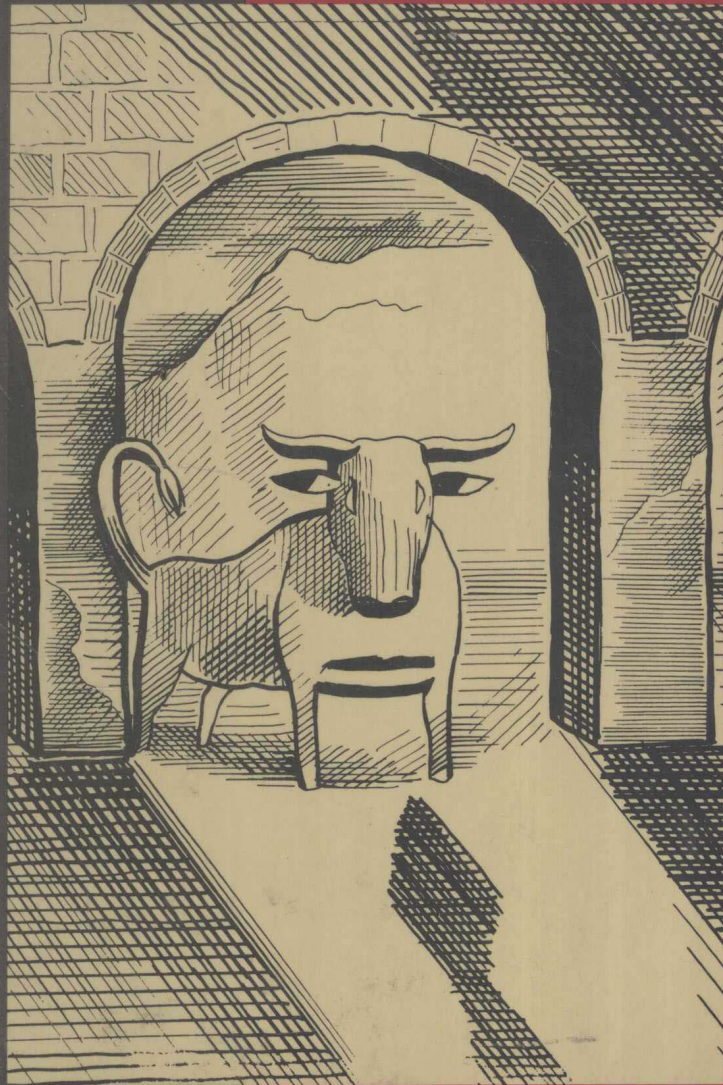


# SACRED BULL



*The  
Inner  
Obstacles  
That Hold  
You Back  
at Work  
and  
How to  
Overcome  
Them*

ALBERT J. BERNSTEIN and  
SYDNEY CRAFT ROZEN

# SACRED BULL



The Inner Obstacles  
That Hold You Back at Work  
and How to Overcome Them

ALBERT J. BERNSTEIN, PH.D.  
SYDNEY CRAFT ROZEN

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To our children,  
Jessica and Joshua Bernstein,  
and Geoffrey and Amanda Rozen

and

To Lee,  
for getting well again

## PREFACE

This book is about the obstacles we place in front of ourselves, most of which we never realize or question.

To see what we mean, let's take a look at an all-too-typical work scene.

*... It was supposed to have been a cooperative inter-departmental meeting. Unfortunately, it turned into the kind of group encounter you'd find in a Stephen King novel.*

*Anna from Engineering is always willing to waste everybody else's time on her obsession with every little detail. There's just one detail this perfectionist consistently overlooks: projects have deadlines.*

*Rick from Research and Development tries to convince everybody that he's the natural choice for project leader. The guy is so political that he needs a campaign manager. Look out for him. You can be sure he'll be looking out for himself.*

*If there were any fairness, you'd be named team leader.*

## PREFACE

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*Who else deserves it more? But you'd rather sit here in dignified silence than stoop to blowing your own horn.*

*The maneuvering goes on, and there's nobody to stop it—certainly not Harris, the VP sitting in for upper management. Harris is a conflict-avoider from the word maybe. He always agrees completely with the last person he talks to. If his foot were on fire, he'd call headquarters for permission to put it out—and then wait for instructions.*

This is the same business bull you have to put up with every day. You probably work with people like this. They're competent and smart. They all believe they're doing the right thing. Yet their perfectionism, blatant self-interest, and avoidance of conflict are holding them back and blocking the progress of the group.

You can see *their* problems clearly. But do you recognize your own?

You may be blocking your own progress at work because of assumptions you've made about how people—yourself included—operate. You probably don't question or even think about these assumptions; you just let them mess up your job. Probably they're holding back your career advancement, preventing you from working effectively with bosses, colleagues, and subordinates, and limiting your ability to make effective decisions.

What if the ideas you accept without question are based on a lot of bull?

This book is about the inner obstacles you create for yourself at work. You build these obstacles from assumptions about how you and other people should act. Over time these assumptions become the rules by which you respond to people and situations. You may believe them without question and operate by them without thinking about the consequences. Even when they're wrong, you hold them sacred.

These unquestioned assumptions become your Sacred

**Bulls.** They cause you to make the same mistakes over and over by thinking things that *should* be true and doing things that *ought* to work.

