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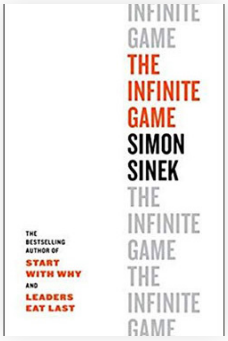

BOOK REVIEW

The Infinite Game

Review by Liesl van Wyk | Book by Simon Sinek
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How can you win a game that doesn't end? Or even play a game without defined rules or players? Raised in a society in which there are clear winners and losers, playing the infinite game requires a fundamental change in how you view the world. *The Infinite Game* is a playbook for leaders looking to learn how to create a business that endures and inspires.

Simon Sinek explores the idea that an infinite mindset is key to creating sustainable and ethical business practices. In this book, he examines how to build a company that cares about inspiring people and generating innovative ideas. The book includes five essential practices that infinite-minded leaders can adopt to get their companies moving in the right direction.

Drawing on his vast experience with strategic communication and motivational speaking, Sinek offers an insightful treatise on thinking infinitely in a world geared towards the finite.

- Readers will learn how to:
- advance a just cause
- build trusting teams
- study worthy rivals
- prepare for existential flexibility
- lead with courage

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INITIAL INSIGHTS

Finite games have fixed players and rules. You fall in line or fail, endlessly marching towards yet another goal in pursuit of financial success. This short-sighted approach to business casts meaningful collaboration to the wayside in favor of profit and short-term gains. Conversely, leaders who play the infinite game look to the future, casting themselves bravely into the unknown. For Sinek, infinite leaders build companies that inspire people to work together for the greater good and carry their intentions forward into the future. In this book, the author explores the importance of advancing a just cause, building trusting teams, choosing worthy rivals, embracing existential flexibility, and leading with courage.

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ADVANCE A JUST CAUSE

Most people aren't familiar with the horrific details about the siege of Leningrad, from September 1941 to January 1944, and the trials faced by its people. Poignantly, Sinek describes how people starved, while around them, botanists in the war-torn city protected a seed bank containing thousands of crop types. They had a bigger picture in mind—long-term human survival in the event of a global catastrophe. According to the author, this was their Just Cause—an ethical purpose that looks to the future and provides motivation beyond the superficial. A mission worth sacrificing for. Sinek isn't just here to give readers a history lesson, however. Using the compelling history of Leningrad as an example, Sinek underscores the idea that to move from the finite game to the infinite game, you need a compelling reason behind your work. Instead of tying feelings of satisfaction to promotions and targets reached, work should be about advancing your cause. And as a leader, your company's Just Cause should influence the people you hire and the culture you build.

So, what does a Just Cause look like? Sinek firmly believes that your cause should be inclusive, service-oriented, resilient, and idealistic. Don't articulate your cause in terms of products—after all, your cause could be rendered obsolete if your product's place or purpose in the market changes. The author also cautions against framing your cause as "being the best." He points out—shrewdly—that this is a common pitfall of many organizations, reflected in mission statements that are generic, don't provide direction, and offer little value. Cleverly, Sinek suggests using the word "better"

instead; this reflects the infinite game's core message—you don't play the game to win, you play the game to keep playing. By always striving to be "better," you dedicate yourself to continued growth and evolution.

BUILD TRUSTING TEAMS

Team trust relies on vulnerability. Here, the author quotes from research professor Brené Brown's book, *Dare to Lead*, which conveys that trust is the stacking and layering of small moments and reciprocal vulnerability over time. When team members are willing to ask for help, admit to mistakes, and be open for learning, more information flows. To see this in action, Sinek takes us out to sea to a Shell off-shore drilling platform for some team building. The author vividly recounts how the tough guys of oil drilling used the seemingly airy-fairy philosophies of holocaust survivor Claire Nuer to bond as a team. They shared stories about their childhoods and relationships and revealed their doubts, fears, and vulnerabilities. This empowered team members to share their concerns, resulting in an 84 percent decline in accidents in the company.

