

COACHING *for* LEADERS

The Infinite Game

by Simon Sinek

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Dave's Reading Highlights

For all its benefits, acting with an infinite, long-term view is not easy. It takes real effort. As human beings we are naturally inclined to seek out immediate solutions to uncomfortable problems and prioritize quick wins to advance our ambitions.

Finite games are played by known players. They have fixed rules. And there is an agreed-upon objective that, when reached, ends the game.

Infinite games, in contrast, are played by known and unknown players. There are no exact or agreed-upon rules. Though there may be conventions or laws that govern how the players conduct themselves, within those broad boundaries, the players can operate however they want. And if they choose to break with convention, they can. The manner in which each player chooses to play is entirely up to them. And they can change how they play the game at any time, for any reason. Infinite games have infinite time horizons. And because there is no finish line, no practical end to the game, there is no such thing as “winning” an infinite game. In an infinite game, the primary objective is to keep playing, to perpetuate the game.

When we lead with a finite mindset in an infinite game, it leads to all kinds of problems, the most common of which include the decline of trust, cooperation and innovation. Leading with an infinite mindset in an infinite game, in contrast, really does move us in a better direction. Groups that adopt an infinite mindset enjoy vastly higher levels of trust, cooperation and innovation and all the subsequent benefits.

to succeed in the Infinite Game of business, we have to stop thinking about who wins or who's the best and start thinking about how to build organizations that are strong enough and healthy enough to stay in the game for many generations to come. The benefits of which, ironically, often make companies stronger in the near term also.

The true value of an organization is measured by the desire others have to contribute to that organization's ability to keep succeeding, not just during the time they are there, but well beyond their own tenure.

The infinite-minded player, in contrast, expects surprises, even revels in them, and is prepared to be transformed by them. They embrace the freedom of play and are open to any possibility that keeps them in the game. Instead of looking for ways to react to what has already happened, they look for ways to do something new. An infinite perspective frees us from fixating on what other companies are doing, which allows us to focus on a larger vision.

When we play with a finite mindset in an infinite game, the odds increase that we will find ourselves in a quagmire, racing through the will and resources we need to keep playing. And this is what happened to America in Vietnam. The United States operated as if the game were finite instead of fighting against a player that was playing with the right mindset for the Infinite Game they were actually in. While America was fighting to "win," the North Vietnamese were fighting for their lives! And both made strategic choices according to their mindset. Despite their vastly superior military might, there was simply no way the United States could prevail. What brought America's involvement in Vietnam to an end was not a military or

political win or loss, but public pressure back home. The American people could no longer support a seemingly unwinnable and expensive war in a faraway land. It's not that America "lost" the Vietnam War, rather it had exhausted the will and resources to keep playing . . . and so it was forced to drop out of the game.

There are three factors we must always consider when deciding how we want to lead: We don't get to choose whether a particular game is finite or infinite. We do get to choose whether or not we want to join the game. Should we choose to join the game, we can choose whether we want to play with a finite or an infinite mindset.

Any leader who wants to adopt an infinite mindset must follow five essential practices: Advance a Just Cause Build Trusting Teams Study your Worthy Rivals Prepare for Existential Flexibility Demonstrate the Courage to Lead

The scientists were so devoted to Vavilov's vision that they were prepared to protect the seed bank at any cost. Even if the cost was their lives. In the end, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of seeds, tons of potatoes, rice, nuts, cereals and other crops that they refused to eat, nine of the scientists died of starvation.

A Just Cause is a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist; a future state so appealing that people are willing to make sacrifices in order to help advance toward that vision.

A Just Cause is not the same as our WHY. A WHY comes from the past. It is an origin story. It is a statement of who we are—the sum total of our values and beliefs. A Just Cause is about the future. It defines where we are going. It describes the world we hope to live in and will commit to help build. Everyone has their own WHY (and everyone can know what their WHY is if they choose to uncover it). But we do not have to have our own Just Cause, we can choose to join someone else's. Indeed we can start a movement, or we can choose to join one and make it our own. Unlike a WHY, of which there can be only one, we can work to advance more than one Just Cause. Our WHY is fixed and it cannot be changed. In contrast, because a

Just Cause is about something as of yet unbuilt, we do not know exactly the form it will take. We can work tirelessly to build it however we want and make constant improvements along the way.

