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HOW GREAT LEADERS INSPIRE
EVERYONE TO TAKE ACTION

WITH

SIMON SINEK

WHY

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START WITH WHY

SIMON SINEK is an optimist who believes in a brighter future for humanity. His talk “How Great Leaders Inspire Action” became the second-most-watched talk of all time on TED.com. Learn more about his work and how you can inspire those around you at simonsinek.com.

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For Liv and Jake.
May you grow up in a world
that starts with Why.

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There are leaders and there are those who lead.
Leaders hold a position of power or influence.
Those who lead inspire us.

Whether individuals or organizations, we follow those
who lead not because we have to, but because we want to.
We follow those who lead not for them, but for ourselves.

This is a book for those who want to inspire others and
for those who want to find someone to inspire them.

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FOREWORD

THE SEED OF A MOVEMENT

We live in a world in desperate need of inspiration. For multiple reasons, including the rise of the internet and our ability to measure every click, swipe, like or purchase, we have become metric, ROI and short-term obsessed. And it comes at a cost—the cost of trust, joy and the feeling that our work can offer us the chance to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. The good news is, we can reverse this trend if we can learn to start with WHY.

The concept of WHY came to me at a time in my life when I needed it most. I had fallen out of love with my work and found myself in a very dark place. There was nothing wrong with the quality of my work or my job, per se; it was the enjoyment I had for that work that I'd lost. By all superficial measurements, I should have been happy. I made a good living. I worked with great clients. The problem was, I didn't feel connected to the work anymore. I was no longer fulfilled by it, and I needed to find a way to rekindle my passion.

Perhaps it was good luck that I studied cultural anthropology at college and was mildly obsessed with human behavior, especially in urban, Western culture. Combined with the pressure I felt having lost any passion for my work, I was able to articulate

the concept of WHY and The Golden Circle as a way to solve my own problem. And the result was profound.

In addition to restoring my passion to a level I had never felt before, the discovery of WHY also completely changed my view of the world. It was such a simple, powerful and actionable idea that I immediately shared it with my friends. That's what we do when we find something magical, we share it. If we read a great book or see a great movie, we tell our friends and family to read or watch it too. We want to share our experiences with people we care about. And the people with whom I shared my idea did exactly the same thing.

My friends invited me to share the concept of the WHY with their friends and the people they cared about. I would stand in someone's living room and tell people about the WHY. I even helped a few of them find their WHY for a hundred bucks on the side. Those living room talks, and my obsession with talking about the idea to whoever would listen, led to more invitations to speak. And the result was nothing short of inspiring. Those who embraced this new idea of WHY found renewed love for their jobs and supercharged their businesses and their careers. Some even started their own businesses as a result of having this newfound focus.

As you will read about in this book, learning to both start with WHY and apply the Law of Diffusion of Innovations is how ideas spread and social movements are built. What I did next was an experiment—I applied both these ideas to prove that you didn't need big marketing budgets or huge funding to spread an idea or build a business. And it worked . . . better than expected. My message spread, and not by any of the traditional channels—it spread by word of mouth . . . in a time before mass social media. People who believed what I believed shared the idea with people they liked and cared about. And stranger and stranger things started to happen. It wasn't a book agent but someone else who introduced me to a publisher at Penguin Random House—a publisher who then offered me the opportunity to write this very book.

There was no application process; it was someone else who introduced me to the organizers of TEDxPugetSound, where I got to give a TEDx Talk that would go on to become the second-most-watched talk on TED.com. And it is because I learned how to start with WHY that I am now writing a new foreword for the fifteenth-anniversary edition of *Start with Why*.

In many ways, the world we live in now is quite different from the one when I first wrote *Start with Why*. The global business environment has changed dramatically. Happily, the concept of seeking purpose in our careers, with our teams and at our companies is now a familiar one. Purpose-driven start-ups and B corps are no longer revolutionary; they have become business as usual. Purpose-at-work is now firmly on the map.

As the world continues to change at an increasingly rapid rate, it is more important than ever for companies and individuals to focus on their WHY and use it to guide their decision-making in a complex and distracting world. As we face some of the greatest challenges we have ever faced, we are also in desperate need for better leaders. Leaders who inspire us. Over the past few decades there has been a steady loss of idealism in the world. Unlike John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan, our leaders no longer speak of “world peace” or “peace on earth” as a driving motivation (in fact, even reading those words now sounds a little corny or cheesy). But it is idealism, the ability to start with WHY, that moves us to invent, explore and advance the world forward . . . and feel tremendous inspiration and fulfillment along the journey.

I am so proud and humbled by the impact this work has had in the world and, more importantly, in people’s lives. We decided to publish this fifteenth-anniversary edition to mark the movement that we are a part of. You and me. While I’ve revised the book in simple ways, updated some of the examples and tweaked some of the stories to bring them up to date, the core message and lessons of the book remain the same.

If you are coming to *Start with Why* for the first time, welcome. I hope it will challenge you to view how the world works

through a new lens. If you're revisiting the book for a second or third time, welcome back . . . and thank you for being a part of this movement to inspire those around us.

