



Euphemism, Spin, and the Crisis in Organizational Life

Howard F. Stein

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In this book about deception and self-deception in and beyond the workplace, Stein portrays a psychological, ethical, cultural, and spiritual crisis that cannot be reduced to a business crisis. He shows how the language of economics shrouds loss, dread, rage, despair, and brutality in the guise of rational business necessity. For example, the act of ridding a workplace of thousands of people has become magically, *euphemistically* transformed into an impersonal, bottom line based exercise in downsizing and outsourcing. As Stein explores the role of euphemism in the official doctrines and public claims of business, he also portrays how people experience the trauma of repeated mass layoffs, and the constant turmoil over shifting workroles and uncertain job security. Stein shows how the inner experience of downsizing, reengineering, and corporate medicine becomes part of a person's very essence and structure, not some unfortunate epiphenomenon.

Three extensive case studies—one of downsizing (and related social engineering concepts), one of managed care, and another of the U.S. prairie's adaptation to life after the Oklahoma City bombing—provide the evidence for his interpretation. Stein supplements these with telling analyses of the concept of spin, the popularity of Scott Adams' *Dilbert* cartoons, George Orwell's trenchant use of euphemism in his novels, and the web of words on which the Nazis' extermination program was spun. He shows how our priorities have created long-term massive social casualty for the sake of short-term gain. Further, he shows how a widespread cultural ethos of scarcity and callousness transcends the boundaries of workplace and business. He calls for an ethical awakening from our self-deceptions and the social harm we have done in the name of good business, and for direct, honest language that expresses our feelings and intentions.

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