Book Review

Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action.
Simon Sinek. New York, NY: Penquin Publishers, 2009. 246 pp. ISBN: 1591842808.

REVIEWED BY
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Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action by Simon Sinek (2009) is not a book you might typically read in an assessment context, as this book is about the power of visionary leadership to create organizations that are innovative, inspirational, and successful, and to create quality programs and services that stand the test of time. However, this is not unlike the work of those responsible for assessment in higher education in building a culture of assessment where it is essential to have dedicated leadership that sets priority for assessment from the top, communicates this vision, and then fosters expertise, ownership, and collaboration.

Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action provides great insight into why individuals like Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Wright Brothers and leaders of organizations like Apple and Southwest Airlines have influenced the ways in which we live and see our lives. Sinek posits, and I agree, that what these leaders have in common is that they started with "Why?". These leaders had vision, communicated this vision clearly to others, and found champions to see this vision through. This book is for anyone who wants to inspire others to action, including those in higher education assessment.

Book Summary

In *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, Sinek studies the leaders who have had the greatest influence in the world and discovers that they all think, act, and communicate in the exact same way. Great leaders "inspire people to act" by giving them a sense of purpose or belonging—a call to action (p. 7). In the six sections of this book, Sinek takes readers through the three stages of the framework he calls The Golden Circle, on which great organizations are built. This framework consists of three levels, and the author moves readers though the book and from the center of this Circle out, from why we exist to how we do what we do and finally to what we do. The problem, he suggests, is that most organizations do not know why they exist.

When we understand the vision of an individual or an organization, why they do what they do, we do not need to be manipulated to follow them, to use the services or products they produce. We follow them because we share a similar vision and are loyal to the cause (p. 54).

For example, this messaging from Apple clearly demonstrates this:

Why: Everything we do, we believe in challenging the status quo. We believe in thinking differently.

How: The way we challenge the status quo is by making our product beautifully designed, simple to use, and user friendly.

What: We make great computers. Wanna buy one? (p. 41)
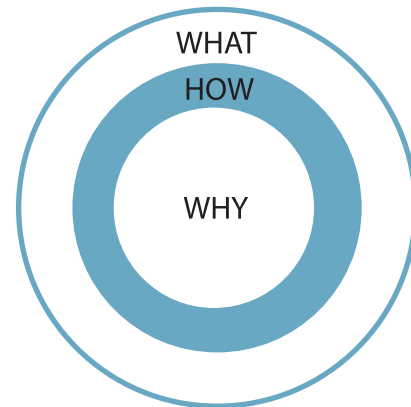
We know why Apple exists and why it creates the products it does. We do not need to be manipulated to follow them, we either share their vision or we do not. And when we do share their vision, we feel like we join a community of like-minded individuals when we use their products.

Sinek found that all great leaders and organizations could clearly articulate why they exist—their purpose, cause and belief. The why then dictated how and what they did. "All great leaders and organizations, regardless of size or industry, act and communicate from the inside out" (p. 41). Those whose visions were unclear described themselves in terms of what they do. They could easily describe their products and services. They could describe the latest innovations they created and the latest changes to their products and services. They might even be able to describe how they do it, but they were unclear as to why.

> *"Sinek found that all great leaders and organizations could clearly articulate why they exist—their purpose, cause and belief...For schools to be effective in building a culture of assessment they need to share a common vision through their shared language."*

Readers move through the book from the inner circle of why to the discipline of how. The how, is how invidiuals will bring action to the belief. The most successful leaders and organizations are those whose behaviors are aligned

and organizations are those whose behaviors are aligned with their vision: they have action-oriented values. "A why is just a belief…hows are the actions you take to realize that belief" (p. 67). Following from how are the results of the actions that are taken, the what, and includes the consistency of everything that is done: creation of products and services, hiring and training of staff, and marketing. There is authenticity when beliefs are aligned with how and what we do. Actions are beliefs made visible. When beliefs are made visible, people perceive a leader or an organization as authentic and trust is established. "When why, how and what are in balance, trust is built and value is perceived" (p. 85). This level of transparency allows others to join in: they clearly see and support the vision. As Sinek proposes:

> The goal is to hire people or to enlist people who share the same passion for the why—purpose, cause, belief. It is in this environment that folks can generate great ideas. Great organizations become great because the people inside the organization feel protected. The strong sense of culture creates a sense of belonging and acts like a net. (p. 105)

As the book winds to a close, Sinek proposes that, in part, what makes leaders great is not only their ability to demonstrate their vision but to have the charisma to engage others to lead. Great leaders create an infrastructure where the why can be tangible. Great leaders move on, but if the infrastructure is created based on vision then others will know how to bring it to life. The what will be a result of their action and will be apparent in the quality of the programs, services and products.

