

Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action¹

Reviewed by Major Ryan Kerwin*

*The best is he who calls men to the best.*²

I. Introduction

Walk through a bookstore or an airport newsstand and you will see them: books claiming they hold the secret to becoming an effective leader, can change the way you think, and show you how to operate like a giant of industry. For the most part, these book jacket exclamations are aimed at people with type-A personalities who desire to improve their lives and their careers. The themes the authors of those books explore could apply to a variety of jobs or endeavors, from aspiring CEOs or owners of fledgling businesses, to military leaders and even athletic coaches. As the *New York Times* reported in 2007, it is not just those aiming for the top of their respective professions who are reading to gain an edge; already established CEOs and captains of industry still devour tomes on leadership as well as the classics, and they frequently credit their personal libraries as a key to their success.³ Ultimately, the pitch from these books is one will achieve success by understanding certain aspects of human nature, and applying this knowledge in a manner that will inspire others. They explore ideas such as the notion that the split-second decisions are often the correct ones⁴; they assert that if you get the right people on your team your venture will be successful.⁵ There are also countless books chronicling the success of iconic business leaders such as Steve Jobs of Apple, Inc.,⁶ and Howard Schultz of Starbucks, Inc.⁷ Simon Sinek's book, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, is of that same genre: a sort of self-help guidebook that aims to provide the reader with new insight into what makes leaders

different and, in turn, successful. A judge advocate searching for renewed inspiration in the realm of leadership might pick up this book and find some valuable lessons.

Mr. Sinek is a well-known motivational speaker, professor, and member of the Rand Corporation.⁸ He has developed and marketed "Why," a concept described as "the purpose, cause or belief that drives every one of us."⁹ The interest in Sinek's interpretation of what makes an effective leader has resulted in invitations to meet with numerous government officials, corporations, members of the U.S. military, and to speak at the prestigious TED conference.¹⁰ *Start with Why* is Sinek's proclamation that by focusing one's vision on why we do things and articulating that message, aspiring leaders will inspire others. Mr. Sinek writes that "this book is about a naturally occurring pattern, a way of thinking, acting and communicating that gives some leaders the ability to inspire those around them."¹¹

The author uses a device he calls "The Golden Circle" as the focal point of his argument.¹² As the book's title suggests, asking "why" we do things rather than "what" we do or "how" we do them is the key to developing a persuasive, successful leadership style.¹³ It could be applied to motivate subordinates, or consumers that leaders in business hope will buy their products. The Golden Circle—literally an illustration of a round target in which the outer ring is "What," the middle ring "How," and the bull's eye "Why"—also serves as a figurative illustration that focuses the reader on what is truly important when it comes to leadership.¹⁴ While most people are consumed with what to do or how to do it, Sinek argues that it is only by asking, "Why are we doing this?" and then effectively communicating that message, that leaders truly rise to an

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¹ SIMON SINEK, *START WITH WHY: HOW GREAT LEADERS INSPIRE EVERYONE TO TAKE ACTION* (2009).

² Quote attributed to ancient Greek poet Hesiod (c. AD 750-650), QUOTESANDPOEM.COM, http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_best_is_he_who_calls_men_to_the_best-and/209066.html (last visited Sept. 10, 2012).

³ Harriet Ruben, *C.E.O. Libraries Reveal Keys to Success*, N.Y. TIMES, July 21, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/21/business/21libraries.html?_r=1.

⁴ MALCOLM GLADWELL, *BLINK: THE POWER OF THINKING WITHOUT THINKING* (2005).

⁵ JIM COLLINS, *GOOD TO GREAT: WHY SOME COMPANIES MAKE THE LEAP . . . AND OTHERS DON'T* (2001).

⁶ WALTER ISSACSON, *STEVE JOBS* (2011).

⁷ HOWARD SCHULTZ AND JOANNE GORDON, *ONWARD: HOW STARBUCKS FOUGHT FOR ITS LIFE WITHOUT LOSING ITS SOUL* (2011).

⁸ Author Biography, STARTWITHWHY.COM, <http://www.startwithwhy.com/About/Biography.aspx> (last visited Sept. 10, 2012).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *TED Talks: Simon Sinek: How Great Leaders Inspire Action*, TED.COM, http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.html (last visited September 10, 2012). Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) is a four-day conference attended by leaders from a cross-spectrum of industries; it offers over 50 speakers and events geared toward inspiration and the sharing of new ideas. Mr. Sinek spoke at the TED Conference in September 2009. *Id.*

¹¹ SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 1.

¹² *Id.* at 37.