As a leader, you have the ability to affect how people feel when they come to work—their morale, motivation, inspiration, commitments, and desire to engage. Sinek observes, correctly, that denying the link between your employees' feelings and their performance is short-sighted. This is especially important to consider when constructing teams. The author is also an ardent advocate for trust. To this end, he draws on a handy graph that maps Performance against Trust. In particular, he highlights one main area of concern: high performers of low trust. For Sinek, these are the toxic people in your organization; they put themselves first quickly and are quick to blame others. Sinek wisely cautions you to remove these weak links, lest your team implode. Time and again, the author emphasizes that the key lies in encouraging open communication with team members and listening to and acting on their concerns.

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STUDY YOUR WORTHY RIVALS

Competition is one of the bedrocks of the business world. Sinek staunchly believes that opposition is healthy—and inevitable—but urges readers to find a "worthy rival." For the author, this person (surprisingly) isn't necessarily a competitor but someone who inspires you to become a better

player, whether they're a sworn enemy, collaborator, or even a colleague. For Sinek, a worthy rival reminds us why we do it. When a rival has the same cause, their efforts towards that cause reinvigorates our efforts to be better. The author notes that all too often, when faced with competition, leaders with finite mindsets double down in their efforts to retain market share. They don't seize the opportunity for innovation and eventually end up just copying their rival's practices in a vain effort to keep up.

Demonstrating great wisdom, Sinek advises you to choose your rival wisely; you don't want to pick the biggest players in the game or someone who can't keep pace with you. The idea is to choose someone who excels in areas you're weak in and who inspires you to improve. To demonstrate, the author describes the tennis rivalry between Chris Evert Lloyd and Martina Navratilova. The mutual respect between these players inspired them to lift their professional game. The point Sinek makes—to great effect—is that traditional competition focuses on winning, while infinite competition focuses on improvement. With these invaluable insights, we see that multiple players can succeed. To underscore this point, Sinek reveals his own personal worthy rival—a fellow author of business books. He is refreshingly honest, detailing his jealousies and fixations with outdoing his rival. In the end, he has an epiphany—there is place for both authors in their field. After all, the more people fighting for his own cause—the evolution of business—the better.

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PREPARE FOR EXISTENTIAL FLEXIBILITY

Walt Disney was a risk-taker. As he nurtured his company from the ground up—from the first cartoon to the first full-length feature film—he was following his own just cause: wholesome escapism from a stressful world. But in time, the company caved to the pressure exerted by finite minds and ceased to promote this cause. So, Disney put it all on the line and started a new company that more closely reflected his utopia, Disneyland. According to Sinek, this example demonstrates existential flexibility—when a company diverts dramatically from its business model to advance its cause. Candidly, the author explains that existential flexibility isn't reactive or opportunistic; rather, it's borne from the desire to fulfil a vision. Sinek points out that infinite leaders who demonstrate "existential flex" are astute enough to realize that drastic action is required in order to avoid failure. And like any leader, they don't enjoy the upheavals and stress, but ultimately think the discomfort is worth it.

DEMONSTRATE THE COURAGE TO LEAD

It's a common sight in reception areas and boardrooms of big companies: mission statements printed in large, visually pleasing fonts. Or proudly displayed on website home pages and e-mail signatures. But when you take a closer look, comparing a company's words against their actions, there's often a big disparity.

To demonstrate, Sinek draws on the example of CVS Caremark. Publicly, they proclaimed their mission loudly "Helping people on their path to better health." Yet they sold tobacco products in every one of their stores. In a landmark decision, to the horror of shareholders, they announced they were removing these products in line with their company's just cause. The author is quick to point out that their dedication to integrity paid off in the end with higher stock prices.

But for Sinek, playing the infinite game requires courage that extends beyond just your actions. Eloquently, he explains that it's more about changing the way you see the world and your place in it. Astutely, the author observes that infinite leaders hold themselves and their company to a much higher standard than legal requirements demand. That's the definition of integrity. Ultimately, your aim is to avoid the need to revise your actions after unethical practices are exposed and a scandal ensues; rather, be bold enough to take the initiative from the get-go.