Many of the organizations we work for now already have some sort of purpose, vision or mission statement (or all of them) written on the walls that our leaders hope will inspire us. However, the vast majority of them would not qualify as a Just Cause. At best they are uninspiring and innocuous, at worst they point us in a direction to keep playing in the finite realm. Even some of the best-intentioned attempts are written in a way that is finite, generic, self-centered or too vague to be of any use in the Infinite Game. Common attempts include statements like, “We do the stuff you don’t want to do, so that you can focus on the things that you love to do.” It may be a true statement, it’s just a true statement for too many things, especially in a business-to-business space. Plus, it’s not much of a rallying cry. Another common generic vision sounds like, “To offer the highest quality products at the best possible value, etc., etc.” Statements like this are of little use for those who wish to lead us in the Infinite Game. Such statements are not inclusive. They are egocentric—about the company; they look inward and are not about the future state to which the products or services are contributing.

A Just Cause must be: For something—affirmative and optimistic
Inclusive—open to all those who would like to contribute
Service oriented—for the primary benefit of others
Resilient—able to endure political, technological and cultural change
Idealistic—big, bold and ultimately unachievable

In the Infinite Game of business, a Just Cause must be greater than the products we make and the services we offer. Our products and services are some of the things we use to advance our Cause. They are not themselves the Cause. If we articulate our Cause in terms of our products, then our organization’s entire existence is conditional on the relevance of those products. Any new technology could render our products, our Cause and indeed our entire company obsolete overnight. The American railroads, for example, were some of the largest companies in the country. Until advancements in

automotive technology and a network of highways offered people a quicker and sometimes cheaper alternative to the train. Had the railroads defined their need to exist in terms related to moving people and things instead of advancing the railroad, they might be the owners of major car companies or airlines today.

Though moon shots are inspiring for a time, that inspiration comes with an expiration date. Moon shots are bold, inspiring finite goals within the Infinite Game, not instead of the Infinite Game.

“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 is a pretty typical-sounding corporate vision or mission statement. This one belongs to Garmin, the maker of GPS devices for everyone from runners to pilots. Though there are dozens of variations, the basic formula is the same—we’re the best and everyone wants our products because our products are the best . . . and “they’re great value” (gotta squeeze that in).

Duke’s own words when he accepted the position revealed the kind of mindset with which he was going to lead. “[Walmart] is very well positioned in today’s economy, growing market share and returns, and is more relevant to its customers than ever,” he said in the press release announcing his new role. “Our strategy is sound and our management team is extremely capable. I am confident we will continue to deliver value to our shareholders, increase opportunity for our over 2 million associates, and help our 180 million customers around the world save money and live better.” Notice the order of the information? Duke’s first thought was growing market share and returns. Though he talks about being relevant to customers he doesn’t actually mention delivering value to them until the end of his statement. It’s a strange quirk of human nature. The order in which a person presents information more often than not reveals their actual priorities and the focus of their strategies. Where Sam Walton started with the people’s interests, Mike Duke started with Wall Street’s.

What happened at Walmart happens all too often in public companies, even the Cause-driven ones. Under pressure from Wall

Street, we too often put finite-minded executives in the highest leadership position when what we actually need is a visionary, infinite-minded leader. Steve Ballmer, as we've already discussed, was one such example. John Sculley, who replaced Steve Jobs at Apple in 1983, was another. Instead of trying to continue advancing the Cause, Sculley was more focused on competing head-to-head against IBM. The damage he did to the culture seriously hurt Apple's ability to innovate. In 2000, after being passed over for the CEO job at GE, Robert Nardelli took over at Home Depot (his nickname at GE was "Little Jack," because of how much he emulated and hoped to succeed Jack Welch as CEO). His relentless drive for cost cutting all but destroyed a culture of innovation at Home Depot. In 2004, the COO, Kevin Rollins, replaced Michael Dell to become CEO of Dell. Focused on growth, he presided over the largest layoffs in the company history, a rise in customer complaints and an SEC investigation over accounting issues. These men were all skilled executives. However, their finite mindsets left them ill qualified for the job they had been given. In fact, Sculley at Apple and Rollins at Dell did such damage to their respective organizations that their more infinite-minded predecessors, Steve Jobs and Michael Dell, were brought back to try to repair the messes they made.