¹³ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 37.

ethereal level.¹⁵ To illustrate his assertions, Mr. Sinek uses examples from successful businesses, pioneers of industry, and historical figures. The question is: Does this hypothesis work? The reader will find the answer: It depends.

II. Style Over Substance

Ironically, the strength of *Start with Why* is also its weakness. While Sinek effectively presents strategic-level ideas along with concise, real-world examples to substantiate them, the lack of hard facts and specific details detracts from the overall message of why leaders should start with “why.” This systemic problem begins early in the book when Sinek first describes his own creation, the “Golden Circle.”¹⁶ He claims the Golden Circle concept was “inspired by the golden ratio—a simple mathematical relationship that has fascinated mathematicians, biologists, architects, artists, musicians and naturists since the beginning of history.”¹⁷ He goes on to explain that many well-known historical figures, including Pythagoras and da Vinci, have used the golden ratio to create some of the most lasting contributions to human history and the advancement of mankind.¹⁸ Although intriguing, the author never explains what the golden ratio entails and likewise never describes how any of these historical figures used it to create their masterworks. Part of the hook with the concept of the golden ratio is that intellectuals of remarkable stature relied upon it to create ideas that changed the world and still affect us today. Failing to provide evidence of this, however, detracts somewhat from the author’s overarching hypothesis.

Along those same lines, throughout the book the author continues to offer intriguing explanations as to why some leaders are successful while others are not, and the reader must settle for vague descriptions of how they achieved this success. As with the golden ratio, Sinek never dives into the details. A discerning reader will be interested in Sinek’s hypothesis concerning the focus on “why” we do things, but is left wanting when no substantive examples are presented.

The practices of highly successful businesses provide the backdrop for many of the contemporary examples Sinek relies upon to support his argument.¹⁹ A great deal of the book is spent discussing why the Apple Corporation is so

successful while other computer, phone, and electronic companies have not achieved that level of commercial success.²⁰ Sinek puts forth a compelling argument that Apple’s success is not necessarily due to selling a superior product, but came about and continues instead because of an innovative vision that is effectively communicated to consumers.²¹ He describes the culture that surrounds a company like Apple to include not only the passion of its employees but also the consumers who are fervently loyal to their brand.²² Apple’s customers return again and again, he argues, because they have effectively marketed a vision and an identity—“a why” instead of a “what” (i.e., a computer).²³ Their customers believe they are innovators themselves and see Apple as an extension of their persona, despite the fact that it is one of the largest corporations in the world.²⁴ That, argues Sinek, is due to do the expert marketing of Apple’s “why.” Their advertisements encourage Apple customers to “Think Different,” and it is this vision that keeps customers coming back for the latest Apple product.²⁵ This blueprint for success is repeatedly illustrated with other companies such as Southwest Airlines²⁶ and even with historical figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr.²⁷ and the Wright Brothers.²⁸ Their commonality is they all were able to focus, according to the author, on macro-level ideas and articulate their visions while others became bogged down with “what” to do or “how” to do it.

The problem again, as with the lack of facts describing the “golden ratio,” is that these historic and business-model examples lack support in the form of verifiable facts. Sinek asserts that the Wright Brothers succeeded because they “knew WHY it was important to build” a flying machine.²⁹ There is no concrete evidence of this claim, however, that the “why” truly was the Wright Brother’s motivation. Instead, the author contrasts them with Samuel Pierpont Langley, a contemporary who was also building an airplane in an attempt to gain fame and notoriety.³⁰ The Wright Brothers succeeded before Langley, Mr. Sinek argues,

¹⁵ *Id.* at 228 (This is the over-arching theme of the book, regularly appearing within each chapter.).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 37, 218.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 37.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 38.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 3–4, 27, 48–49, 83–88, 140–41, 186–95, 198–99, 204–05. The author relies heavily on business models to illustrate success as well as failure. Examples include Apple, Microsoft, Starbucks, Continental Airlines, Southwest Airlines, Honda, and Colgate.

²⁰ *Id.* at 3–4, 45–46, 63–69, 43–46, 154–64, 209–11.

²¹ *Id.* at 54–59.

²² *Id.* at 41–42.

²³ *Id.* at 164–65.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 155.

²⁶ *Id.* at 70–73.

²⁷ *Id.* at 126–30.

²⁸ *Id.* at 97–99.

²⁹ *Id.* at 97.