The more organizations and people there are who learn to start with WHY, the more people there will be who wake up feeling inspired, feeling safe wherever they are and feeling fulfilled by the work that they do. And that's about the best reason I can think of to continue sharing this idea.

Inspire on!
Simon Sinek
January 2025

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INTRODUCTION

WHY START WITH WHY?

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. Although these “natural-born leaders” may have come into the world with a predisposition to inspire, the ability is not reserved for them exclusively. We can all learn this pattern. With a little discipline, any leader or organization can inspire others, both inside and outside their organization, to help advance their ideas and their vision. We can all learn to lead.

The goal of this book is not simply to try to fix the things that aren’t working. Rather, I wrote this book as a guide to focus on and amplify the things that do work. I do not aim to upset the solutions offered by others. Most of the answers we get, when based on sound evidence, are perfectly valid. However, if we’re starting with the wrong questions, if we don’t understand the cause, then even the right answers will always steer us wrong . . . eventually. The truth, you see, is always revealed . . . eventually.

The stories that follow are of those individuals and organizations that embody this pattern. They are the ones that start with Why.

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I.

The goal was ambitious. Public interest was high. Experts were eager to contribute. Money was readily available.

Armed with every ingredient for success, Samuel Pierpont Langley set out in the late 1800s to be the first man to pilot an airplane. Highly regarded, he was a senior officer at the Smithsonian Institution, a mathematics professor who had also worked at Harvard University. His friends included some of the most powerful men in government and business, including Andrew Carnegie and Alexander Graham Bell. Langley was given a \$50,000 grant from the War Department to fund his project, a tremendous amount of money for the time. He pulled together the best minds of the day, a veritable dream team of talent and know-how. Langley and his team used the finest materials, and the press followed him everywhere. People all over the country were riveted to the story, waiting to read that he had achieved his goal. With the team he had gathered, and ample resources, his success was all but guaranteed.

Or was it?

A few hundred miles away, Wilbur and Orville Wright were working on their own flying machine. Their passion to fly was so intense that it inspired the enthusiasm and commitment of a dedicated group in their hometown of Dayton, Ohio. There was no funding for their venture. No government grants. No high-level connections. Not a single person on the team had an advanced degree or even a college education, not even Wilbur or Orville. But the team banded together in a humble bicycle shop and made their vision real. On December 17, 1903, a small group witnessed a man take flight for the first time in history.

How did the Wright brothers succeed where a better-equipped, better-funded and better-educated team could not?

It wasn't luck. Both the Wright brothers and Langley were highly motivated. Both had a strong work ethic. Both had keen scientific minds. They were pursuing exactly the same goal, but only the Wright brothers were able to inspire those around them

and truly lead their team to develop a technology that would change the world. Only the Wright brothers started with Why.

2.

In 1965, students on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, were the first to publicly burn their draft cards to protest America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Northern California was a hotbed of antigovernment and antiestablishment sentiment; footage of clashes and riots in Berkeley and Oakland was beamed around the globe, fueling sympathetic movements across the United States and Europe. But it wasn't until 1976, nearly three years after the end of America's military involvement in the Vietnam conflict, that a different revolution ignited.

They aimed to make an impact, a very big impact, even challenge the way people perceived how the world worked. But these young revolutionaries did not throw stones or take up arms against an authoritarian regime. Instead, they decided to beat the system at its own game. For Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs, the cofounders of Apple Computer, the battlefield was business and the weapon of choice was the personal computer.

The personal computer revolution was only beginning to brew when Wozniak built the Apple I. Just starting to gain attention, computer technology was primarily seen as a tool for business. Computers were too complicated and out of the price range of the average individual. But Wozniak, a man not motivated by money, envisioned a nobler purpose for the technology. If he could figure out a way to get a computer into the hands of the individual, he thought, the computer would give nearly everyone the ability to perform many of the same functions as a well-resourced company. The personal computer could level the playing field and change the way the world operated; one day, he imagined, a single person or small business would be able to compete with a corporation. Woz designed the Apple I, and improved the technology with the Apple II, to be affordable and simple to use.

No matter how visionary or how brilliant, a great idea or a great product isn't worth much if no one buys it. Wozniak's best friend at the time, the twenty-one-year-old Steve Jobs, knew exactly what to do. Though he had experience selling surplus electronics parts, Jobs would prove to be much more than a good salesman. He wanted to do something significant with his life, to "put a dent in the world," as he put it. Building a company was how he was going to do it. Apple was the tool he used to ignite a revolution.

In their first year in business, with only one product, Apple made a million dollars in revenue. By year two, they did \$10 million in sales. In their fourth year, they sold \$100 million worth of computers. And in just six years, Apple Computer was a billion-dollar company with over 3,000 employees. Apple was a unicorn in a time before there were unicorns.

