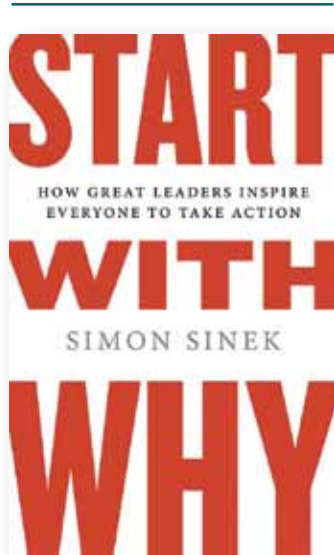


## The Essential Variable in Leadership “Why”

By Shayne Kavanagh



Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action

Simon Sinek

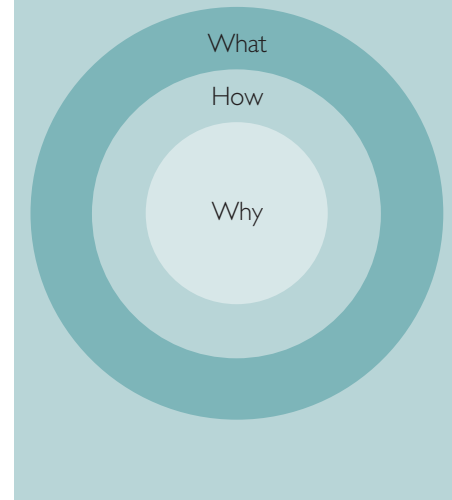
Portfolio/Penguin

2011, 256 pages, \$16

In *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, author Simon Sinek presents an alternative model of leadership based on inspiration. It contrasts with the transactional forms of leadership commonly found in organizations. Transactional modes of leadership are characterized by the use of positive and negative reinforcements (e.g., monetary incentives and punishments), and Sinek refers to these as “manipulative.” He does not use the term pejoratively, but rather descriptively — by using such tools, a leader seeks to manipulate others into doing something they would otherwise not want to do.

Sinek advances an inspirational model of leadership that motivates people to do things because they want to. This pattern of leadership starts with “why.” “Why” represents the most fundamental reason for the existence of the organization and the reason constituents and employees should care about the organization. “Why” is at the center of what Sinek calls the “Golden Circle” (see Exhibit 1), which tells us that while “why” is central, it must also be accompanied by “how” and “what.” “What” is the service that an organization provides, and “how” is the method or approach used to provide that service.

**Exhibit 1: The Golden Circle**



The problem many organizations have, Sinek posits, is that they are able to clearly articulate their “what” and their “how,” but not their “why.” Inspirational leadership is impossible without the “why,” leaving only transactional, manipulative modes of management. These styles of leadership will ultimately fail to attract, motivate, and retain a highly effective workforce, leading to subpar organizational performance. Hence, leaders must understand that employees and constituents don’t get excited about “what” the organization does, but rather “why” it does it.

### EXPLAINING THE “WHY”

A good illustration of the consequences of missing the “why” comes

from TiVo, the first digital video recording service (DVR). TiVo was first to market, is widely acknowledged to have had technology that was superior to the competitors that followed, and was well-funded by venture capital. The brand name “TiVo” even became a general-use verb for digitally recording a TV show, even for customers who did not use the TiVo service (much like one will “Xerox” a document on a competitor’s photocopier). So, with DVR technology now commonplace, why is TiVo not a titan of the technology industry in the manner of Apple, Google, or Microsoft, instead of a small company with largely stagnant or shrinking customer base? The answer is that TiVo did not emphasize the “why” when trying to inspire people to buy its product. Instead, it emphasized the “what” — technical features such as the amount of memory, intuitive interface, etc. TiVo’s competitors emphasized “why” one would want a DVR in the first place — to watch favorite television shows on one’s own schedule and to skip commercials.

As an example of a company that has successfully articulated its “why,” Sinek cites Apple. Apple’s “why” is to challenge the status quo, celebrate individuality, and offer simple alternatives. In a story that mirrors TiVo’s, the iPod was actually released 22 months after a similar, technologically superior device from another company, Creative Technology. However, like TiVo, Creative Technology emphasized the “what” (technical features), while Apple

emphasized the “why,” with marketing slogans like “1,000 songs in your pocket.”

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Identifying the organization’s “why” is not difficult from a technical perspective. For example, a school exists to help children get ready for college and a career, to culturally enrich students’ lives, and to prepare them to be good citizens. A police department exists to protect people. In fact, Sinek points out, one “why” is rarely objectively superior to another. Each organization has some constituency that finds the organization’s “why” objectively valuable, so to that constituency, that “why” is the right one. The real challenge with articulating “why” is that it contains an important emotional or “gut” component, making it difficult to put “why” into words. Hence, “why” is often neglected in favor the easier-to-articulate “what” and “how.”

### **THE POWER OF “WHY”**

Much of *Start with Why* focuses on the way in which “why” can lead to commercial success. While private-sector concepts of profit and loss have little to no relevance for government

organizations, Sinek’s concept of how commercial success is achieved does. In Sinek’s view, a properly motivated and inspired workforce leads to happy customers, which leads to commercial success. A properly motivated and inspired workforce is of obvious value to government organizations as well.

Sinek’s leading example here is Southwest Airlines. Southwest has a clear “why” and an aligned “how”: The “why” is to make air travel accessible to everyday people, and the “how” is by offering consistently low prices. Two of Southwest’s marketing slogans illustrate this: “Southwest: You are now free to move about the country,” and “Southwest: THE low cost airline.” One might think that becoming the low-cost airline would not be compatible with a highly motivated and inspired workforce, but Southwest proves otherwise. One of the keys to Southwest’s success (and one that Sinek underscores heavily through similar examples in other organizations) is to hire people that fit with Southwest rather than necessarily hiring people with the greatest technical qualifications. In fact, the founder of Southwest remarked that the airline hires for attitude because skills can be taught. Defining who fits with an organization starts with defining the “why.” Those who are willing and able to be inspired by the “why” and get behind it are the best fits.

Once employees are on board, Sinek emphasizes the need to build trust, which begins to emerge when employees have a sense that the orga-

nization is driven by things other than financial success. It comes from being part of an organization that has a common set of values and beliefs. Trust is maintained when the values and beliefs are actively managed. Hence, it is incumbent upon leaders to not only define the “why” but then to also align the other concentric rings of the Golden Circle. “How” and “what” are thus consistent with “why,” and employees have something to work toward, rather than just something to work on.

### CONCLUSIONS

Studies show that Millennials and other young workers are more concerned with the social impact of the

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work they do than previous generations. At the same time, public manag-

ers are increasingly concerned with the impending retirement of large portions of the government workforce, and the consequent need to recruit young workers into public service. These workers will not be as attracted to the relative job security and pension benefits offered by public organizations as prior generations. However, the socially beneficial mission of government agencies could be a lure if public sector leaders can articulate the “why.” ■

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**SHAYNE KAVANAGH** is senior manager of research at the GFOA’s Research and Consulting Center in Chicago, Illinois. He can be reached at [skavanagh@gfoa.org](mailto:skavanagh@gfoa.org).

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