it's been shown that the politeness, courtesies, and kindnesses we show one another in the workplace are really vital to the success of workplaces.

But what about when it comes to transparency on other fronts? For example, should we simply make everyone's salary transparent to have a more egalitarian workplace? The state of California tried to do just that some time ago. Reporters unearthed the salaries of all the public employees in the state of California and made it public.

And their goal was laudable. Their goal was to say, "Let's have more transparency in terms of showing who makes how much money." The net effect of this, however, was very, very sad. Many of the people who were very good employees saw that there were other employees who were making more than them, and they thought these other employees were not as good as them. And they felt undervalued. These employees became more likely to quit.

This intervention, which began with laudable goals, ended up driving many of the people who were the best workers out of the organization—which, in this case, was the state of California—and ended up keeping in place the people who were the best compensated but not necessarily the best workers. It's another small example of how, even though it might seem, superficially, that some amount of opacity is bad, it might actually be the case that some amount of opacity is actually good for us.

Self-deception in the service of good

How do we harness self-deception to address, say, climate change?

So before we think about the good that self-deception can do in the world, it's worth looking at how self-deception just operates in the world as it is. For example, I'm a sports fan, and every January, when the NFL playoffs are going on, I watch teams playing in -10° weather in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

And when you look in the stands, there're always those five people who are standing there without wearing any shirts in that weather. And snow is falling on them, and they have their team colors written on their chests.

And you have to ask yourself, what is prompting these people to pursue their fandom of the team with such maniacal focus? Surely, it's a form of self-deception? A team, after all, is just a business that happens to be located in your town. The players who are playing for your team are not even from your town. They've actually been imported from all over different places, and yet you're willing to stand in the freezing cold with your shirt off so that you can demonstrate your loyalty to the team.

The reason I mention this is that in many ways, I think we need to leverage the capacity of the human mind to form deep, tribal loyalties and direct those tribal loyalties in the service of goals that are much more important than your local football team.

So take the problem of climate change. At an individual level, each of us might come out ahead if we drive more, if we fly more, if we burn more fossil fuels. We might come out narrowly ahead, but the collective as a whole, the planet as a whole, might pay a price. And so, there is a mismatch between the incentives here, because at an individual level, I am not personally incentivized to care about climate change.

That's precisely the kind of problem that religions may have come into existence to solve—where you have mass problems, where people need to collectively take some action, where I need to look out not just for my personal self-interest but for the collective interest.

And religion, in some ways, can help us see that fighting climate change is not just a cost-benefit equation, the way that we typically talk about it; it needs to be a sacred value. We need to have the same relationship to fighting the climate as those fans in Green Bay have toward their sports team.

We need to have the same fervor, the same passion. And I would argue that what we should be doing is harnessing the capacity of the brain for self-deception in the service of these laudable goals.

How can organizations get their employees to do their best?

So one of the things that companies often have to grapple with when it comes to encouraging people to do their best is to ask, "What conditions will prompt people to put their best foot forward?" For example, some researchers found that positive illusions are useful in helping people deal with the challenges they encounter in the workplace.

So, let's say I were to join McKinsey tomorrow, and I discover during my first month at McKinsey that I encounter all kinds of problems. Now, this is normal. You would expect that somebody who joins the company for the first time is going to encounter all kinds of problems.

‘When [people feel that they belong in an organization] and then they encounter setbacks, they’re more likely to weather those setbacks and more likely to move forward.’

But if I am not blessed with a certain amount of self-confidence, I might interpret those problems as a signal that tells me, “I don’t belong at McKinsey. People like me do not belong at McKinsey. I am an imposter; I should not be here.” And I might draw the wrong conclusion that the best answer for me is to leave the company.

For many companies, McKinsey being one of them but hardly the only one, many people who are women and minorities often experience this when they enter workplaces. They see very few other people who look like them, and so when they encounter setbacks in the workplace or at a university when they join, they often misinterpret those signals to mean that they don’t belong in that workplace.

Many years ago, the researcher Greg Walton at Stanford University conducted a very interesting experiment. He brought in African American first-year students at Stanford, and he asked them to come up with a little intervention.

He asked them to write little articles where they describe what it was like in their first year of college, the kind of setbacks and obstacles they faced, and how those setbacks and obstacles turned out to be

transient. And what he was trying to do was to tell these people that, “Yes, you faced setbacks. Maybe you got a bad grade or maybe you didn’t get along with a professor. Maybe you didn’t have friends, and you felt lonely.”

But it turned out that these problems were, in fact, transient problems. Everyone in their first year of college goes through some version of these problems. When he eventually tracked the performance of these students over the course of the next four years, he found that these students significantly outperformed students who had not been through this intervention.

In other words, being reminded that these setbacks are transient is very useful. Another way to think about this is that you want to instill a certain sense of self-confidence in people, a certain sense of positive illusions.

You want to give people the belief that they belong at your organization. They belong at your university. When they have that belief and then they encounter setbacks, they’re more likely to weather those setbacks and more likely to move forward.

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