

Sinek, Simon. *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. New York: Portfolio, 2009. Print.

Summary of Key Ideas:

As stated in the title, Simon Sinek encourages his readers to start with WHY and defines this as being the guiding purpose, cause, or belief that “gets you out of bed” in the morning, is why your company exists, and is why anyone should care. This concept of WHY is supported by the WHAT and the HOW. WHAT is at one would expect - it is WHAT you or your company do. The WHAT would be the products or services that a company provides and typically are easily identifiable. The HOW are the processes and systems in place that allow you to do the WHAT. In most companies, the WHAT is comprised of the workers and lower-level employees, HOWs are the executive level managers, and WHYS are typically the CEO of the company - the one who sets the purpose for the company's existence. These concepts are best illustrated through “The Golden Circle,” a series of concentric circles with WHY being in the bull's eye and HOW and WHAT as the outer rings in that order.

After describing the concepts The Golden Circle through numerous examples (Apple, Harley Davidson, and Southwest) and non-examples (Creative Technology Ltd, Dell, and Walmart), Sinek goes onto to correlate how these various concepts are more than a communications hierarchy and actually equate to the three major levels of the human brain. The neocortex, the newest part of the brain, corresponds with WHAT and is responsible for rational and analytical thought and language. The middle two portions of HOW and WHY comprise the limbic brain, the portion of our brain that controls all of our feelings but is devoid of language. This part of the brain is not only responsible for all human behavior, but also controls decision making. The correlation of The Golden Circle with human behavior becomes important when you consider the implications it has on being a leader that others will want to follow.

“We can all learn to lead,” Sinek asserts (page 1, Sinek), but developing the way of thinking, actions and communications that inspire others will determine who follows you and for how long. All that we do as leaders begins with a decision. This decision can be founded upon data and rational thinking (neocortex/WHAT) or on “a gut feeling” (limbic/HOW/WHY) and these decisions often result in a desired outcome. The result can be derived from manipulating or inspiring others to follow. Manipulation fosters a following, but it is not a loyal, long term relationship. Companies use manipulation through price, peer pressure, promotions, fear, aspirations, and novelty. These manipulations have an immediate effect in the short term, but do not yield a long term loyal relationship. This carrots and sticks approach is useful in getting people to do what you want them to do, but does create a reason to rally behind a leader.

A good leader inspires others to follow. They create an atmosphere of “we’re in this together” and those who rally around the leader know that they are there for the long haul, through thick and thin because they believe in a cause or a purpose - their WHY - and can articulate what this belief is to others through their thinking, actions, and communications. Sinek uses Apple as a sterling example of how to start with WHY. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak created Apple Computers on the WHY of “challenging the status quo.” The WHAT are the products they make, but the WHY is what people buy - a lifestyle, a belief, a cause to rally around, and what some refer to as a “cult.” When a leader starts with WHY, they bring the right people into the organization, they make decisions about the WHAT and HOW based upon their WHY. Applying the filter of WHY creates consistency in messaging, actions, and thinking. Followers know who they are following and, more importantly, why they are following. Without a strong sense of WHY, leaders will not develop the loyalty and trust with those who follow them or if they do, it will not be lasting.

## My thoughts and recommendations for application to my work environment

This book has been on my reading list for some time as I am always working on developing my leadership skills and style. The concept of “starting with WHY” piqued my interest as it is a question that I refer to often when working with my staff, speaking with teachers, and communicating with site leaders. Why are we here? What is our purpose? What drives us? For me, my WHY is to make a difference in the lives of West Sacramento kids. My guiding compass is being aware of how the decisions I make impacts “my” kids. Second to that is the impact it has for teachers and then that which it has on administrators because they take care of my West Sacramento children and I need to take care of them. For me, this book reaffirmed and validated my approach to how I work with others, make decisions, communicate with the various stakeholders involved in educating children, and how I plan. It has given me a reference for my approach and provides examples I can use in defining my leadership style to others.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and found it very easy to read. It is not a book written for education and education was rarely mentioned, but there were a number of parallels that I was able to draw from the business world and connect to my daily work as a technology leader. Because of this, I recommend this to my colleagues. My next book on my reading list is Simon Sinek’s “Leaders Eat Last” which expands on the ideas presented in “Start with WHY” and I am anxious to get started.