



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

Why safety stuff matters To lead, you must explain the reasons

Ever wonder *why* your safety program just doesn't seem to sizzle?

Why your latest safety promotion fell flat on its face?

Why you manipulate individuals to be safe?

Why does all this safety stuff really matter anyway?

One of my students called the other day to tell me her company's safety performance was a disaster. Everything



The Golden Circle

she tried just was not working. She told me what she and her group were doing and how they were going about implementing their new safety programs.

After an hour or so, I asked her why she was doing what she was doing. Her incredulous response was, "So no one will get injured or killed, you #@^*&."

She didn't say the last phrase, but I sensed she was thinking it. I asked her, "Is this really 'why' you are doing what you are doing or is this 'what' you expect as the result of what you are doing?"

Having recently read Simon Sinek's book *Start with Why*¹, it was evident to me that my student's story paralleled Sinek's concept of the Golden Circle.

She knew "What" she was doing and "How" she was doing it. However, when it came to "Why," she could only articulate an outcome she was hoping would result from what she was doing.

Drilling down: Why you do what you do

Even though Sinek's book targets leadership roles in organizations, I believe the principles of his Golden Circle model has numerous applications in safety, both from a safety leadership and incident investigation point of view.

Sinek² describes the three levels of the Golden Circle as:

WHAT: Everyone can easily describe the job function they have within an organization.

HOW: Most, not all, can describe HOW they go about doing WHAT they do. Many individuals believe the HOW of WHAT they do is what differentiates them from others.

WHY: Very few people can clearly articulate WHY they do WHAT they do.

As Sinek points out, people generally communicate from the outside in — WHAT to WHY — versus the inside out — WHY to WHAT. The reason: we are more comfortable telling others WHAT we do and HOW we do it, then trying to articulate WHY we do it.

Throughout the book, Sinek uses analogies from great companies with loyal followings to make his point that "...people don't buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it."³ Several of his examples include Apple, Harley-Davidson, Southwest Airlines, and Disney.

Lessons from MacLand

Mac Heads will remember way back in 1997 when Steve Jobs returned to Apple and launched his "Think Different" re-branding of Apple (See endnote for video).⁴ As we have seen, this re-branding has propelled Apple into becoming the third largest PC maker in the World today.⁵ In 2001, Jobs introduced the new iPod in one sentence: "iPod — One thousand songs in your pocket." Not only did the iPod change the way we listen to music, iTunes changed the entire music industry. Steve Jobs is all about "challenging the status quo."

In both instances, Jobs tells his loyal customers, and future loyal customers, WHY they should own his products, not WHAT they are or HOW they work. He doesn't talk about mp3 technology, gigabytes, gigahertz, flash drives, processors, or touch screens. He talks about the experience of owning an Apple product.

The key to inspiring people to believe in your cause, as Sinek points out, is to start with WHY and work yourself from inside the Golden Circle to the outside by covering the HOW and WHAT after. Sinek⁶ defines his terms as follows:

WHY — The WHY is your driving motivation for action. It is your Purpose, Cause or Belief.

HOW — The HOWs are the specific actions to be taken to realize your WHY. They are your guiding principles.

WHAT — The WHATs are the tangible ways in which you bring your WHY to life. They are your tangible proof or results.

To plod or to challenge

The safety profession has reached the tipping point where we can either continue to plod along thinking things are going to be the same into the foreseeable future OR we can start to “Think different and challenge the status quo.”

Safety professionals who think life, as we know it, will remain the same into the future are just not paying attention. If we don’t challenge the status quo, there won’t be a safety profession, as we have known it, within the next ten years, and that’s being optimistic.

Try this out the next time you are faced with having to gain support for a safety initiative. Heck, what do you have to lose? Start by telling the decision-maker WHY you believe the safety initiative is important. Too often we base our persuasion on what we want to prevent (eliminate injuries and illnesses) instead of what we can create (inspire and motivate employees to make a difference by being safe and productive). As Sinek points out, the key to success is getting people to share your beliefs and want to incorporate your ideas into their own lives as WHATs to their own WHYs.⁷ Get them to believe in your cause, your WHY. The WHY is the belief that drives the decision, and the



Employees are sold on safety when they know why safety matters.

WHATs provide a way to rationalize the appeal of the decision.

Try incorporating systems thinking into your repertoire of processes when addressing safety matters. Next time you lead an incident investigation, start by asking yourself or your team, “WHY did this incident happen?” By answering the WHY question first, you will essentially be forced into thinking about the incident in a systemic versus linear fashion.

Indeed, the time has come to “challenge the status quo” and “think differently” about WHY safety is important. I have yet to meet someone who goes to work expecting to get hurt. So why do we advertise our safety programs on the platform of preventing injuries, when we

should be promoting safety in the context of the employees’ WHY?

James E. Leemann, Ph.D., is clinical assistant professor in Tulane University’s Center for Applied Environmental Public Health, and is president of the Leemann Group LLC, Scottsdale, AZ. For more information visit www.leemanngroup.com or email jim@leemanngroup.com.

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