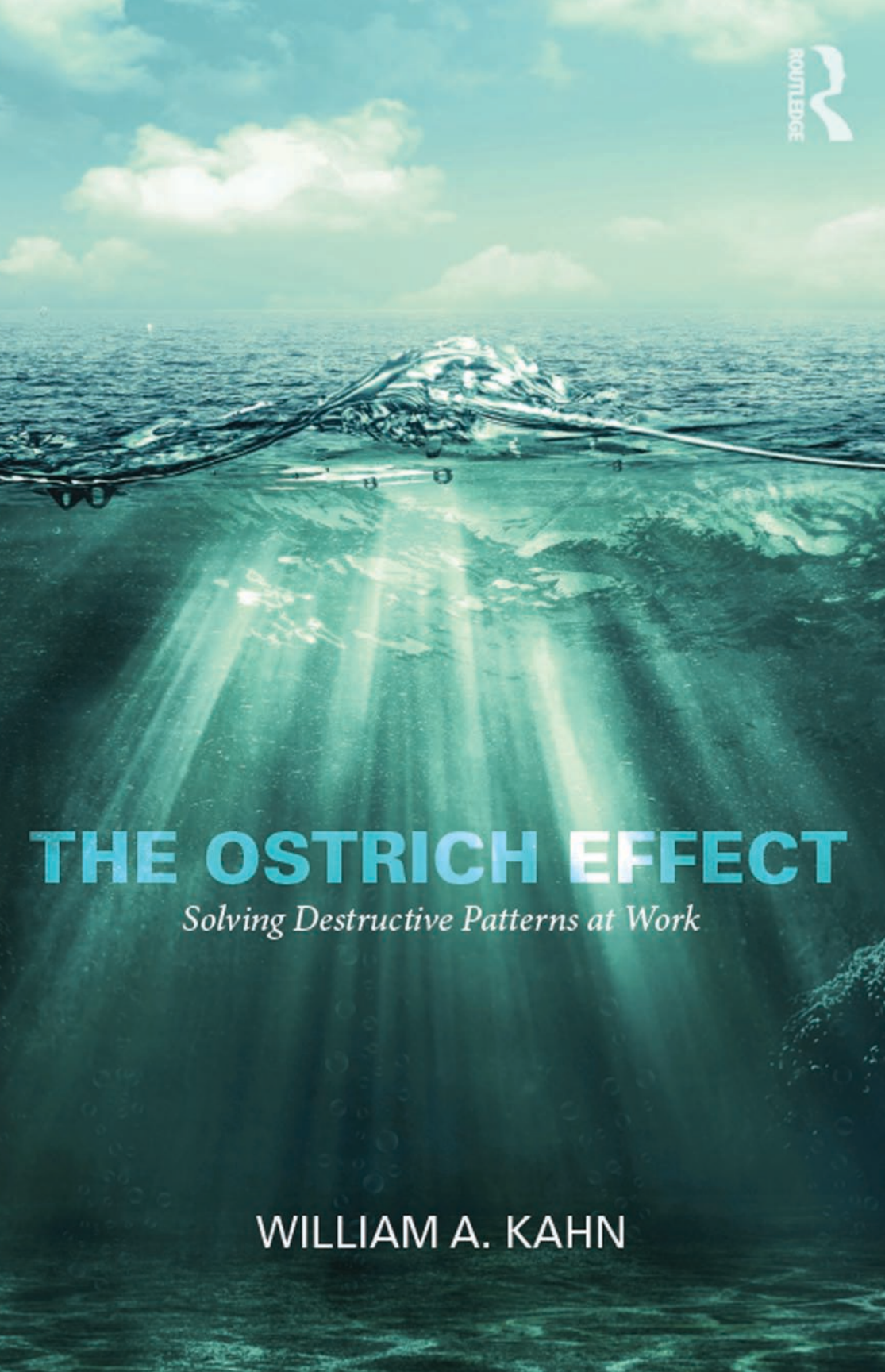
ROUTLEDGE
THE OSTRICH EFFECT
Solving Destructive Patterns at Work
WILLIAM A. KAHN

"This remarkably engaging, insightful book about relationships, as applicable at home as in the workplace, provides a roadmap to clearer understanding of self and others. Drawing on decades of organizational research and consulting, Kahn explains how to tackle seemingly intractable problems, starting from impasse, moving to deeper truth, and finally, to resolution."