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Building an Assessment Culture

While Sinek did not use higher education as a backdrop for describing the characteristics of great leaders and organizations, it is here that we most need to create the Golden Circle. The Division of Student Affairs at Portland State University (PSU) serves as an example where the Golden Circle is applied in higher education. Building a culture of assessment in student affairs must start with dedicated leadership that sets priority for assessment from the top, that values evidence-based decision making and then communicates this value to staff, and that sets clear expectations for assessment activities and holds units accountable (Lakos & Phipps, 2004; The Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009). Both the Portland State University Vice-President for Enrollment Management and Student Affairs and the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs have set assessment as a priority for the division. They communicated their vision for the division and reinforce the philoso-

phy that assessment of programs and services is essential to informing practice and progress.

"Higher education assessment professionals, like those in corporations, benefit from visionary leadership that can foster environments where vision leads to effective practice and attained outcomes."

The Student Affairs Leadership Council (2009) concluded that to effectively build a culture of assessment universities must create an infrastructure to support assessment efforts and the leader's vision. Universities need to have a dedicated assessment coordinator to provide staff with assistance to plan and conduct assessment projects, to develop assessments and survey tools, to analyze and interpret data, and then to use and report findings; however, the coordinator should not be solely responsible for conducting all assessment. Effective coordinators are able to find champions for the leadership's vision and these champions are provided training and assistance in conducting research and assessment of programs and services, so that they may then assess the quality of their programs and services. The PSU Division of Student Affairs created an assessment coordinator position to provide staff with the tools and resources needed to build assessment competency, and to set timelines and requirements for assessment planning and reporting. Serving as assessment coordinator, I am charged with moving the vision into practice.

PSU has experienced marked progress in their student affairs assessment capacity. The Student Affairs Assessment Council (SAAC), consisting of 24 members representing both Student and Academic Affairs, was formed as a group of champions who support the vision to move assessment forward. Collectively the Council has developed a common assessment language through a dictionary of terms, and has created standardized assessment planning and annual reporting templates. A great deal of work has taken place to remove as many obstacles to assessment as possible by offering a variety of assessment trainings, including webinars, in-house workshops, one-on-one consultations, and all staff training at our fall and winter meetings. Because of a shared vision, the PSU Division of Students Affairs has been able to increase the visibility of their assessment work through forming both internal and external partnerships and by disseminating and sharing our resources. Dissemination activities include the development of the assessment section of the Student Affairs website, and outreach and education outside PSU through the website, Word Press Blogs and Twitter postings.

For schools to be effective in building a culture of assessment they need to share a common vision through their shared language. Staff need to be part of the process

of creating systematic and standardized processes, such as using an assessment planning template that guides their assessment efforts and sharing a common annual report format. Universities that clearly understand why and how to do assessment are then able to experience increased visibility, both internally and externally, by sharing their findings. They create a strong presence in both print and visual media as a means to highlight assessment activities and results. And they are more likely to be actively engaged in professional organizations and conferences, and to foster collaborative partnerships (both internally and externally to campus).

The PSU Division of Student Affairs starts with why in both strategic and assessment planning to address such questions as: Why do you have your program or service? What do you hope to occur in student learning and development as a result of your programs/services and your efforts? What activities occur in your programs/services that will allow for the changes you hoped? Staff are able to articulate why they have their programs and services, and are then able to formulate a mission for how they will carry out their vision, and by what services and activities. Because of this, they are clearer in writing their outcomes because they know what they expect. By starting with why, staff know where they want to end up, and can then proceed backwards toward what needs to be measured and what needs to happen (content) for the outcomes to occur. Staff know that it is imperative that they focus on their why, so that they use their time, money, and staff most efficiently.

Simon Sinek clearly did not write *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* with higher education in mind, as there is not one example of leadership in education. Readers can, however, comfortably make the leap from the corporate setting to higher education, and from traditional assessment books to books such as this because higher education institutions are organizations striving for greatness. Higher education assessment professionals, like those in corporations, benefit from visionary leadership that can foster environments where vision leads to effective practice and attained outcomes. We want the very best for our students and for the faculty and staff who interact with these students. Why not start with why?

References

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