

Sinek, Simon – Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action

Penguin Group, 2009, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade



The video “How great leaders inspire actions” has been viewed over 3 million times at YouTube and it’s the 3rd most viewed TED-talk ever. Simon Sinek’s Golden Circle of “Why, How and What” is a hit. This book builds and expands on the presentation trying to codify the reason why certain companies and leaders like Apple or Martin Luther King transition to greatness and manage to inspire their followers. Nowadays a RAND researcher, Sinek in the preface describes an almost evangelical background to this book “it was dark, then I met Lord Why and now I spread his word of joy and salvation”. Sinek is ultra-dedicated to his topic. Personally, even though I basically agree with the notions of the author, this “newly saved” tone is a slight turn-off.

The book kicks off with a description of the World that doesn’t start with why but instead uses what the author calls the “external manipulation” of carrots and sticks to influence behavior. The problem is that this doesn’t breed loyalty and all gains thus become short-term and temporary. People want to belong to a group and the great leaders and companies motivate and inspire others by giving them an opportunity to do just that. By formulating a company’s purpose, its cause and belief, it states why it exists. If this “Why” resonates with a person’s view of himself, his beliefs and aspirations then this creates a strong bond of loyalty. To reject the company would be to reject who you are – or want to be – as a person. For those companies who know why they do something it’s important – and natural – to follow through with a “how they do it” and “what they do” that resonate with the core values. The system needs to be in balance for the company to be perceived as authentic. Further, Sinek discusses the difficulty but also the necessity for a company of staying true to their “Why” even after they have had success and the “What” starts to dominate everyday thinking.

This book is a rallying cry to kick-start an early majority to form a why-movement. The problem

for me as a reviewer is that I’m the analytical, contrarian, late majority type of person and any cult-like phenomena with lots of people herding around it always makes this kind of person very uneasy. Yet, I am in some way nevertheless joining the movement, as I know Sinek is pretty much spot on. However, with regards to “external manipulation”, the capability of mind-control and manipulation is – as any cult leader would testify – so much more potent when people have handed over their personality into the hands of the particular leader they are following, than it is with “carrots and sticks”. There is a huge moral responsibility not to abuse those who follow you more or less blindly and this responsibility has been betrayed often enough historically.

Other quarrels I have with the book is that it is too long for the simple – but powerful – idea of the Golden Circle. Topics get repeated quite a lot. The author further isn’t just the instigator of a movement; he’s also a follower of one. Sinek must have the most severe case of the Apple bug I have ever seen. A few other companies are discussed like Southwestern Airlines but the business case of Apple is all over the book. Sinek is a religious man and the trinity is Jobs, Wozniak and the Holy iPhone. Again, a person with my personality finds this idolizing bordering on fetishism unsettling even though we can all appreciate the strength of the phenomena. In some ways I’ll have to rate the idea rather than the book. To start with the purpose of doing something and then adding on from that is an underappreciated way of building a coherent and authentic company. The idea might be simple but it packs a good punch. Giving the book a poor grade just because it doesn’t fit my personality would be unfair. It might fit yours.

Anyone who wants to build a strong foundation for a genuine long-lasting company with dedicated customers should either carefully study this book or view Sinek on YouTube. I certainly have.

Mats Larsson, October 5, 2014