

The Science of WHY

Simon Sinek, Business and Leadership Coach

The work world is tough: wake up, go to work, deal with the boss (or if you are the boss, deal with everyone), make money, come home, manage personal life, go to bed, wake up, repeat. That's plenty to deal with every day. Why get fancy (and waste time) by trying to also understand why you do what you do? The answer to that question isn't fancy; it's simple.

Discovering the WHY injects passion into our work. This is not a formula for success. There are many ways to be successful (by traditional metrics); however, the Golden Circle is a tool to help us achieve long-term, fulfilling success.

The Golden Circle

Every organization—and every person's career—operates on three levels: what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. We all know what we do: the products we sell, the services we offer or the jobs we do. Some of us know how we do it: the things that we think make us different or stand out from the crowd. But very few of us can clearly articulate why we do what we do.

The WHY is the purpose, cause, or belief that drives every organization and every person's individual career. Why does your company exist? Why did you get out of bed this morning? And why should anyone care?

Companies that inspire, companies that command trust and loyalty over the long term, are the ones that make us feel we're accomplishing something bigger than just saving a buck. That feeling of alliance with something bigger is the reason we keep wearing the jersey of our hometown sports team even though they've missed the playoffs for ten years and counting. It's why some of us will always buy Apple products over other brands, even if Apple isn't always the most affordable choice. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are not entirely rational beings. If we were, no one would ever fall in love and no one would ever start a business. Faced with an overwhelming chance of failure, no rational person would ever take either of those risks. But we do. Every day. Because how we feel about something or someone is more powerful than what we think about it or them.

There's just one problem with feelings. They can be tremendously difficult to express in words. That's the reason we so often resort to metaphors and analogies, like "our relationship feels like a train heading at high speed toward a rickety bridge" or "when I get to the office, I feel like a little kid on the playground again." Even though communicating our feelings is hard, the payoff is big. When we align emotionally with our customers and clients, our connection is much stronger and more meaningful than any affiliation based on features and benefits. That's what starting with WHY is all about.

And here's the best part, this whole concept of WHY is grounded in the tenets of the biology of human decision making. How the Golden Circle works maps perfectly with how our brain works.

The outer section of the Golden Circle—the WHAT—corresponds to the outer section of the brain—the neocortex. This is the part of the brain responsible for rational and analytical thought. It helps us understand facts and figures, features and benefits. The neocortex is also responsible for language.

The middle two sections of the Golden Circle—the WHY and HOW—correspond to the middle section of the brain, the limbic system. This is the part of the brain responsible for all our behavior and decision making. It's also responsible for all our feelings, like trust and loyalty. But unlike the neocortex, the limbic system has no capacity for language. This is where "gut feelings" come from. It's not our stomach. It's a feeling we get about a decision we have to make that we struggle to explain.

That separation of powers is the biological reason we sometimes find it difficult to put our feelings into words ("I love you more than words can say"), explain our actions ("The devil made me do it!") or justify our decisions ("I don't know ... it just felt right").

We can learn, however, to put words to those feelings. And those who do are the ones who are better able to inspire action in themselves, among their colleagues and with their customers.

The Effect of WHY

Once you understand your WHY, you'll be able to clearly articulate what makes you feel fulfilled and to better understand what drives your behavior when you're at your natural best. When you can do that, you'll have a point of reference for everything you do going forward. You'll be able to make more intentional choices for your business, your career and your life. You'll be able to inspire others to buy from you, work with you and join your cause. Never again should you have to play the lottery and act on gut decisions that are made for reasons you don't really understand. From now on, you can work with purpose, on purpose. From now on, you can start with WHY.

If we want to feel an undying passion for our work, if we want to feel we are contributing to something bigger than ourselves, we all need to know our WHY.

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