

Start With Why

The key to developing engaging education lies in first establishing the motivation to learn. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



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Author Simon Sinek's popular TED talk urges companies to "Start With Why" in their quest to maintain sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly complex, confusing, and cluttered world. Sinek argues that firms that focus on what they do or how they do it in communicating their value to customers lose their footing because they are not connecting on an emotional level with their customers.

Sinek describes a simple model he calls the Golden Circle that has "Why" in the middle, "What" in the next ring out, and "How" in the ring after that. In applying the circle model to Apple, Sinek contends that "What" Apple does is make computers, and the "How" is designing them to be easy to use. But what people really connect to, Sinek stresses, is the fact that Apple challenges the status quo in everything it does. It is the emotional connection with "Why" Apple exists—not the product itself—that attracts legions of followers to the Apple store with each new product release. Apple thinks "different," and people connect to the company's "Why" on a visceral and emotional level. As a result, Apple enjoys a position of sustainable and differentiated competitive advantage.

BALANCING CARROTS AND STICKS

Game designers also use a circle model to create compelling—some would argue addicting—gaming experiences. Raph Koster's book, "A Theory of Fun for Game Design," delves deeply into the game mechanics of tokening and leveling to maintain the ever-illusory state of engagement that dwells in the zone between challenge and boredom. In focusing on what he calls the Magic Circle, Koster argues that game design is all about balancing carrots and sticks. The aim is to keep the gamer fully engaged in what Hungarian psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls a state of Flow: the mental state of operation in which a person is fully immersed in, energized by, focused on, involved in, and enjoying the process of activity.

Closer to home, Malcolm Knowles, the father of andragogy and author of "The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species," recognized that as people mature, they:

- Become more self-directed in their learning
- Draw upon their own experience in learning something new
- Are more interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their jobs or personal lives
- Become more problem centered and time sensitive in their orientation to learning
- Are more intrinsically motivated to learn
- Need to know why they need to learn something before committing to doing so

The common thread that links Sinek's observations on strategic competitive advantage, Koster's insights on engaging game design, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of Flow, and Knowles' description of andragogy is one simple word: why!

PAUSE FOR A MOMENT

This edition of *Training* focuses on employee engagement, motivation, and talent management. To survive and thrive in an increasingly complex, connected, and confusing world, Human Resource professionals would do well to heed Sinek's advice of "Starting With Why." Too often, as Learning professionals, we are overly focused on what we will learn and how we will learn it, with very little air-time or focused attention dedicated to why we are learning something in the first place.

By starting with why and working out from the middle of the Golden Circle, we might be able to leverage the insights that consultants, game designers, social psychologists, and adult learning theorists have known for a long time: **The key to developing engaging education lies in first establishing the motivation to learn.** The establishment of motivation can only be achieved by answering that one simple question: *Why?*

So next time you are engaged in a discussion about what learning objectives a program must deliver or how the program might best be delivered, pause for a moment to consider why the program exists in the first place and why people would want to participate in it. Armed with this insight, the better likelihood that the program you develop and the modality of delivery will be optimally attuned to the needs and motivations of your audience. **E**