Jobs and Woz were not the only people taking part in the personal computer revolution. They weren't the only smart guys in the business; in fact, they didn't know much about business at all. What made Apple special was not their ability to build such a fast-growth company. It wasn't their ability to think differently about personal computers. What made Apple special is that they were able to repeat the pattern over and over and over. Unlike any of their competitors, Apple has successfully challenged conventional thinking within the computer industry, the small electronics industry, the music industry, the mobile phone industry and the broader entertainment industry. And the reason is simple. Apple inspired. Apple started with Why.

3.

He was not perfect. He had his complexities. He was not the only one who suffered in a pre-civil rights America, and there were plenty of other charismatic speakers. But Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a gift. He knew how to inspire people.

Dr. King knew that if the civil rights movement was to suc-

ceed, if there was to be a real, lasting change, it would take more than him and his closest allies. It would take more than rousing words and eloquent speeches. It would take people, tens of thousands of average citizens, united by a single vision, to change the country. At 10:00 a.m. on August 28, 1963, they would send a message to Washington that it was time for America to steer a new course.

The organizers of the March on Washington did not have the benefit of social media or mass email, nor was there any website to check the date. But on the right day and at the right time, the people came. And they kept coming and coming. All told, a quarter of a million people descended on the nation's capital in time to hear the words immortalized by history, delivered by the man who was leading a movement to change America: "I have a dream."

The ability to reach so many people of different races and backgrounds from across the country and join them together took something special. Though others knew what had to change in America to bring about civil rights for all, it was Dr. King who inspired a country to change not just for the good of a minority but for the good of everyone. Martin Luther King Jr. started with Why.

• • •

There are leaders and there are those who lead. The Wright brothers were not the strongest contenders in the race to take the first manned, powered flight but they led us into a new era of aviation and, in doing so, completely changed the world we live in. With only a very small market share in the United States, and an even smaller percentage worldwide, Apple has never been a leading manufacturer of home computers. Yet the company led the computer industry and other industries as well. Martin Luther King Jr.'s experiences were not uncommon, yet he inspired a nation to change.

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Their goals were not unique, and their systems and processes were easily replicated. Yet the Wright brothers, Apple and Martin

Luther King Jr. stand out among their peers. They stand apart from the norm and their impact is not easily copied. They are members of a very select group of leaders who do something very, very special. They inspire us.

Just about every person or organization needs to motivate others to act for some reason or another. Some want to motivate a purchase decision. Others are looking for support or a vote. Still others are keen to motivate the people around them to work harder or smarter or just follow the rules. The ability to motivate people is not, in itself, difficult. It is usually tied to some external factor. Tempting incentives or the threat of punishment will often elicit the behavior we desire. General Motors, for example, so successfully motivated people to buy their products that they sold more cars than any other automaker in the world for over seventy-seven years. And yet, though they were leaders in their industry, they did not lead their industry.

Great leaders, in contrast, are able to inspire people to act. Those who are able to inspire give people a sense of purpose or belonging that has little to do with any external incentive or benefit to be gained. Those who truly lead are able to create a following of people who act not because they are swayed but because they are inspired. They are able to create a following of people—supporters, voters, customers, workers—who act for the good of the whole not because they have to, but because they want to. Those who are inspired are often willing to pay a premium, put up with inconvenience and sometimes even endure personal suffering. For those who are inspired, the motivation to act is deeply personal.

Though relatively few in number, the organizations and leaders with the ability to inspire us come in all shapes and sizes. They can be found in both the public and private sectors. They are in all sorts of industries—selling to consumers or to other businesses. Regardless of where they exist, they all have a disproportionate amount of influence. They have the most loyal customers and the most loyal employees. They tend to be more profitable and more

innovative than others in their industry. And, most important, they are able to sustain all these things over the long term. Many of them change industries. Some of them change the world.

The Wright brothers, Apple and Dr. King are just three examples. Harley-Davidson, Disney and Southwest Airlines are three more. John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan were also able to inspire. No matter where they hail from, they all have something in common. All the inspiring leaders and companies, regardless of size or industry, think, act and communicate exactly alike . . . and it's the complete opposite of everyone else.

What if we could all learn to think, act and communicate like those who inspire?

I imagine a world in which the ability to inspire is practiced not just by a chosen few but by the majority. Studies show that nearly 80 percent of Americans do not have their dream job. And those who do tend to be of an older generation. If more knew how to build organizations that inspire, we could live in a world where that statistic was the reverse—a world where over 80 percent of people loved their jobs. People who love their work are more productive and more creative. They go home happier and have happier families. They treat their colleagues and clients and customers better. Inspired employees make stronger companies and stronger economies. That is why I wrote this book. I hope to inspire others to do the things that inspire them so that together we may build companies, an economy and a world in which trust and loyalty are the norm and not the exception.

This book is not designed to tell you what to do or how to do it. Its goal is not to give you a course of action. Its goal is to offer you the *cause* of action.

For those who have an open mind for new ideas, who seek to create long-lasting success and who believe that success requires others, I offer you a challenge. From now on, start with Why.

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PART I

A WORLD THAT DOESN'T START WITH WHY

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