Sinek is realistic—human beings aren't perfect. But leaders who aim to be visionaries should make efforts to ensure their motivations and actions stay true to their brand and their vision of the future.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Here are some strategies you can apply to play the infinite game in your own workplace.

MAKE PEOPLE A PRIORITY

Companies are quick to claim that their employees or customers are their focus, but often their actions say otherwise. Support your assertions by mentioning your people first in your mission statement. Prioritize protecting your people when revenue is down; layoffs should be a last resort. Demonstrate care by spending time "on the floor"—talk to employees about how they feel about their role.

USE LANGUAGE THAT'S CLEAR AND UNAMBIGUOUS

Ethical fading happens when we build a culture that distances itself from responsibility. It's important to set an example. Make sure your company's activities are moral by avoiding the use of euphemisms or deceptive language. Don't encourage bad behavior (like employees taking shortcuts) by setting unreasonable targets with unrealistic expectations. Stay observant and stop ethical corruption in its tracks by dealing with transgressions immediately.

BECOME A CVO, NOT A CEO

Titles matter. They describe your role and where you fit in the company hierarchy. Trade in your position of Chief Executive Officer and become a Chief Vision Officer. Focus on communicating and protecting your vision. Then, rework your traditional company hierarchy to avoid competition between roles and encourage partnership, instead. As CVO, you shouldn't be top of the food chain, but rather working with your CFO or COO as an equal partner.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Finite minds play to win; infinite minds play to keep playing. Sinek masterfully brings these enduring concepts, first coined in renowned scholar James P. Carse's book *Finite and Infinite Games*, into the modern era. He acknowledges the pervasive tension inherent in a finite game driven by profits and speaks to a greater truth that puts ethics before revenue. Sinek provides a fascinating look at the evolution of leadership over history, drawing on both the past and present to illustrate his points. The book also includes myriad case studies that highlight the wisdom and follies of companies that are championed by the brightest business minds in history. Undoubtedly, Sinek's latest offering is extremely engaging and accessible, offering thought-provoking ideas that steer away from staid clichés and dry instruction. However, given the competitive world of business, the author's philosophies might be a tough sell, especially for finite thinkers. But on the whole his arguments are compelling and will give even the most hardened skeptic something to think about.

If you've enjoyed this review of Simon Sinek's *The Infinite Game*, we encourage you to access the other *The Infinite Game* assets in the Skillsoft library, or purchase the hard copy.

"Great leaders set up their organizations to succeed beyond their own lifetimes, and when they do, the benefits—for us, for business and even for the shareholder—are extraordinary."

FOR ADDITIONAL READING

1. *The Power of Mandate: How Visionary Leaders Keep Their Organization Focused on What Matters Most* by Scott Stawski, McGraw-Hill, © 2019, ISBN 978-1260454406.
2. *Uncommon Leadership: How to Build Competitive Advantage by Thinking Differently* by Phil Higson and Anthony Sturgess, Kogan Page, © 2014, ISBN 978-0749471040.
3. *Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good* by Ann Mei Chang, John Wiley & Sons (US), © 2019, ISBN 978-1119506607.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SIMON SINEK received a BA in cultural anthropology from Brandeis University. He began his career at the New York ad agencies Euro RSCG and Ogilvy & Mather and later launched his own business, Sinek Partners. Sinek is also an instructor of strategic communications at Columbia University, and is an adjunct staff member of the RAND Corporation. As a motivational speaker, Sinek has given talks at The UN Global Compact Leaders Summit, and at the TEDx conference.

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ALSO BY SIMON SINEK

1. *Find Your Why: A Practical Guide for Discovering for You and Your Team*, Portfolio, © 2017, ISBN 978-0143111726.
2. *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, Portfolio, © 2014, ISBN 978-1591845324.
3. *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, Portfolio, © 2011, ISBN 978-1591846444.

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