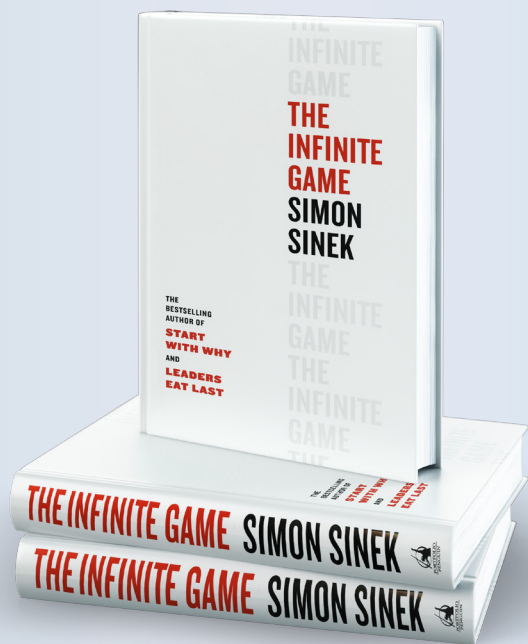


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The Infinite Game

by Simon Sinek

Simon Sinek is an optimist and the bestselling author of *Start With Why*, *Leaders Eat Last*, *Together Is Better*, and *Find Your Why*. He is working to build a world in which the vast majority of us will wake up inspired, feel safe at work, and return home fulfilled at the end of the day. Learn more about his work at SimonSinek.com.

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Play to Keep Playing for as Long as Possible

There's a reason we talk about business in militaristic terms—battles are fought to be won. Leaders plan strategies to gain territory (market share) and to outwit the enemy (the competition). Marketers and salespeople implement campaigns, and any competitor information gained by illicit means is referred to as industrial espionage. Victory is achieved when the enemy is vanquished either through surrender (a merger or takeover) or outright defeat (driven out of business).

In his new book, *The Infinite Game*, Simon Sinek points out a fundamental flaw with this approach. Businesspeople fight to win, but business is inherently unwinnable because there is no defined end point. Personnel may change over time, products and services may come and go, and companies will rise to prominence, maturity, and inevitable decline, but: “There is no such thing as ‘winning business.’”

Games like chess or football are finite in nature. There is a clear end point to be achieved by fixed rules, and there are easily identified winners and losers at the end. The world of business, by contrast, is more contradictory. Leaders play to win but the objective isn't really to win, it's to keep playing (ideally in pole position) for as long as possible. Sinek defines this as an infinite game.

The author's inspiration for this terminology is *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, by James P. Carse, published in 1986. It is that promise of “play and possibility” that Sinek seems to find so attractive, because he presents this perspective of business as an infinite game as the key to transformation from a company of stressed and overworked production drones to a cohesive team of innovative risk-takers. To achieve that transformation, the author proposes five fundamental practices that leaders must follow if they hope to achieve a truly infinite mindset.

1. Advance a Just Cause

What kind of company do you want to build? This is not the same question as Sinek asked in *Start with Why*. That was about establishing a clear purpose in all you do. Answering that question drew on the past—your life experiences and value





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system that led you to this point—your origin story. In this instance, you are looking to the future. If business really is an infinite game, it must be about future potential that can take you in multiple directions. In this game, you're not competing with another company, you're competing with yourself. Sinek cites the example of sharing a cab with an Apple designer who was very nonchalant about Microsoft launching the Zune to compete with the iPod. Apple wasn't worried about the Zune, they were worried about what came after the iPod.

The choice of the term cause is a deliberate attempt to separate from a profit motive or other corporate metric. This just cause “must be durable, resilient, and timeless.” As such, profit becomes a means to the continued pursuit of that cause rather than an end in itself. The inherent service orientation here leads us to a detailed discussion of a broader responsibility of business beyond order fulfillment and customer satisfaction.

What makes a “just cause”? Sinek describes this as: “a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist.” That future state has to be so compelling that your employees will gladly enter the fray on a daily basis, making endless sacrifices for something that they consider to be bigger than themselves. They are acting for something rather than against something else.

Don't confuse this with a run-of-the-mill vision statement that shows up in every annual report alongside mission and objectives. Sinek quotes the vision statement from Garmin, the GPS device maker, that proudly states: “We will be the global leader in every market we serve and our products will be sought after for their compelling design, superior quality, and best value.” This, the author points out, may be a guiding philosophy, but it's not a just cause. Being the best is great for a finite game, but it's no guarantee of success in an infinite game, as Garmin was to discover when its market value fell by two-thirds from 2007 to 2018.

2. Build Trusting Teams

Sinek makes a detailed distinction between performance and trust. Companies hire based on past performance and then treat those hires as expendable resources to be cut loose when financial performance metrics demand. The Human Resources (HR) department is usually complicit in this process. For companies playing the infinite game, this scenario should be reversed. Hire the best people and then trust them to do their jobs. If you find that you can't trust them, then why did you hire them in the first place?

With that trust in place (which, the author admits, will take a while), the role of HR then changes to protecting the people

from the short-term mentality of leaders seeking to boost the bottom line with a quick reduction in labor costs. Employees who feel trusted and protected perform at a higher level, and customers respond to that.

Sinek offers a detailed example of the Marine Corps where the priority in leadership training isn't the ability to overcome any obstacle, but rather to “create an environment in which everyone feels trusted and trusting so that they can work together to overcome any obstacle.” This message is underlined with frequent reiteration of the statement that: “leaders are not responsible for the results, leaders are responsible for the people who are responsible for the results.”

