

# Sinek's *Start with Why* - Starts the Conversation, Raises Questions in Practice

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*Simon Sinek's (2011) Start with Why is a much sought-after leadership and business book which has sold more than one million copies. Its wide popularity, having generated one of the most well received TED talks of all time (TED, n.d.), has been fascinating to observe. As a Leadership Development Specialist in the corporate sphere and as an Educational Leadership Scholar, I have a keen interest in Sinek's work. Therefore, this manuscript serves as a review of Sinek's Start with Why. I begin by summarizing his book before critiquing it through both scholarly and practitioner lenses.*

*Keywords: Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Business, Simon Sinek, Start with Why, Motivation, Culture, Equity, Employee Engagement*

## INTRODUCTION

*Start with Why* by Sinek (2011) is framed around the central idea that leadership that inspires others should start with WHY. Sinek posits "Great leaders...are able to inspire people to act. Those who are able to inspire give people a sense of purpose or belonging that has little to do with any external incentive or benefit to be gained" (p. 6). It is this sense of purpose that Sinek identifies as WHY.

## SUMMARY AND MAIN ARGUMENTS

### Part 1: A World That Doesn't Start with Why

*Assume You Know (chapter 1)*: Sinek challenges us to recognize that many of our assumptions guide our thinking. He highlights "...our behaviour is affected by our assumptions or our perceived truths" (p. 11). Interestingly, Sinek challenges us to go with our gut...to embrace what cannot be seen. He states "...great leaders understand the value in the things we cannot see" (p. 11).

*Carrots and Sticks (chapter 2)*: Sinek draws a distinction between manipulation and inspiration. He states that organizations that use manipulative strategies may achieve success but will likely not achieve long-term loyalty from their customers. He explains that manipulations include selling an idea based on price, promotions, fear, aspirations, peer pressure, and novelty.

### Part 2: An Alternative Perspective

*The Golden Circle (chapter 3)*: This chapter begins with Sinek explaining "There are few leaders who choose to inspire rather than manipulate in order to motivate people" (p. 37). He explains that at the core of the Golden Circle is WHY, followed by HOW, and then followed by WHAT. Sinek reiterates that people do not buy WHAT you do but rather WHY you do it and that great leaders understand this. He states that great leaders communicate starting with their WHY – they communicate their purpose

followed by HOW they do it followed by the tangible proofs of what they do which he calls the WHAT. According to Sinek “Very few people or companies can clearly articulate WHY they do WHAT they do. When I say WHY, I don’t mean to make money – that’s a result. By WHY I mean what is your purpose, cause or belief?” (p. 39).

*This is Not Opinion, This is Biology (chapter 4)*: Sinek explains that the Golden Circle is rooted in science and that “If you look at a cross section of the human brain, from the top down, you see that the levels of the Golden Circle correspond precisely with the three major levels of the brain” (p. 55). Essentially our “limbic brain” is where our true motivation and gut feeling arise consistent with the WHY.

*Clarity, Discipline and Consistency (chapter 5)*: This chapter highlights the importance of having clarity in one’s WHY and the importance of discipline in HOW. Sinek links the importance of consistency between one’s WHY and WHAT. He explains “What authenticity means is that your Golden Circle is in the balance. It means that everything you say and everything you do you actually believe” (p. 68). Sinek further highlights the importance of communicating in the correct order – starting with WHY, followed by HOW, and then WHAT. He concludes the chapter by pointing out “The goal should not be to do business with anyone who simply wants what you have. It should be to focus on the people who believe what you believe” (p. 80).

### **Part 3: Leaders Need a Following**

*The Emergence of Trust (chapter 6)*: Sinek explains that trust is a feeling, not a rational choice. He further explains “... you can’t convince someone to trust you. You have to earn trust by communicating and demonstrating that you share the same values and beliefs. You have to talk about your WHY and prove it with WHAT you do” (p. 84-5).

*How a Tipping Point Tips (chapter 7)*: Sinek discusses the Law of Diffusion of Innovation, first codified by Rogers (1962). This law holds that 2.5% of the population are innovators, 13.5% are early adopters, 34% are the early majority, 34% are the late majority and 16% are the laggards. Sinek explains that mass market penetration cannot occur unless the innovators and early adopters are onboard first. According to him “The goal of business then should not be simply sell to anyone who wants what you have – the majority – but rather to find people who believe what you believe...” (p. 120).

