

With

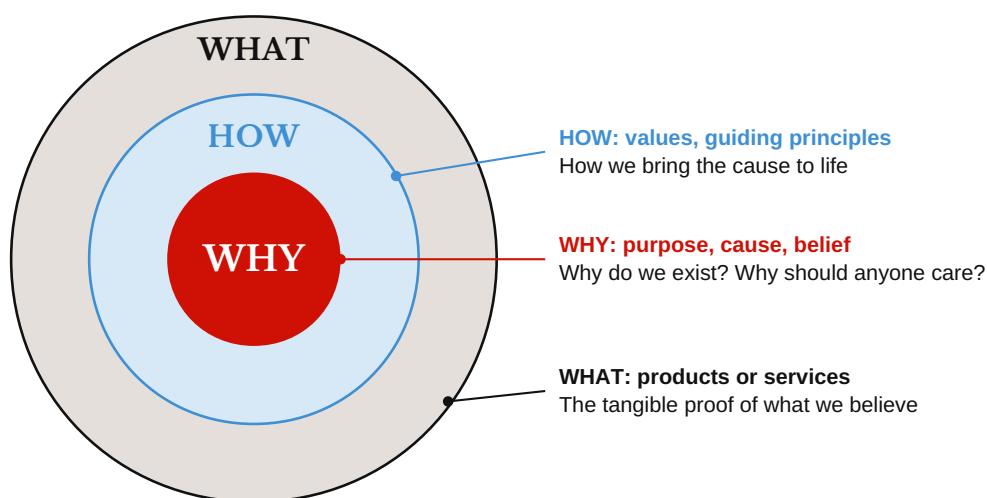
The Golden Circle, 'Start with Why', Simon Sinek (2009)

Watch first

Simon Sinek lays out the Golden Circle in his talk *How great leaders inspire action* (TEDxPuget Sound, 2009), one of the most watched TED talks of all time:

ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

“People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” – Simon Sinek



The Golden Circle: communicating from the inside out

The importance of starting with the why, the belief or purpose – and then moving to the ‘what’, the tangible proof of your beliefs, your purpose, *creates loyalty and inspires people to take action.*

“Going back to the original purpose, cause or belief helps (companies) adapt. Instead of asking, ‘What should we do to compete?’, the question must be asked: ‘Why did we start doing what we’re doing in the first place, and what can we do to bring our cause to life, considering all the technologies and market opportunities available today?’

“Knowing your WHY is not the only way to be successful, but it is the only way to maintain a lasting success and have a greater blend of innovation and flexibility.

When your WHY goes fuzzy, it becomes much more difficult to maintain the *growth, loyalty and inspiration* that helped drive the original success. By difficult, I mean that manipulation rather than inspiration fast becomes the strategy of choice to motivate behaviour. This is effective in the short term, but comes at a high cost in the long term.

Consider the classic Business School case of the railroads.

With

The Golden Circle, 'Start with Why', Simon Sinek (2009)

Case Study

In the late 1800s, the railroads were the biggest companies in the country, having achieved such monumental success, even changing the landscape of America.

Remembering WHY stopped being important to them. Instead, they became obsessed with WHAT they do: they were in the railroad business.

This narrowing of perspective influenced their decision-making. They invested all of their money in tracks and sleepers and engines, but at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new technology was introduced: the aeroplane. And all those big railroad companies eventually went out of business.

What if they had defined themselves as being in the mass transportation business?

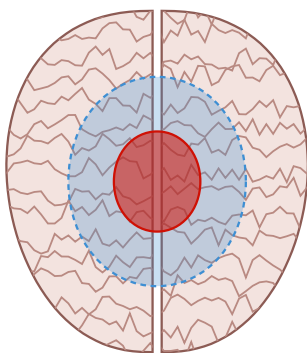
Perhaps their behaviour would have been different. Perhaps they would have seen opportunities that they otherwise missed. Perhaps they would own all the airlines today.

“Instead of asking, ‘What should we do to compete?’, the question must be asked: ‘Why did we start doing what we’re doing in the first place, and what can we do to bring our cause to life, considering all the technologies and market opportunities available today?’” – Simon Sinek

It's biology, not just opinion

The principles of the Golden Circle are much more than a communications hierarchy. Its principles are deeply grounded in the evolution of human behaviour. The power of WHY is not just opinion; it's biology.

If you look at a cross-section of the human brain from the top down, you see that the levels of the Golden Circle correspond precisely with the three major levels of the brain.



● Neocortex = WHAT

The newest area of the *Homo sapiens* brain. Rational and analytical thought, and language.

● ● Limbic brain = HOW and WHY

Feelings such as trust and loyalty. All human behaviour and decision-making, but no capacity for language.

The human brain from above: an illustrative view, showing the three major levels.

With

The Golden Circle, 'Start with Why', Simon Sinek (2009)

The newest area of the *Homo sapiens* brain is the neocortex, which corresponds with the WHAT level. **The neocortex** is responsible for rational and analytical thought and language.

The middle two sections, HOW and WHY, comprise **the limbic brain**. The limbic brain is responsible for all our feelings, such as trust and loyalty. It is also responsible for all human behaviour and all decision-making, but it has no capacity for language.

When we communicate from the outside in, when we communicate WHAT we do first, yes, people can understand vast amounts of complicated information, like facts and figures, but it does not drive behaviour.

But when we communicate from the inside out, when we start with WHY, we're talking directly to the part of the brain that controls decision-making.

There is no part of the stomach that controls decision-making; it all happens in the limbic brain... and the reason gut decisions feel right is because the part of the brain that controls them also controls our feelings.

Our limbic brain is powerful, powerful enough to drive behaviour that sometimes contradicts our rational and analytical understanding of a situation. We often trust our gut even if the decision flies in the face of all the facts and figures.

This is what we mean when we talk about winning hearts and minds. The heart represents the limbic, feeling part of the brain, and the mind is the rational language centre.

Clarity, Discipline and Consistency

For the Golden Circle to work, each of the pieces must be in balance and in the right order.

1. Clarity of **WHY**

It all starts with clarity. You have to know WHY you do what you do.

If people don't buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it. So it follows that if you don't know WHY you do what you do, how will anyone else?

If the leader of an organisation can't clearly articulate WHY the organisation exists in terms beyond its products or services, then how does he or she expect the employees to know why to come to work?

To inspire starts with clarity of WHY.

With

The Golden Circle, 'Start with Why', Simon Sinek (2009)

2. Discipline of HOW

Once you know WHY you do what you do, the question is: HOW will you do it?

HOW are your values or principles that guide how to bring your cause to life. HOW we do things manifests in the systems and the processes within an organisation and the culture.

For values or guiding principles to be truly effective, they have to be verbs. They're actions.

It's not integrity; it's **"always do the right thing"**. It's not innovation; it's **"look at the problem from a different angle"**.

Articulating our values as verbs gives us a clear idea of how to act in any situation. We can hold each other accountable to them, measure them, or even build incentives around them.

3. Consistency of WHAT

Everything you say and everything you do has to prove what you believe.

A WHY is just a belief; that's all it is. HOWs are the actions we take to realise that belief, and WHAT are the results of those actions.

Everything you say and everything you do – your products, services, marketing, PR, culture, and who you hire – if people don't buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it, then all these things must be consistent with it.

It is at the WHAT level that authenticity happens.

What authenticity means is that your Golden Circle is in balance. It means that everything you say and everything you do, you actually believe.

After you have clarity of WHY, are disciplined and accountable to your own values and guiding principles, and are consistent in all you say and do, the final step is to keep it all in the right order.