An example of a clear failure to comprehend this message is presented under the heading of ethical fading. The case of Wells Fargo's toxic work culture that prompted employees to open new accounts for customers without their knowledge or permission is covered in detail. The gradual fading of any ethical standards is an inevitable consequence of an oppressive work culture in which any act of malfeasance can be rationalized in the name of employment security. The fact that the financial penalty paid by Wells Fargo—\$185 million—represented less than one percent of their annual profits is indicative of the lack of serious concern for this issue. Sinek takes his clear frustration one step further by calculating the fine in terms of an employee's salary: “It's the equivalent of someone who makes \$75,000 in annual salary being fined \$150. Not much of a punishment.”

3. Study your Worthy Rivals

Closely studying your competition should be second nature for any competent business leader. How you study and which rivals you choose to study will quickly reveal whether you are playing a finite or infinite game. Are you simply following in your competitor's shadow, constantly playing catch-up, or are you examining every detail of what they do to learn as much as you can from them?

Sinek recounts the story of former Boeing Commercial executive Alan Mulally joining Ford Motor Company as its new CEO in 2006. When asked what kind of car he drove, Mulally stated unequivocally that he drove a Lexus, and followed-up with the justification that: “It's the finest car in the world.”

To state that the car you drive is better than any car made by the company you now run might have seemed sacrilegious to some, but Mulally was sending a very clear message—Toyota makes better cars than Ford and we have to fix that. That one statement changed the perspective of the entire corporation. Instead of monitoring every competing car maker as a matter of corporate



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policy, Ford now had a worthy rival. When the stock market crashed in 2008, Ford was the only US auto maker to survive the market downturn without federal assistance. Both General Motors and Chrysler received a government bailout—a move that Mulally wholeheartedly supported. For him, the opportunity to let two competitors go under was worth far less than keeping two rivals around to make sure that Ford stayed sharp.

4. Prepare for Existential Flexibility

Sinek draws a clear distinction between the daily flexibility you need to be good at your job, and the existential flexibility needed to be ready to make a huge strategic shift in pursuit of your just cause. Walt Disney made such a shift when he put everything on the line to elevate cartoons from the black-and-white short of Steamboat Willie in 1928, to the glorious feature-length color of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1937. This was not a ‘bet-the-house’ gamble in pursuit of maximum profit. It was a commitment to providing the audience with an opportunity to “leave the stresses and strains of life behind and enter a more idyllic world of [Disney’s] creation.”

Being willing to risk everything in pursuit of your just cause is only one element of existential flexibility. Finite leaders live in constant fear of having their carefully planned strategy upended by new or disruptive technology. Infinite leaders, who are playing the long game, welcome the disruption and embrace the new technology as an opportunity to improve their product or service and better serve their customers.

Sinek further clarifies that an Existential Flex should not be confused with the passion and vision of an entrepreneurial start-up venture that is fueled more by faith than resources. An Existential Flex happens when a fully formed and mature company recaptures that infectious enthusiasm and passion for something new at a time when the company appears to be doing fine on all other metrics—making sales and profits. To outsiders, the decision to shake everything up may seem crazy at worst and iconoclastic at best, but infinite leaders know that this is the very time that you should reset and reinvent.

5. Demonstrate the Courage to Lead

From the author’s perspective, playing the finite game doesn’t require real courage. Yes, there may well be some risk in expanding into a new market or committing research dollars to the development of a new product, but real courage comes from making a decision that takes your company in a completely new direction. When you decide, “That’s bad for business, and I’m going to do it differently,” you may be impacting your

sales and profitability in the short-term as a sacrifice to the longer-term viability of your just cause.

CVS Caremark made such a choice in February 2014 when the company announced that they would stop selling any tobacco-related products in their stores. They expected the decision to cost them as much as \$2 billion in annual revenue across over 2,800 stores. What would prompt a corporation to make such a decision that was guaranteed to invoke the wrath of Wall Street analysts and pundits? Sinek points to CVS’ Just Cause: Helping people on their path to better health.

The company wasn’t responding to an online campaign or national boycott. Nor were they reacting to bleak market data that called for the end of all tobacco products. They were simply committing to their just cause. As for the Wall Street analysts, the predicted loss of revenue to competing retailers never materialized. As Sinek points out: “The seven hundred packs of cigarettes per week per store didn’t just go somewhere else. They went nowhere. The total sale of cigarettes actually decreased.” Removing the availability of tobacco-related products in their stores encouraged customers to quit the habit rather than get them somewhere else.

Sinek concludes by drawing comparisons between the game of business and the game of life. We can consider our lives as finite, but life itself, as far as we know, is infinite. Changing that perspective, the author argues, might just change your whole life. In any other game you get to choose whether you want to play or not. In life you become a player the moment you are born. You then have a choice to follow a finite path of short-term goals (usually in pursuit of financial gain), or an infinite path in pursuit of a just cause—what Sinek calls a life of service.

Sinek doesn’t present finite and infinite games as being mutually exclusive. Every infinite leader will have to make finite choices in the short-term to pursue their just cause. The message of his book is that the finite mindset is, by definition, restrictive. The rules of the game are decided for you, and if all you do is focus on beating your competition at any cost, you forego so much potential that you could access if you just stopped for a moment and thought about how you want to play. Playing the infinite game isn’t portrayed as easier by any means, but the prospect of leading a company that truly reflects your values, respects the people that work with you, and commits to something more substantive than the almighty dollar, must be worth serious consideration.