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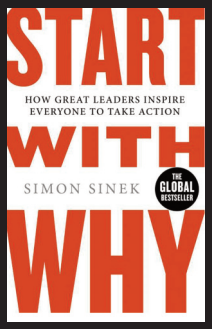
Start with WHY

How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action



A Book Review

Review by Ann Kitching

Book by Simon Sinek | Published by The Penguin Group | © 2009

If you find that your career doesn't provide fulfillment, it may be because your work culture has lost sight of WHY it exists. To receive new energy and renewed optimism, HR professionals, CEOs, managers, and all employees should read this book and follow its precepts.

Start with WHY lays bare the simple message that most companies are out for themselves and their bottom-line profits. However, business practices built on producing cheaper products, or presenting new features as innovations, ultimately undermine loyalty on the part of workers and customers. *Start with WHY* effectively makes the case that people are happy to work for and support enterprises that match their personal philosophies.

Simon Sinek opens readers' eyes to the intrinsic motivations of companies. With clear insight, he explains what readers already know: by and large, consumers are uncomfortable with how most corporations do business. Because many firms exhibit the same advertising practices, consumers are forced to do research before making purchases and are left feeling cheated. Sinek suggests that the best companies cut through that minutiae and he urges leaders to strive to focus on and to promote their company's underlying philosophy.

After feeling disillusioned in his own work life, Sinek sought avenues to find fulfillment. He examined workplaces and leadership styles to determine what employees need in order to feel inspired and motivated. He believes the first step to recovering lost optimism is to recognize the power of WHY, and coaches you to:

- develop, promote, and advertise WHY your company exists
- decide HOW your company can meet its goals while staying true to base-line philosophy
- discover WHAT products match the reasons you are in business

Initial Insights

WHY is the driving force behind what people do. *Start with WHY* discusses cases of companies that concisely match WHY, HOW, and WHAT, while contrasting their success with companies whose actions and objectives are misaligned.

In *Start with WHY*, the author reveals that many companies today don't understand why their customers buy from them. Companies may say it's about lower prices or superior products but, in truth, these are common factors that consumers can compare to find the best deal; they don't form the basis of long-term loyalty. If companies want to survive in today's market, they must do more to promote WHY they exist in the first place.

The Elusive WHY

According to Sinek, companies that wish to inspire loyalty need to clearly communicate the reason(s) consumers need them. He cites Apple as a company that produces technology for the common person. He notes that Apple products align closely to the company's values, and its supporters have become cult-like, proudly reflecting the ideals that the company represents.

In contrast, many other companies start with the products they offer, and advertise how they differ from the competition. The most popular way of promoting business today largely entails manipulating people into buying products to receive rewards—slashing prices, offering free gifts, promising future returns, and so on. As *Start with WHY* succinctly explains, companies that engage in such tactics have only a hazy vision of why they exist, so consumers are free to shop around for the best deals elsewhere. Compare this philosophy to a dinner table with young children. Suppose you tell the children that, if they don't eat their broccoli, they're not allowed dessert. This rewards-based viewpoint garners only short-term success; the situation easily turns into a never-ending battle with bigger and better desserts offered in exchange for munching dreaded vegetables. But changing the conversation to WHY eating broccoli is a good idea for the entire family increases the likelihood of the children adopting long-term healthy eating habits. Likewise, companies that provide consumers with valid reasons why they exist earn more loyalty. People support brand names because they believe in the company's mission, not because they necessarily buy every product.

Adding HOW

Although a great leader inspires followers initially, he or she often needs practical assistance with HOW to make the vision come true, as impactfully illustrated in *Start with WHY*. In Sinek's model, the effective leader focuses on delivering the WHY message to consumers, while trusting team members to develop ways to accomplish the mission.

There must always be clear links between the WHY and the HOW in a corporation. It makes no sense for a company that claims to support a "Greener Tomorrow," for example, to run factories belching black smoke. Conversely, Sinek cites the example of Southwest Airlines as a company whose three-point HOW fully supported its WHY. Its aim was

to champion the common person by making air travel accessible, providing competition for the bus and the car. To accomplish this, it designed its airline to be inexpensive and fun, so that regular people, not just people in suits, would take a plane. And it made booking a flight simple by offering only two fares—one for daytime, and one for nights and weekends. For Southwest, HOW it structured its business correlated exactly with WHY it began in the first place.

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Creating WHAT

Sinek posits that people crave familiar environments, and a firm that clearly and consistently stands for something gains more loyalty than a company capitalizing on a temporarily "hot" item. Consider Harley-Davidson Motor Company as an example. As soon as the name is mentioned, an image of a free-spirited, anarchistic lifestyle springs to mind. If the company suddenly started to produce desktop computers, the public would be perplexed. Harley-Davidson succeeds because it aims to deliver quality products based on certain lifestyle choices, and people with the same life goals support it loyally.

When marketing your products, Sinek advises readers to ensure they target the innovators and first-responders—those who desire to be at the forefront of new technologies and who love trying out new ideas. These are the consumers who will urge others to follow along or who will convince others not to bother. As long as WHAT you make matches WHY you're in business, people who share your beliefs will support you, Sinek promises.

Building a Community

Once a company has clarified the reasons it exists—WHY it has started—it can be more flexible in terms of innovation. As a business communicates its underlying philosophy, consumers adopt products and services into their hearts, rationalizing their allegiance with talk of new features or benefits. Basing the creation of new products and services on a company's fundamental reason to exist means that people who identify with that belief system feel connected.

Sinek aptly proposes that, because people thrive in cultures that support their own core beliefs, they give loyalty to leading companies that share their world view. Therefore, generating trust between an organization and those who work within it is central to smooth success. Workers who can trust their leaders to support them will stay with a company and work hard to return trust. Workers asked to improve on a product may be able to add features, but workers asked to answer a deeper call may be able to innovate an industry.

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Parting Thoughts

As Sinek boldly articulates, "Being a leader requires one thing and one thing only: followers." It's hard to argue with the tenets proposed in *Start with WHY*, since they're grounded in common sense. Although the idea of basing one's life and work around a central belief (or a WHY) seems rather facile at first glance, all people tend to crave personal meaning. Lining up his personal mantra with HOW he approaches life and WHAT he does has led Sinek to contentment, so he reasons that, if others follow his path, they should achieve the same level of optimism. All those who aspire to lead should certainly consider starting with WHY.

About the Author

SIMON SINEK is an optimist. He believes in a bright future and our ability to build it together. Together with his organization SinekPartners, he teaches leaders and organizations how to motivate people. With a bold goal to help build a world in which the vast majority of people go home every day feeling fulfilled by their work, Sinek is leading a movement to inspire people to do the things that inspire them. He is an adjunct staff member of the RAND Corporation, and is also active in the arts and not-for-profit worlds. He teaches graduate-level strategic communications at Columbia University in New York City.

Also by Simon Sinek

1. *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, Portfolio, © 2013, ISBN 978-1591845324.
2. *Together is Better: A Little Book of Inspiration*, Portfolio Penguin, © 2016, ISBN 978-0241187296.
3. *Find Your Why: A Practical Guide to Discovering Purpose for You or Your Team*, Portfolio, © 2016, ISBN 978-0143111726.

Start with WHY: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action, by Simon Sinek. Copyright © 2009, The Penguin Group, 256 pages, ISBN 978-1591846444.