### **Part 4: How to Rally Those Who Believe**

*Start with Why, But Know How (chapter 8)*: Sinek provides insight into how organizations should work. He explains that the Golden Circle can be used to build effective hierarchy within an organization including the CEO at the top representing the WHY, the senior leaders representing the HOW and the rest of the organization representing the WHAT. Sinek explains that the “WHY-types are the visionaries, the ones with the overactive imaginations” (p. 140). Interestingly, Sinek argues that “Most people in the world are HOW-types” (p. 141). He further highlights the importance of communicating the WHY clearly and memorably. According to him “For a message to have real impact, to affect behaviour and seek loyalty, it needs more than publicity. It needs to publicize some higher purpose, cause or belief to which those with similar values and beliefs can relate” (p. 146). Sinek uses the metaphor of a megaphone to emphasize the importance of publicizing purpose so that all employees in the organization can hear the message. Chapter 9, *Know Why. Know How. Then What?* continues this argument.

*Communication Is Not about Speaking, It’s About Listening (chapter 10)*: Sinek argues that when decisions are filtered through the WHY, efficiency and market appeal become a key advantage. He coins the “The Celery Test” to evoke the image of an individual going to a supermarket to purchase groceries. He explains “...what if you knew your WHY before you went to the supermarket? What if your WHY is to do only things that are healthy? ...you’ll buy only rice and celery” (p. 167). He uses Volkswagen as an example of a company that was in violation of the celery test. Its motto “people’s car”, aimed at the mainstream population, was in violation of the celery test when it released a luxury vehicle. As a result, sales of this luxury vehicle performed poorly.

## **Part 5: The Biggest Challenge is Success**

*When Why Goes Fuzzy (chapter 11)*: Sinek provides examples of what happens when WHY becomes unclear or is lost. He uses Walmart as an example – an organization that started by treating its employees extremely well. He explains that with the passing of its inspired leader, the organization lost its way, and began treating employees poorly and thus faced multiple lawsuits. In chapter 12, *Split Happens*, Sinek builds on this and explains that as organizations become larger, they must work hard to ensure that their WHY remains clear.

## **Part 6: Discover Why**

*The Origins of a Why (chapter 13)*: Sinek explains that WHY comes from looking back. He states, “Before it can gain any power or achieve any impact, an arrow must be pulled back...And that’s also where a WHY derives its power” (p. 214).

*The New Competition (chapter 14)*: Sinek challenges the reader to recognize that true competition is not with others but with one’s self. He claims that when we recognize this, others will also want to help us.

## **CRITIQUE**

As a Leadership Development Specialist with over 10 years of experience in learning and development, my responsibility is to help corporate leaders enhance their skills and abilities so that they may inspire and develop those that they lead. In this section of the review, my goal is to critique Sinek’s work through both scholarly and practitioner lenses.

### **In Favour**

Weber (1963) writes that leaders gain their legitimacy and power through rational, traditional and/or charismatic grounds. Weber (1963) defines charismatic authority as “resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him” (p. 63). It appears that Sinek is largely discussing the charismatic leader, emphasizing the visionary and inspirational qualities that such leaders possess; Sinek’s account appears to demystify what it means to be a charismatic leader and fundamental to his assumptions and philosophy of leadership.

In his book, Sinek explains that the mind shapes behaviours – that true transformation occurs from the inside out, starting with purpose and cause. This notion of transformation occurring from the inside out is important in various areas of leadership. For example, leaders concerned with diversity may benefit from Sinek’s work. To draw this parallel, consider Ahmed’s (2017) work on organizational diversity. Ahmed (2017) highlights that diversity work could become and sometimes is “... about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations...even if diversity is an attempt to transform the institutions, it too can become a technique for keeping things in place” (p. 105). Ahmed (2017) further explains “The very appearance of a transformation...is what stops something from happening” (p. 105). Ahmed’s perspective is consistent with Sinek’s views - the need to start with purpose, to look at our internal cause, rather than just the results (the WHAT).

Leaders concerned with emotional intelligence capacity development may also benefit from Sinek’s work. The World Economic Forum has listed emotional intelligence as a 10 top skill that employees will need for 2020 and beyond (Beckford, 2018). As a practitioner in the field, I leverage Goleman’s (1995) Model of Emotional Intelligence. One of the competencies in this model is self-awareness. To grow self-awareness in leaders I often help them recognize how their thoughts inform their emotions and how their emotions inform their behaviour. Sinek’s approach is consistent with this and would likely explain that self-awareness occurs first by identifying purpose and passion, the WHY, followed by gaining clarity as to HOW one performs an action followed by an awareness of WHAT one does. Although actions are important, Sinek constantly reminds us that the WHY must come first.

In discussing the Law of Diffusion of Innovation, Sinek explains that the leaders are the innovators and the visionaries. Leithwood et al. (2019) would agree. In their article, *Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership*, they outline the importance of leaders' role in setting direction along with the leadership practice of building a shared vision. In addition, in my professional practice, I have seen the impact a clear vision can have in motivating employees intrinsically. Without intrinsic motivation, external motivations, such as money, become most important. Sinek would agree and would argue that extrinsic motivation would serve as a short-term strategy.