Robin Ely, Harvard Business School, USA

"*The Ostrich Effect* addresses the human side of enterprise in a unique and compelling way. Through storytelling, Bill Kahn paints a vivid picture of interactions we experience every day by coupling our unique needs and desires, interests and motives, and tendencies and temperaments with the additional complexity of situational context."

Kenneth W. Freeman, Boston University Questrom School of Business, USA

"Kahn has written a fascinating and deeply thoughtful exploration of how and why we make bad choices when faced with relationship difficulties. *The Ostrich Effect* provides its readers with guidance on how to reframe a narrative, tell a new story, and start on the path to stronger, more communicative relationships."

Lee Bolman, University of Missouri-Kansas City, USA

"Not since Goleman's *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* has a psychologist brought such clarity to the ways we avoid addressing our most difficult and important relational moments. Bill Kahn not only examines why we do this—he provides guidelines for how to navigate these emotionally demanding personal and organizational challenges in a text that is both thoughtful and helpful."

David Berg, Yale School of Medicine, USA

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THE OSTRICH EFFECT

The Ostrich Effect goes beyond the typical "how to" approach of most books that deal with difficult conversations at work. It aims to teach the reader what conversations to have, and when to have them, in order to solve destructive problems that occur in the workplace.

Like the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand, people often avoid confronting small issues at work, but, if avoided, these issues will escalate and inevitably wreak havoc. Drawing on a combination of social science research and Kahn's practical experience as an organizational psychologist the book examines the micro-processes that underlie the way in which these problems develop and flourish. These micro-processes are tiny, fleeting, and hardly noticeable, but when they are identified, something startling becomes apparent: there is a predictable pattern to this escalation. The book uses a variety of examples to demonstrate this pattern across a range of organizations and industries, and offers a toolkit to help guide the reader in resolving people problems at work. The toolkit focuses not on changing others, but on changing how we interact with others—our own behavior is the most powerful force for change that we have.

The ostrich remains the symbol of those of us who foolishly ignore our problems while hoping that they will magically disappear. By identifying this "ostrich effect" the reader is empowered to re-frame and neutralize its impact.

William A. Kahn is Professor of Organizational Behavior at Boston University's Questrom School of Business, USA. He has written widely for academic and practitioner audiences, is an expert blogger on *Psychology Today*, and consults for a number of public and private organizations on issues related to leading organizational change. He authored *Holding Fast: The Struggle to Create Resilient Caregiving Organizations* and *The Student Guide to Successful Project Teams*, both published by Routledge.

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THE OSTRICH EFFECT

Solving Destructive Patterns at Work

William A. Kahn

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To Dana: for joining me in a life of curiosity and revealing what ought not to remain hidden.

To Noam, Eliana, and Zachary: for expressing rather than hiding your selves in ways that create a home of wonder, humor, and love.

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PREFACE

> It is a familiar fact that much of this avoidance of what is distressing—this ostrich policy—is still to be seen in the normal mental life of adults.
>
> *Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams*

The senior partners of an accounting consulting firm asked me, an organizational psychologist, to help them create a buy-out plan amongst themselves. The partners were mired in conflict. They could not agree on what was fair. Two partners were lined up against the other two, the pairs barely speaking to one another. I talked with each partner several times. Each partner was sure that his problems lay with another colleague, variously characterized as passive-aggressive, irrational, arrogant, and selfish. Each partner wanted me to fix others, as if they were broken, or make them reasonable or, failing that, get them to leave. The partners had each decided in their minds who the real problems were, pointing everywhere but at themselves.

I sat in on partner meetings, watching how they worked together. I found something that helped me see them more clearly: the two original partners, college friends who had hatched the idea for the firm while trekking together, barely looked at one another. I followed the clue to see where it led. Soon enough the story filled out. The two partners had been drifting apart, slowly and then abruptly as one got engaged. The one who remained single tried to remain close to his friend, with little success. And he grew angry. He recruited allies among the other partners, splintering the group. He pushed the partners to develop a buy-out agreement; he made the process difficult, attacking others' ideas and demanding ever more provisions. I helped the two founders talk about how their changed personal relationship had affected their work together. They expressed sadness and regret. Creating the buy-out plan was reasonably simple after that. The partners were happier and more productive. I left. But I was curious. Why hadn't they figured this out on their own?

