

Moral Money Leadership

Simon Sinek: the next generation must test leaders' finite mindset

The TedX leadership guru is concerned that bosses are not embracing a long-range approach



Simon Sinek sees the bright side despite leadership being stuck in the 'old ways' © Andrew Dolgin

Andrew Hill JULY 5 2019

Simon Sinek says he “got lucky” in 2009, when he gave [a TedX talk](#) to about 50 people near Seattle.

In the talk, he drilled home the simple idea that the most successful companies begin with a purpose (the “why”), rather than with a product (the “what”). He sketched a “golden circle” with “why” at the centre on a flip chart, referenced some brain science, and that was more or less that.

The video has now been viewed more than 44m times. His book based on the same framework, *Start With Why*, has sold 1m copies. Mr Sinek now speaks to far bigger audiences — his biggest gig was to more than 15,000 people — and runs a successful leadership consulting business.

When he appeared recently at London’s Excel centre for the World of Business Ideas forum, where individual tickets sell for more than £2,000, the marketer-turned-leadership speaker took top billing alongside management and strategy experts such as [Gary Hamel](#) and [Michael Porter](#).

Fans queued for selfies with the 45-year-old. “Anyone who has responsibility for others should read his books,” [enthused](#) one on Twitter. “Was lucky enough to . . . attend his small workshop #lovedit,” [tweeted](#) another.

What is the appeal?

While he is slightly more polished, cleaner shaven and better dressed than in that 2009 TEDx appearance, Mr Sinek’s tools are still the same: a flip chart (untouched at his London talk), a series of pretty well-worn business anecdotes, and an unwavering belief in his recipe for better, longer term, more purposeful businesses.

Mr Sinek was indeed lucky that his video appeared just as TEDx talks were taking off. But there was more to it than that. In an interview that he squeezed in, film-star style, between a book-signing and a workshop in London, the writer pointed out that he had been polishing the talk that went viral for three years. “I knew it resonated,” he told me.

Start with Why also appealed to businesses looking to restore trust with clients in the aftermath of the financial crisis. I have heard the book cited at coaching sessions, at roundtables of managers, and at conferences about company “purpose”, which over the past decade has become a [corporate must-have](#). Purpose is as essential as brand values and mission statements — and, sometimes, as ephemeral.

A lot of the questions he fields onstage are the same from gig to gig, which he says is “revealing of the stasis” inside organisations. But there is progress. Mr Sinek refers to the 2018 letter to chief executives from [Larry Fink of fund manager BlackRock](#), calling for companies to make “a positive contribution to society”. Concern about purpose, Mr Sinek says, is “no longer the private grumbling of the unwashed masses, it’s inside the palace walls — and that’s a big deal”. At the same time, though, he admits that “talk is cheap: I’m fully aware that a lot of companies talk about [it], but are they actually building culture and practices?”

He used to be asked a lot about how to lead millennials. But in 2016 Mr Sinek [went off on a lengthy but measured critique](#) of millennials in the workplace, in an interview where he managed both to repeat some well-worn accusations against the generation (“entitled, narcissistic, self-interested, unfocused, lazy”) and come to their defence. It was classic Sinek: fluent and witty enough to avoid being offensive, but striking a chord with his audience. The YouTube video of his analysis has attracted 11m views, and counting.

Now, Mr Sinek says a more common audience question is “what do you do when you believe in the ‘why’ . . . when you have an ‘infinite mindset’, and your leadership does not?”

The “infinite mindset” is an idea from his new book *The Infinite Game*, due out in October. Again, the premise is simple. Business is an infinite game that most people are playing with a dangerously finite mindset. They are trying to trounce their rivals, or hit quarterly targets, instead of embracing a longer-range approach “that will lead us to feel inspired every morning, safe when we are at work and fulfilled at the end of each day”.

The British-born writer has an undoubted flair for presentation. He seems to have perfected a style that combines familiar melodies with an insistent bassline of common sense, all based, he freely admits, on others’ research. *The Infinite Game* is built on scholar James Carse’s 1986 book *Finite and Infinite Games*.

He also talks in his stage presentation about how he used to obsess about Adam Grant, the Wharton management professor and psychologist, comparing their book sales and wincing whenever he heard him praised. Eventually, the authors [shared a stage together](#). Each admitted to being obsessed with the other. Since then, they have regarded each other as “worthy rivals” — another concept from the new book. Mr Sinek lauds Prof Grant’s research, while he says the academic is envious of his ability to “just go on stage and do it”.

Mr Sinek claims that he found his own “why” — to inspire people to do the things that inspire them, so together we can do things that change the world — as a teenager. He studied cultural anthropology at university in the US, started a law degree in London but pulled out after a year to go into marketing with Euro RSCG (now Havas) and Ogilvy. After he quit marketing in 2002, Mr Sinek built an independent business in “positioning and strategy consulting” before realising in 2005, by his own account, that he had lost sight of his why. It was then he began to assemble the theory that has made his name. The acknowledgments in the 2009 book suggest he also embarked on a concerted study of the most successful mass-market business books, from [Jim Collins’](#) *Good to Great* to Spencer Johnson’s fable *Who Moved My Cheese?* He claims that without that TedX talk he would still be running a “little marketing business”. Instead, he now “accepts the responsibility for being the public voice” of the purpose movement.

That audiences continue to question their leaders’ finite mindset is, Mr Sinek says, “an indicator that leadership is pretty shit”. But as an “unshakeable optimist”, according to his official biography, he can also see the bright side: “The bad news is leadership is stuck in the old ways; the good news is there could be a groundswell of people who are coming up through the ranks asking these questions.”

He might have added the implied and self-interested good news: there will continue to be demand for what Simon Sinek is selling, both as a speaker and a consultant to companies such as Disney and American Airlines. How do you feel about business leadership today? he was asked at his London talk. “We suck,” he responded, in mock self-deprecation. “It’s embarrassing I have a career. I talk about trust and co-operation: I shouldn’t have any work!”

Five essential practices for an ‘infinite mindset’

From Simon Sinek’s *The Infinite Game*:

Advance a just cause, a positive and specific vision of the future that is inclusive, service-oriented, resilient and idealistic.

Build trusting teams of people who feel safe expressing themselves.

Study your worthy rivals, who have strengths and abilities from which you could learn.

Prepare for existential flexibility, adopting a capacity to initiate extreme disruption to your business model or strategic course.

Demonstrate the courage to lead, a willingness to change our perception of how the world works.

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