

Vision - Begin with WHY

Excerpted from Dr. Bob Milligan's Learning Edge Monthly Newsletter

I am a reader of business books. As I look around my office, I have two very long shelves of books on leadership, strategy, supervision, etc. Each book has added a point or two to my writing, speaking, and consulting. The book I just finished, however, was different.

Start with WHY: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action by Simon Sinek profoundly deepened my understanding of the power of vision and enables me to more clearly understand and better explain why vision is so powerful.

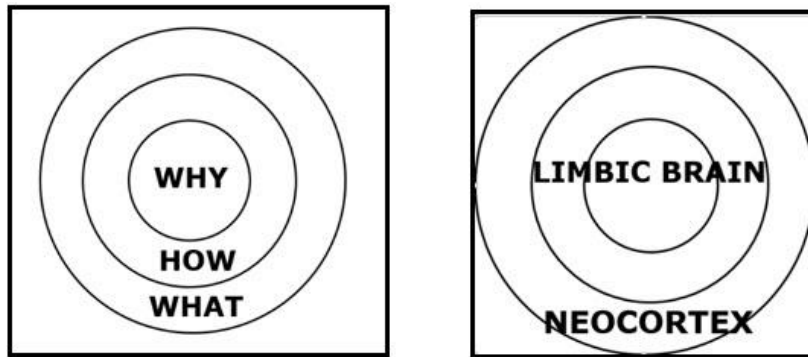
This article is an integration of a book report on Start with WHY into a discussion of the importance of vision. I use many of Mr. Sinek's examples of companies we all know. I also apply the ideas to farms and other family businesses.

Let's start by asking a question: Think of one or more national companies that have employees and customers who are extremely committed to the company and its vision. Why are they committed? Four examples from the book and my experience and their common vision are:

- 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. This is not new to me or to you. What is new from this book is a deepened understanding of why WHY is so important.

The diagram on the left below, referred to by the author as The Golden Circle, illustrates why the leaders of companies like those mentioned above are so incredibly rare and successful. 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!



The diagram on the right above enables us to understand why WHY is so important and powerful. When leaders talk about or explain WHAT the farm or other 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.

When leaders talk about and explain WHY they do things, their 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. As a result, 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. Only the WHY resonates where there will be an emotional reaction.

It seems pretty compelling that business owners and leaders should articulate WHY the business exists. Why then is it so rare? Again we need to understand how the brain functions. The limbic brain has no capacity for language. Language is solely in the neocortex. One result is that we human beings have trouble describing feelings. Try explaining to your spouse why you love her or him.

Articulating vision - the business' WHY - is difficult because the neocortex has difficulty verbalizing emotions that are in the limbic brain. This is why successful communication of the vision - the WHY - often requires the use of stories, symbols, logos, and images. A quote from Begin with WHY articulates the challenge for you 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 in thinking about vision to focus on WHAT the business does - produce milk, grow crops, sell milking equipment. It is much more difficult

to articulate the WHY. Where then does the WHY for a farm or other business come from?

The author argues that WHY comes 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, agribusiness, or golf course. WHY was it started? I expect that WHY is still present today. It needs to be clarified and articulated so all of the workforce, trusted advisors, and customers understand it and can become passionate about sustaining your business.

Mr. Sinek argues convincingly 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.

- Steve Jobs had to return to Apple to reinstill the WHY in the business.
- Sam Walton's vision was not about low prices; it was to serve people. He did not, however, pass that vision on and Wal-Mart changed dramatically after his death.

What does what we have learned for Begin with WHY mean for your farm, agribusiness, or golf course? My reading of this enlightening book suggests the following:

- Think about and reflect on WHY your business exists. Many of you own farms and other businesses that go back several generations. Delineate the powerful WHY that has sustained the business over those decades and even centuries.
- 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, perhaps going back generations, can be used to convey the WHY?
- And the greatest challenge is make the WHY the cornerstone of transitioning your farm or other business to the next generation or the next leader.

Full steam ahead,

Bob
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