

Book Review

The Arbinger Institute. *The outward mindset: Seeing beyond ourselves*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016.

Tony Vitaliano Zampella
New York, USA

Bob, the point man on his SWAT team, is called to respond to a volatile incident requiring bullet-resistant helmets and body armor. With eleven officers at the scene, Bob and seven others ram the front door, while three others circle back behind the house. Once inside the house, Bob is confronted with mayhem. Adults scatter; several mothers and young children are paralyzed with fear, and infants are screaming. Two male suspects reach for their guns and are taken down, and then there's more screaming.

After the scene is secured, Bob walks into the kitchen searching for white powder; not for contraband to secure evidence, but for a more immediate need: Similac, a powder used to make baby formula. With babies crying, Bob, the most alpha male in the room, is focused on an *outward need* that can calm the mothers and quiet the babies. He begins mixing bottles and handing them out to the SWAT team to give to the moms.

At the moment when it mattered, Bob acted on an outward-focused need that made a difference.

Focusing outward and on something bigger than ourselves, as Bob did, can shift outlooks and mobilize teams to engage in wholesale change.

The story of Bob is one of 38 vignettes in 15 chapters of *The Outward Mindset: Seeing Beyond Ourselves* by Arbinger Institute. It builds upon the Institute's previous books, *Leadership and Self-Deception* (2002) and *Anatomy of Peace* (2008).

The Outward Mindset is a timely read because the nature of change, itself, has changed during the past dozen years. Today, the pace of technological progress and globalization has outrun our ability to manage the ensuing

complexity and uncertainty. Deeper anxieties govern our lives, and coping can seem like a struggle that never ends. To thrive requires deep work – horizontal and vertical mindset development – to cope with change and function in a collaborative manner.

Arbinger's latest effort approaches mindsets by focusing on impact rather than core beliefs. Right up front in the preface, the authors assert "people often use the term mindset to refer to core beliefs about oneself. However, in our experience ... the biggest lever for change is not a change in self-belief but a fundamental change in the way one sees and regards one's connections with and obligations to others" (p. ix).

This newest effort opts for an everyday approach to highlight its six main strategies. Arbinger is adept at using accessible language and storytelling to break down complex ideas.

We begin with mindset

The book's first seven chapters establish the limits of the inward mindset and efficacy of the outward-mindset pattern, which they have termed SAM (See others, Adjust efforts, and Measure impact).

The effectiveness of SAM is illustrated in Bob's story, where a focus on another's "objectives and behaviors to take others into account" (p. 30) can be seen to interrupt our reflexive tendency to turn in toward our "self-focused objectives and behaviors" (p. 30).

Chapters 8, 9 and 11 apply the outward SAM mindset, showing the shift from dwelling in our victimhood and resistance to becoming aware and open to discoveries. This framework is the book's key contribution to the idea that outward self-awareness, not inward self-absorption, can shift mindset.

Arbinger notes the "slowness" of mindset work as compared to direct approaches to modifying behavior. They present the story of a longstanding labor-management dispute which found the Arbinger team working with 20 management leaders and 10 labor leaders for two days to understand mindset – training both sides to see the other's needs, challenges and objectives, making adjustments and measuring impact. Afterwards, the Arbinger team observed, "Two days spent working on changing mindsets enabled the leaders to accomplish in 45 minutes what they had been unable to solve in six months" (p. 113) and they did so by themselves!

Behavior modification can improve action; but focusing on mindset alters context, presenting new, previously unseen possibilities for action. Without an awareness of mindset, we are doomed to repeat entrenched patterns with only slightly improved behaviors.

The remaining five strategies support this framework.

- **Don't wait for others to change.** “Ironically, the most important move in mindset work is to make the move one is waiting for *others* to make” (p. 95). Focus on view and action will follow.
- **Mobilize your team** or organization to achieve collective goals. Here the authors want us to see that to sustain our focus outward requires a collective result such as the needs of one's manager, customers, peers and direct reports. They offer the example of the San Antonio Spurs, whose collective purpose demands working together to win championships.
- **Own your work.** Directly stated, we are to own our plans, actions and impact, and require others to own theirs. Here we are asked to step up by taking on a new level of responsibility to bring the whole self – thinking, planning, speaking and action – to every task or situation.
- **Eliminate unnecessary distinctions** that create distance between yourself and others. Here the authors reach back to some of their best work from *Leadership and Self-Deception*, reminding us that when we do look outward we should not regard others as objects. Viewing and managing others as objects creates unnecessary distance or “distinctions” between our self and others, which we then codify through privileges and “leadership trappings” (pp. 135-6). This strategy, as defined in chapter 14, seemed a little contrived and disconnected. The focus on “distinctions” distracts from the potency of the original object-focus insight, which is important and deserves more attention: that once we relate to anyone as an object, we've separated ourselves and begun ranking ourselves above others.
- **Turn systems and processes outward;** create an organizational ecosystem that energizes people rather than treating them as objects to be managed.

Outward Mindset avoids distinguishing mindset from skill-sets or hidden beliefs; it opens us to mindset as a meta-focus: a focus about the way we focus

on situations. The authors distinguish between inward focus on the self, and outward focus on caring for others. Defining it as a practice suggests that it can be cultivated.

At times, however, the book appears disconnected, offering an excess of short stories that seem to interrupt rather than illuminate its concepts. Some of the stories border on glib solutions or resemble commercials; it might have been useful to highlight key capabilities that offer access to the outward mindset.

Specifically, two critical and challenging capabilities required to effect the outward mindset are 'taking action to initiate change' and 'deep listening.' Both are given short shrift in *The Outward Mindset*. The authors cite Brenda Ueland's *Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening*, which remains a valuable must-read on listening.

Still, this latest effort by Arbinger contributes to the literature on mindset and its applications: the SAM framework can impact change, ownership and collaboration. *Outward Mindset* extends the conversation, and adds to established thinking and approaches that include Carol Dweck's fixed (static) and growth (dynamic) mindsets; Peter Senge's mental models and system thinking (*Fifth Discipline*); Robert Kegan's and Lisa Lahey's mental complexity (*Immunity to Change*), Otto Scharmer's 'blind spot' and generative listening (*Theory U*), and Bill Torbert's action-logics, as well as Chris Argyris' single- and double-loop learning.

Decades ago, Southwest Airlines' beloved CEO, Herb Kelleher, noted that he hired for attitude and trained for aptitude. *Outward Mindset* offers a way to shift attitudes toward meaningful, effective action, as a matter of practice, not chance.