A few months later I was helping a social service agency develop programs to enhance employee engagement and morale. The agency's assistant director took me aside and asked my help with a problem employee. Her most talented middle manager was out of control. She described him as arrogant, defensive and difficult to talk with. She told me that the manager had much potential—she had initially thought of him as a rising star in the agency—but that she was now on the verge of letting him go. She wanted me to intervene, to back him away from the edge of ruining his own career. I agreed to try to help. I spoke with the manager several times. I sat in on several project meetings in which he worked with colleagues, including the assistant director. I did indeed find what I was told I would find. The manager trumpeted his own ideas and was dismissive of what others offered.

Yet I discovered another dynamic that complicated the issue. The manager told me about feeling betrayed almost from the beginning of his work with the assistant director. He had developed an innovative program and was then kept out of meetings to refine and implement it by the assistant director, who had taken credit for the program herself. Similar incidents followed, leaving the manager upset and angry. He had attempted to talk with her but the assistant director kept focusing on his seeming arrogance. Circling back to the assistant director, I focused less on the subordinate and more on the relationship they had created—a relationship marked by mutual distrust and disrespect. To her credit, the assistant director was able to take some responsibility, enough to allow them to slowly begin to rebuild trust. Again, though, I was struck. Why were these two unable to approach the right issues and have the right conversations to fix what was actually broken?

As an organizational psychologist I get called quite often to help others deal with what they believe are difficult people problems. I am pointed toward people acting selfishly, lazily, incompetently, defensively; communicating poorly or not at all; engaging in too much conflict or not speaking up when they should; managing through fear and intimidation; competing rather than collaborating; protecting themselves politically rather than working on behalf of shared goals; undermining others; participating in dysfunctional group dynamics; and abusing power. This is the stuff that makes work painful and demoralizing for leaders and members alike. It is the source, often enough, of inefficient work and low morale.

I have heard hundreds of stories—in my roles as professor, consultant, radio host—from people who are astonished and anguished by working with others and want to know what to do. These are often some very smart people. The partners at the accounting consulting firm, the assistant director at the social service agency and her rising star middle manager—these are people able to take complex problems and figure out the right solutions. But they cannot do so when it comes to themselves. They look at one thing that is right in front of them and cannot see anything else. How is it that the problems that they point to bear so little relation to the real distress? Why are they unable to see what they need to see and then do what they need to do? How do the real problems migrate from one place to another? Why is the compelling solution so often the "fixing" of

individuals identified as the "real" problems? These are the questions that I set out to answer through a close examination of people problems at work and how they are effectively resolved. This book answers these questions.

A number of popular books attest to the complexity of people problems and lay out frameworks to guide people toward "difficult," "crucial," "tough" or "fierce" conversations by which to solve those problems. These are useful books. They provide the steps by which people can confront and collaborate with one another. There is no book, however, that helps people understand *what* conversations to have. In my work I have found that figuring this out is the most important component for solving people problems at work. This book focuses on precisely that: how to shift from getting stuck on surface people problems to uncovering and solving the more crucial problems that lie beneath. It turns out that until that occurs, different people problems keep appearing on the surface.

Too many people get this wrong. They look around them—at their supervisors, subordinates, co-workers, team members, senior executives—and focus on what it is about others that so disrupts the work that needs to get done. This person is too arrogant and dismissive, roundly considered a jerk. That person is selfish and lazy. Another person is timid and hesitant. Yet another is secretive and withholds information. These assessments may not be wrong; indeed, they often have more than a grain of truth about them. Yet we still get it wrong when we focus on these characteristics—and the people themselves—as the real problems that we have to solve.

Of course, people at work can be lousy to deal with. Their particular ways of talking and acting can be frustrating and upsetting. Their personalities can be incredibly annoying. Their behaviors can make it more difficult to get work done. Their emotions and moods can get in the way of good work getting done on time. All of this is true. It is part of the deal of working with other human beings. But the annoyance, difficulty, and inconvenience of working with others does not need to translate into disruptive problems. This happens far too often. What might only be frustrating and annoying too often segues into intractable people problems that damage careers, relationships, reputations, and the work itself.