### **Clarification Needed**

Although I do believe that Sinek's book is valuable, there are a couple of points I would like to raise about his characterization of WHY. Sinek emphasizes that an individual has one WHY that never changes. Why is this the case? Furthermore, early in his book, Sinek claims "With a little discipline, any leader or organization can inspire others, both inside and outside their organization, to help advance their ideas and their vision. We can all learn to lead" (p. 1), yet later in his book he claims that there are individuals known as WHY-types. He further states "Most people in the world are HOW-types" (p. 141) and later states "every person has a WHY" (p.214). If most people are HOW-types, can everyone truly lead from a place of inspiration as he earlier claimed?

### **A Note about Equity in Practice**

Throughout his book, Sinek challenges leaders to focus on individuals who believe what they believe and although this may inspire some in theory, I am left wondering how this might exclude others and lead to inequalities in practice within the workplace. Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer and Desai (2013) examined the misrecognition of talent within a Canadian public school and found "...that, in order to embody the elusive X factor, students must display technical skills obtained through prior training and an exposure to specific, culturally acceptable, forms of the arts" (p. 133). The argument that Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer and Desai (2013) make is that the X factor becomes the one standard by which talent is perceived. Although this study specifically examined schools, the same challenge can occur in other organizations as well. Perhaps equity issues could be mitigated if there is an acknowledgement that individuals can have multiple WHY's, creating more opportunity for individuals to find common ground. Furthermore, perhaps the call to leaders is not to focus on those who believe what they believe. Perhaps the call is for leaders to challenge themselves to create an inclusive environment where multiple WHY's may thrive. Could this lead to inclusion and innovation?

### **Discovering the Why in Practice**

Early in his book, Sinek states "This book is not designed to tell you what to do or how to do it. Its goal is not to give you a course of action. Its goal is to offer you the cause of action" (p. 7). Sinek, however, misses something that may perhaps be even more important. How does one discover their WHY? What tangible steps can one take to achieve this? Perhaps he does not attend to this as he assumes learning one's WHY is easy to do. In fact, near the end of his book, he claims "Gaining clarity of WHY, ironically, is not the hard part" (p. 215). He claims "Finding WHY is a process of discovery, not invention" (p. 214). Although I do agree that finding the WHY is a process, his assumption that it is not hard to do may be problematic. Having taught over 100 leaders and interacted with thousands of employees, I have witnessed many individuals struggle to find their purpose. When pressed they claimed their WHY was to "make money" or to "help people". When I probed deeper, they were left wondering what their true WHY was and how they could discover it.

Fortunately, in my experience, I have achieved some success in helping some leaders discover their WHY's. I did so by facilitating self-awareness exercises rooted in Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Model which I believe would have been beneficial to include in part 6 of Sinek's book, "Discover Why". In one of the self-awareness exercises I facilitated, I began by helping leaders reflect on their true intentions behind their actions. This helped shed some light on their WHY's. I followed this up with an exercise where leaders were asked to pick their top values. To validate their values, reflective

coaching was employed where the leaders were asked to examine if their behaviours were consistent with their chosen values. Although I will not fully map out the exercise within the confines of this review, the final piece of the exercise, once each leader had a clear sense of their WHY's, was to help them collaborate to discuss how their various WHY's could fit together for the purpose of creating a shared vision where they felt they all belonged. What was critical in the exercise was to allow space for the leaders to make sense of their WHY's, identifying how their personal purpose could fit with that of their peers along with their job requirements. Perhaps Sinek would benefit from including the shared sense-making process highlighted by Ganon-Shilon and Chen (2019). The shared sense-making process is a circular and continuous process that includes "taking a retrospective look", "social integration and negotiation", "coming up with a collaborative map", "constructing and enacting school meaning" and "implementing ambiguous reform demands" (Ganon-Shilon & Chen, 2019, p. 79). School meaning may be substituted for organizational meaning.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

I believe that Sinek's *Start with Why* is a valuable book, particularly for leaders of organizations and leadership development practitioners who are concerned with issues of teamwork, organizational culture development, innovation and overall employee engagement. This book will also appeal to those who are interested in emotional intelligence capacity building. It is important to highlight that Simon Sinek's message has gone viral. His TED talk where he discusses the Golden Circle is one of the most popular TED talks ever made (TED, n.d.). The reason for the appeal of Sinek's message could be interesting for scholars to investigate. In conclusion, despite the challenges in practice outlined in this review, Sinek's book is a welcome addition that encourages any reader to start the conversation on how to inspire, and challenge notions of leadership and organizational effectiveness.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The reference for the book that was reviewed in this manuscript is as follows:

Sinek, S. (2011). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. London, England: Penguin Books. Pages: 256. ISBN: 978-1-59184-644-4

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