

5 Key Principles to Harness the Power of Why

Principle 1: Start With Why

Author of Start with Why, Simon Sinek defined what he terms 'The Golden Circle' around six years ago. In essence, it goes like this: everyone knows What they do, some know How they do it, but it's the inspired leaders and organizations that know Why they do it. Knowing Why your organization exists – the higher purpose, cause or belief – acts as the engine for innovation. It's for the leader (the senior manager) to be the guardian of this Why, enabling the team to align and bond around that belief.

The Why is not about profit or growth; those are results. For an organization, the Why has something to do with the human reason the organization was founded in the first place – why the organization exists. When people are viscerally connected to Why, it inspires them to work out How to do What it is they need to do. Why gives purpose, a coherent context and meaning to what we do, and is the catalyst for remarkable achievement. Conversely, without context, any content (the stuff that we do) lacks meaning and brings little lasting fulfillment.

If you haven't seen it, you can check out Simon's 18 min TED talk (the 2nd most downloaded TED talk of all time) by clicking on this link - <http://bit.ly/1dORCqm>

You may also want to check out Simon's online Why Discovery course (<http://startwithwhy.com/WhyUniversity.aspx>), designed for individuals and entrepreneurs to find and articulate their own Why. Save 10% on the course by entering the promo code WHYPROPEL during checkout.

Principle 2: Right-to-Left Thinking

When approaching something new, most of us will look at our experience from the past and apply it to the present problem. It's what we call 'left-to-right thinking'. To achieve extraordinary results, we need an alternative. Right-to-left thinking is where we connect ourselves with the outcome we want to achieve by visualizing what that looks like and feels like. This emotional connection is key, but not enough. We need to make what we commit to that outcome, a deeply held declaration of what we are going to be the source of, and what will inspire others who are similarly motivated.

This commitment then needs to be communicated, passionately and publicly. We call this a Declared Future – and if we start living it now, things start changing around us consistent with that commitment right now. This can sound a little bizarre or ‘soft’ to some who are unfamiliar with it, and yet this is fundamental to extraordinary performance. It’s a very real and powerful approach.

When President Kennedy said in 1961 that America would send a man to the Moon before the end of the decade, he had no past experience to draw on. At that stage, NASA had little idea how to do it. And yet, Kennedy made the commitment and declared it to the world, and it inspired NASA to work it out. Right-to-left thinking is hugely powerful, for an individual or a team – especially when inspired by a higher purpose, a Why.

Principle 3: Adaptive Leadership

A Harvard authority on leadership, Ronald Heifetz, identified that there are two types of challenge we face in business and life: those that are ‘technical’ and those that are ‘adaptive’. Technical challenges are those that are clearly defined and for which we can draw on our experience and expertise to solve. Adaptive challenges are different. These are challenges to which we, and no one else in our team, know the solution. Sometimes, we can’t even clearly express the problem in the first place, so we couldn’t ask anyone else to solve it, even if we knew who to ask. In these circumstances, it’s going to take a different approach.

It’s an approach that requires us to be open to learning and empowering our team to become creative, rather than telling them what to do. As a leader, this may well involve us acknowledging that we don’t know the answer and instead focusing our energy on encouraging a culture within which everyone can help each other to learn their way through the problem. This is what Kennedy did with NASA. As President he didn’t know how to put a man on the Moon and yet he created the environment within which it could happen by empowering NASA to discover how it could be done.

The most common mistake in business is to apply a technical fix to an adaptive challenge. Adaptive leadership is an art and a culture – an art that can be learned to complement management techniques already in place, and a culture that can be fostered. A team that has a culture of adaptive problem-solving is a very powerful and resilient team indeed.

Principle 4: Being and Doing

Part of the key to solving adaptive challenges is to promote an environment in which people can learn their way through a problem and find creative solutions. Often we find ourselves so consumed by activity or ‘doing stuff’ that we tend to forget to pause and consider who we are being. Being is about how we are seen by others, the effect it can have on them and on the outcome. Linking back to the notion of right-to-left thinking, are we being a leader of that outcome we have declared? Or are we simply waiting for others to step up?

High-performing, inspiring and authentic leaders tend to be those who are more willing to let go of who they think they should be, in order to be who they are. In business, if we want to release creativity and breakthrough performance, leaders need to generate the environment in which these can flourish. And this is done by paying as much attention to who they are being, as to what they do.

Principle 5: Relationship

All the key principles discussed so far are brought together by a fundamental 'glue': relationship.

Relationship is the foundation of accomplishment: the deeper and broader the relationship we have with our team (be that business, customers, or family), the more we can accomplish. In business, the most successful team will be led by those who invest time and effort in building relationship within the team, who understand their Why and who have a commitment to the future outcome they have declared.

Importantly, relationship is as much about being with people as it is about doing things. Relationship is built at the water-cooler or over coffee as much as it is while engaged in day-to-day activity – although it's a balance and both are needed. Spending time building relationship is never wasted. It's the foundation for everything else.

[These 5 Key Principles, while each powerful on their own, derive their greatest power when used together. My partner Peter Docker of Why Not Unlimited had the idea to combine these 5 Key Principles and they guide much of the work we do together.]