

The Power in Asking ‘Why?’

A business book by Simon Sinek is earning acclaim. It points out the power of understanding “why” in your business.

Sinek makes this observation: “All businesses know what they do — products and services. Most are pretty good at how they do it — strategy and tactics. Only a few can truly inspire their employees and their customers by clearly articulating why they do what they do.”

Sinek suggests that once you — or your business — harness the “why” in your efforts and convey that to others, it will elevate your success. In his book, “Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action,” Sinek offers four examples of companies that have cultivated employees and customers extremely committed to the company and its vision.

- Apple: Challenge the status quo.
- Southwest Airlines: “You are now free to move about the country.”
- Disney: Provide good, clean fun.
- Medtronic: Save lives.

What do the four visions have in common? The answer is that they do not describe what the company does; they describe why the company exists.

Influencing behavior

Why is focusing on why versus what so important? Sinek explains that when leaders talk about or explain “what” the business does, employees and customers process what is said in the part of the brain called the neocortex.

The neocortex is responsible for rational and analytical thinking and language. The “what” is understood here, but it does not drive behavior.

Conversely, when leaders explain “why” they do things, employees and customers process what is said in the limbic brain. This part of the brain is responsible for all of our feelings — trust, loyalty, commitment. The limbic brain is responsible for human behavior and decision making.

The “why” resonates in this part of the brain. Only when “why” is clearly articulated can employees experience the emotions that lead to commitment to the vision and passion for the success of the business.

It seems very compelling that business owners and leaders should articulate why the business exists. So, why is it so rarely done? Again, people need to understand how the brain functions.

Articulating vision — the business’s “why” — is difficult because the neocortex has difficulty verbalizing emotions that are in the limbic brain. And, the limbic brain has no capacity for language; language is solely in the neocortex. Thus, successful communication of the vision — the “why” — often requires the use of stories, symbols, logos and images.

Articulating “why”

A quote from “Start with Why” pinpoints the challenge for the owner/leader: “If the leader of the organization can’t clearly articulate why the organization exists in terms beyond its products or services, then how does he expect employees to know why to come to work?”

It is easy to focus on what the business does — raise cattle, grow crops, sell hay, etc. It is much more difficult to articulate the “why.”

Sinek suggests that “why” must come from the founder. It is the reason the founder took the risk and endured the hard work to

start the business. Think about the history of your farm or agribusiness. Why was it started?

Often, that “why” is still present today or has evolved into a specific “why” for the current generation. It needs to be clarified and articulated so all of the workforce, trusted advisors and customers understand it and can become passionate about sustaining the business — is it the lifestyle, is it to secure similar opportunities for the next generation, is it to produce quality genetics that influence the industry?

Sinek argues that the greatest challenge for every business leader is to pass that vision — the “why” — to his or her successor. He gives several examples where businesses have struggled because the leader failed in continuing the “why” to the next generation of leaders.

Specifically, Steve Jobs had to return to Apple to reinstall the “why” in the business. And, Sam Walton’s vision was not about low prices; it was to serve people. He did not, however, pass that vision on, and Walmart changed dramatically after his death.

The bottom line: Think about and reflect on why your business exists. Determine the powerful “why” that has sustained the business over the decades. An even greater challenge is to find ways to articulate this “why” to your family, especially your children, and to your employees, trusted advisors and customers. What stories and symbols can be used to convey the “why”? Then, make the “why” the cornerstone of transitioning your farm or other business to the next generation or successor. **HW**

Editor’s note: Listen to author Simon Sinek share more about his concept “Start with Why”; his 18 minute TED talk can be accessed at [youtube.com/watch?v=sioZd3AxmNE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sioZd3AxmNE).