Whether or not he was qualified to be CVO of Walmart, Duke failed to adjust for the role he was given—he failed to champion Sam Walton's vision into the next century. In contrast, Duke's successor, Doug McMillon, could prove to be the CVO that Walmart needs. When his new position was announced in 2013, McMillon said in a press release, "The opportunity to lead Walmart is a great privilege. Our company has a rich history of delivering value to customers across the globe and, as their needs grow and change, we will be there to serve them. Our management team is talented and experienced, and our strategy gives me confidence that our future is bright. By keeping our promise to customers, we will drive shareholder value, create opportunity for our associates and grow our business." McMillon presented his priorities in literally the exact opposite order that Mike Duke had when he stepped up to lead the company five years earlier. McMillon put Sam Walton's vision first. It is exciting to see how he is reequipping Walmart to once again play in the Infinite Game.

It is not technology that explains failure; it is less about technology, per se, and more about the leaders' failure to envision the future of their business as the world changes around them. It is the result of shortsightedness. And shortsightedness is an inherent condition of leaders who play with a finite mindset. In fact, the rise of this kind of shortsightedness over the past 50 years can be traced back to the philosophies of a single person.

For a more infinite-minded alternative to Friedman's definition of the responsibility of business, we can go back to Adam Smith. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher and economist is widely accepted as the father of economics and modern capitalism. "Consumption," he wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*, "is the sole end and purpose of all production and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer." He went on to explain, "The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it." Put simply, the company's interests should always be secondary to the interest of the consumer (ironically, a point Smith believed so "self-evident," he felt it was absurd to try to prove it, and yet here I am writing a whole book about it).

Consider how differently we drive a car we own versus one we rent, and all of a sudden it will become clear why shareholders seem more focused on getting to where they want to go with little regard to the vehicle that's taking them there. Turn on CNBC on any given day and we see discussions dominated by talk of trading strategies and near-term market moves. These are shows about trading, not about owning. They are giving people advice on how to buy and flip a house, not how to find a home to raise a family. If short-term-focused investors treat the companies in which they invest like rental cars, i.e., not theirs, then why must the leaders of the companies treat those investors like owners?

It's not the people doing the job, it's the people who lead the people doing the job who can make the greater difference.

In business, the resistance tends to come from a different place. Leaders of companies tell me that business is supposed to be professional, not personal. That their job is to drive performance, not to make their people feel good. But the fact is, there is no avoiding the existence of feelings. If you've ever felt frustrated, excited, angry, inspired, confused, a sense of camaraderie, envious, confident or insecure while at work, then congratulations, you're human. There is no way we can turn off our feelings simply because we are at work.

Performance can easily be quantified in terms of output. Indeed, in business, we have all sorts of metrics to measure someone's performance, but we have few if any effective metrics to measure someone's trustworthiness. The funny thing is, it is actually incredibly easy to identify the high performers of low trust on any team. Simply go to the people on the team and ask them who the asshole is. They will likely all point to the same person.

It's a phrase I will repeat again in this book: leaders are not responsible for the results, leaders are responsible for the people who are responsible for the results.

The best antidote—and inoculation—against ethical fading is an infinite mindset. Leaders who give their people a Just Cause to advance and give them an opportunity to work with a Trusting Team to advance it will build a culture in which their people can work toward the short-term goals while also considering the morality, ethics and wider impact of the decisions they make to meet those goals. Not because they are told to. Not because there is a checklist that requires it. Not because they took the company's online course on "acting ethically." They did so because it's the natural thing to do.