³⁰ *Id.* at 96.

because their vision and their grasp of the “why” differed from Langley’s mundane and unimaginative pursuit of “what” and “how” in his endeavor to become the first to fly.³¹

Similarly, the author claims that it was President John F. Kennedy’s compelling leadership alone that propelled the space program to achieve the astounding success of putting a man on the moon six years after Kennedy’s death.³² What Sinek neglects to address, though, is the immense impact that the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union had on the development of the U.S. Apollo 11 mission. While there is no doubt that Kennedy’s vision was a motivating factor, the aerospace competition between the two Cold War countries that resulted in the moon landing began well before President Kennedy took office.

III. The Big Picture

Despite these minor flaws, what the book lacks in detail, it makes up for with captivating, accessible ideas that a leader at almost any level can apply. While “what” we do and “how” we do it are, more often than not, technical endeavors, determining an effective “why” is often considered an art form. Most companies sell a product by telling you what it is and how it works.³³ Companies like Apple, Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, and Harley-Davidson, suggests Sinek, sell an image. Why else, he asks, would someone get a tattoo of the Harley-Davidson logo?³⁴ That notion does not seem very strange, given the image that Harley-Davidson has spent years cultivating.³⁵ Could you picture someone getting a tattoo of the corporate logo of Motorola? Probably not. And yet Motorola is a corporation, just as Harley-Davidson is. Sinek theorizes the difference is that Harley-Davidson has developed a vision projected at their consumers that focuses less on the actual product and instead highlights an image of who they are and who *you* will be if you buy into this image as well.³⁶

One of the more persuasive examples that the author uses to illustrate what can be accomplished when a charismatic leader is effective at projecting his message is Martin Luther King, Jr.³⁷ Sinek rightly recognizes the monumental effect Dr. King had on those who heard him

speak.³⁸ Although his story is used to illustrate the point that a powerful vision that is conveyed to the masses can create a cultural and political movement, the impact Dr. King had on others is vastly different from that of the corporations the author discusses. One glaring difference, and a testament to Dr. King’s leadership skills, was his ability to influence and motivate people to act in the face of physical harm and even death. Unlike the die-hard followers of Apple products or Southwest Airlines, those who marched with Dr. King were drawn together to fight for equality and to change the course of U.S.—and human—history; notably, they did so despite facing immense adversity. Sinek draws the correlation between Dr. King and successful CEOs most effectively when he describes how a clear, visionary agenda communicated at a strategic level can have an incredible impact on people and the world.³⁹

The author’s example of famed explorer Ernest Shackleton’s ability to lead his crew through a harrowing expedition shows that the analysis of strategic-level communications and how vital they are to an organization’s success; this is indeed the strongest argument Sinek makes throughout *Start with Why*.⁴⁰ In addition to the Martin Luther King, Jr. example to illustrate the importance of “why” in a political, cultural, and historical context, Sinek next moves on to explore business models. What boils down to, it seems, is just good marketing. The reader must infer here that merely making quality products at affordable prices is not enough to actually achieve the immense success and transcendent innovation at the level of corporations like Apple.⁴¹ “There is a big difference between repeat business and loyalty,” Mr. Sinek writes.⁴² That theme throughout *Start with Why*—effectively communicating the “why”—is the key to an effective leader: one who garners that loyalty, not just repeat business, be it from customers in the marketplace or subordinates in the workforce.

IV. Conclusion

Books like *Start with Why* exist because people clearly desire to know what makes great leaders so effective, and why some businesses thrive while others fail. The concept of

³¹ *Id.* at 98.

³² *Id.* at 38.

³³ *Id.* at 58–59.

³⁴ *Id.* at 162–63.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.* at 126–30.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 129.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 90, 92. Another similar, and fascinating, historical example in *Start with Why* is the Antarctic expedition of famed explorer Ernest Shackleton. Faced with extraordinarily harsh conditions and grave danger, the men on the expedition never wavered. *Id.* It was a testament to Mr. Shackleton’s leadership that he was able to motivate his crew to accomplish feats that most thought were both physically and psychologically impossible. The author argues that those very skills can be used in any environment, be it boardroom or battlefield. *Id.* at 90.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 27–28.

⁴² *Id.* at 28.

“why” on its face is certainly interesting, as Sinek conceives it. Some readers, however, will not be able to get past the lack of detail or explanatory facts in the examples the author presents. If, however, a judge advocate reader’s goal is to enjoy a refresher on leadership with an emphasis on how to

inspire others and build loyalty, *Start with Why* is worth exploring. What it lacks in hard data, precise facts, and convincing supportive evidence, it makes up for with lofty ideas, strategic-level visions, and clear messages. For Mr. Sinek, maybe that is the whole point.