We are, of course, limited in what we can do—as managers and leaders, co-workers and teammates, subordinates and peers—to truly change other people. We can influence their behaviors, with positive and negative reinforcement, feedback and support. But we are unlikely to change who they fundamentally are. There will always be moments when people who are predisposed to act in certain ways—egotistical, withdrawn, belligerent, defensive, uncaring—will do so. But we are not helpless. There are ways to halt what is annoying and frustrating about others from becoming people problems that make work life truly difficult. These ways stem from a close understanding of how what is merely annoying and frustrating can morph into distressing people problems. If we know how that occurs, we can act far more effectively. Indeed, we can change what happens at work without needing to change other people.

Drawing on a combination of social science research and my work as an organizational psychologist, I show in this book how the nagging people problems that show up at work have a common underlying structure. This structure takes the form of a set of *micro-processes* that emerge from a close examination of how our problems with one another develop and flourish. These micro-processes are tiny, fleeting, and hardly noticeable. We can see them only by using our equivalent of a stop-action video, looking frame by frame at slowed-down versions of interactions and situations. When we do so, a startling finding emerges. *There is a generalized, stable and predictable sequence of events that, unless interrupted, leads inexorably from harmless to harmful problems between people.* Amidst all the complexities and vagaries of the particular difficulties that people have with one another, there is a common story. This book tells that common story.

I call the underlying structure that creates this common story the *Ostrich Effect*. The name refers to a key ingredient of the structure: avoidance. Ostriches are commonly associated with hiding their heads in the sand. This is not quite true. Ostriches do hide when attacked, by sometimes lying flat on the ground, with their long necks and heads on the ground as well. And when they eat they also lay their heads and necks flat on the ground to swallow sand and pebbles. Either behavior can look, from a hazy distance in the African heat, as if their heads have disappeared. In his *Natural History* (Secundus, 1991), the Roman writer Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) forever cast the ostrich as a naïve and hapless avoider by writing "they [ostriches] imagine, when they have thrust their head and neck into a bush, that the whole of their body is concealed." It is a compelling image. The ostrich remains the patron symbol of those of us who foolishly ignore our problems while hoping that they will magically disappear. The Ostrich Effect describes more sophisticated versions of this phenomenon as it plays out across a spectrum of people problems at work.

The purpose of the book is to re-frame how organizational members, leaders, and scholars think about and therefore act in relation to people problems at work. In this book, the re-framing of people problems is away from simple narratives about others' personalities (which we can do very little about) and toward more complex, useful narratives about the relationships that we create with others at work (which we can do a great deal about). This means not looking so intently at the problematic person as the puzzle to be solved ("Why does he act that way, and how can we fix him?"). It means having a larger picture of the puzzle that we are trying to solve. Indeed, understanding the Ostrich Effect is like having the picture on the box of a complicated jigsaw puzzle. We can hold up particular pieces and see how they fit in relation to the other pieces arrayed before us. We thus know how to make sense of what we are looking at. Understanding the predictable sequence of events that make people problems at work so problematic gives us the larger picture.

The Ostrich Effect exists for a simple reason: people would rather move away from than toward disturbing situations, which seem difficult, frightening, and even dangerous. Pliny the Elder himself is a cautionary tale. In 79 AD Mt.

Vesuvius erupted, covering and later preserving Pompeii. Most people ran away from Vesuvius. Pliny the Elder ran toward it, to see it for himself and to rescue others. He died there. The events that trigger the Ostrich Effect are rarely as dramatic as an erupting volcano. But the events do feel like eruptions in people's work lives and force them to make choices similar to that which Pliny the Elder faced. Do they move toward people problems that seem dangerous, toxic, or frightening, driven by their need to know or fix something? Or do they move away, hoping that when they look away they are safe, "the whole of their body concealed?" These choices show up in all sorts of work settings and they matter a great deal. Organizational behavior theory and research provides a useful foundation for understanding such choices and their implications for individuals and their work.

Each chapter of the book introduces readers to real (if anonymous) people having problems with one another at work. In each scenario, people struggle valiantly with what they believe are their real struggles but do so in ways that make matters worse rather than better. The stories and cases are illuminated by useful concepts and ideas drawn from organizational behavior, psychology, and sociology. They help articulate the common story that flows beneath what looks, on the surface, as many disparate stories.