In India, cows sacred to vengeful Hindu gods are allowed to roam wherever they choose. They can eat a person's lunch, block traffic, disrupt commerce, and generally stand in the way of India's becoming a modern, industrialized country.

The unruly beasts that block your progress don't have horns and tails. You can't see them. For the most part, you don't even think about them, much less recognize them as the sources of ineffectiveness at work. They are the rules you live by, beliefs that are incorrect but never questioned.

The ten Sacred Bulls that create obstacles to your progress at work are the Bulls of:

1. *Denial: I don't see the problem, so it isn't there.*
2. *Blind Spots and Shortcuts: What I don't like can't be important.*
3. *Self-Interest: Always look out for Number One.*
4. *Mind Reading: People should know what I want without being told.*
5. *Blame: If something goes wrong, it has to be somebody's fault.*
6. *Being Nice: Avoid conflict at all cost.*
7. *Perfection: If it's not perfect, it's nothing.*
8. *Fairness: I don't need to negotiate for what I want; I just want fairness.*
9. *Excuses: There's always a good reason why I don't follow the rules everyone else works by.*
10. *Being Right: There's a right way and a wrong way; my way is right.*

*Sacred Bull: The Inner Obstacles That Hold You Back at Work and How to Overcome Them* turns the focus

of Dr. Albert Bernstein's twenty years of experience in psychotherapy and business consulting toward an examination of these unquestioned and frequently self-destructive beliefs. *Sacred Bull* goes below the surface and helps you look at and understand the obstacles that stand in your way.

What you do doesn't always get you the results you expect. When things go wrong, you may push harder, clamp down, or blame others. You may question everything around you—except the real source of the problem: your Sacred Bulls. This book helps you to rethink why you do what you do and offers ways to make changes toward becoming more effective, productive, and happy.

What are the obstacles you're creating for yourself at work?

Maybe, like Anna in the example, you're having problems with perfectionism. It's a vice that masquerades as a virtue. It makes you feel as if you're accomplishing a lot and generally doing the world a favor. But perfectionists tend to become obsessed with details and the need for control, and to forget about the big picture. Eventually this catches up with you, and you feel like a complete failure. Worse yet, your behavior is so annoying to other people that they will gladly make all the mistakes you so scrupulously avoid just to spite you.

Or, like Rick the office politician, maybe you've been focusing too much on looking out for Number One. Isn't that the basis of any successful career? If you believe that, you may be engaging in knee-jerk competition even when you could gain more by cooperating.

Or how about fairness? If you expect other people to treat you fairly, you're in for one disappointment after another when they don't. The bigger problem is that you never learn to negotiate for what you want, which ensures that you never get fair treatment.

Maybe you sympathize with Harris, the conflict-avoiding VP? You hate choosing sides and don't like to



## PREFACE

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make other people angry at you. Often, to solve a problem, you have to be willing to take the Bull by the horns.

We're sure you know people who act like this. But do you recognize yourself? If not, you just might be following the Sacred Bull of Denial: "I don't see the problem, so it isn't there." This book will help you recognize and confront the obstacles that are holding you back.

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SYDNEY CRAFT ROZEN

*Portland, Oregon*  
*Bothell, Washington*  
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A.J.B.  
S.C.R.

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## Chapter One



# WATCH OUT FOR THE BULL

*Allen's eyes snapped open. The digital clock said 3 A.M. He clamped his eyes shut and willed himself to relax and get some sleep. He would need to be sharp and alert for his meeting tomorrow with Dalton, "the Enforcer." The senior VP for finance was coming all the way out here from headquarters to talk to Allen about his division. The Enforcer rarely "talked," he passed sentences.*

*Allen stared up through the darkness at the bedroom ceiling, wondering how things had gotten so out of control. The problems had started three years ago, when he was transferred from the Finance Department at headquarters to this division. He thought his new assignment would be a snap. He'd always believed that managers in the field didn't have the financial savvy to do things right. He was all set to show up the other divisions and go back to headquarters, covered with glory.*

*The division he was sent to manage was doing okay—just okay—in production, sales, and customer service. This was no shining star. Allen knew costs were running on the*



*high side, but he had promised, sight unseen, that he could improve the profit picture. How hard could it be? He had never seen an operation yet that couldn't be cut a few percentage points.*

*Allen prided himself on his years of accounting experience. He was a real perfectionist where waste was concerned. What he hadn't counted on were the impossible people he'd have to work with, people who managed to torpedo everything he was trying to do.*

*The transfer had been his big chance. If he could get control of this division and show some impressive numbers, he'd have a shot at a VP seat at headquarters. Now that chance was sinking, along with his hopes for the rest of his career.*

## “WHAT WE DO KNOW THAT AIN'T SO”

If there's one thing you learn in twenty years of practice in business consultation and psychotherapy, it's that people don't always know what they're doing. (No offense, Allen.) What we do doesn't always get us the results we expect. Sometimes what we do doesn't square with what we say we believe. We all have enormous capacity to hide these facts from ourselves.

It was Allen's own mistaken beliefs about how things should be done, not his subordinates, that fired the torpedo. Allen assumed that if he managed the money, everything else would take care of itself. It did, but not in the way he expected.

When things go wrong, we may push harder, clamp down, or blame others, but few of us ever question the basic beliefs by which we operate. As we manage our careers and our life at work, we seldom ask ourselves, “What am I really trying to accomplish here? Is this the best way to get it done?” We just continue with more of the same and wonder why the situation grows steadily