The chapters of the book build on one another in several ways. Chapter 1 sketches out the basic sequence of the Ostrich Effect in the context of a marriage. The marriage setting provides a clear focus on the relational dynamics at the core of the Ostrich Effect, absent the organizational context. Chapter 2 focuses on the difficulty of interrupting the Ostrich Effect when people at work are unwilling to examine the inner workings of their relationships. This issue is explored within the context of the relation between the two founding partners of a firm. Chapter 3 examines how the Ostrich Effect plays out in groups and teams, as specific individuals are singled out as particularly problematic, leaving others to work around them. The key ideas in this chapter revolve around how the narratives that people create to make sense of their experiences and actions can create casualties of others. Chapter 4 focuses on how the Ostrich Effect can be set in motion early in the life of groups, as members create patterns of behavior that seem reasonable at the time but inadvertently initialize destructive sequences.

The remaining chapters continue to build on these ideas while adding more complexity in terms of organizational phenomena. Chapter 5 offers a way to understand how difficulties that exist at one level of an organization, such as a team, can migrate to another level, such as the relations between groups and divisions. The Ostrich Effect provides a useful lens through which to examine and interpret such movements within and across organizational units. Chapter 6 explores how events far in the past can lay the groundwork for the Ostrich Effect, which later emerges in ways that can be quite destructive to organizations and their members. This process is triggered, often enough, by significant organizational transitions that release that which has long been buried. Chapter 7 begins to address how the Ostrich Effect is shaped by power differentials in organizations.

The chapter examines these dynamics from the perspective of those who lack formal or informal power and thus run disproportionally higher risks of engaging in behaviors that interrupt the Ostrich Effect. Chapter 8 examines the power dynamic from the other perspective—those with the formal power to shape the status quo in organizations—and the implications for the maintaining and interrupting of the Ostrich Effect. Chapter 9 focuses on how organizational crises create particularly unique circumstances for triggering the sequence of actions and reactions that entrap members and leaders within the Ostrich Effect. Chapter 10, finally, shifts to an understanding of the conditions that are likely to enable people to make the moves necessary to interrupt and reverse the sequence of the Ostrich Effect, and thus create more effective patterns of working and relating.

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I am indebted to several individuals whose personal and intellectual support were invaluable, not only in the writing of the book but in the years of conversation that led up to that writing. Joe Allen has remained an unvarying source of perspective, insight, and humor; he has personified what genuine friendship is, in its truest form. Craig Garfield too has been a significant source of support, maintaining his faith that ideas can matter and need to be articulated in the world. I was fortunate to have inherited him when I married as well as I did. And David Berg has continued to engage with me at the intersection of mentorship and friendship. I count myself lucky to have met him when I did, as a young graduate student, and to have continued to benefit from our relationship. Without the cajoling, challenge, and faith of these three individuals, I would not have been able to write the book that I most wished to write.

A NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY

The case illustrations used in this book have been drawn from action research and consultation with specific organizations. All names are fictitious and identifying details have been altered to preserve the anonymity of those involved.

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HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Staff members of the finance and operations areas are caught in the crossfire of their directors vying over policy and budget. Nurses and physicians in a surgical unit are at odds over changes instituted by the hospital's senior management team. The new vice president of fundraising at a non-profit agency cannot get the attention of the CEO who hired her. Social workers feel betrayed and disrespected by an executive director who seems concerned only with financial performance. The new general manager at a manufacturing facility is frustrated by the lack of processes and systems that would enable him to assess quality and control costs, and angered by the lack of responsiveness of the family business owners. The middle managers of a growing financial services firm are frustrated by senior leaders who continue to involve themselves in operational issues rather than on figuring out how the firm can attract new clients. A partner in a law firm is upset about being left out of decisions that he and the other partners used to make together. The list goes on, its endless variations a product of the myriad of ways in which people at work get in the way of others and themselves.

There are various ways to understand these situations. Depending on their involvements—the roles that they have in particular groups and organizations, the interests at play for them, their histories, and their relationships with other actors—people are likely to choose to think about a troubling situation in specific ways that differ from the choices made by others with different involvements. The choices that organization members make about how to understand particular situations matter a great deal: like physicians who select medical interventions based on their diagnoses, how organization members think about troubling situations determines how they act and react in those situations. Individuals vary in terms of how aware they are of themselves as making such choices; they may be quite conscious about their tendencies and biases, or may be steered by unconscious wishes in ways of which they remain unaware. Regardless, they are active participants in how they understand the situations in which they find themselves.