
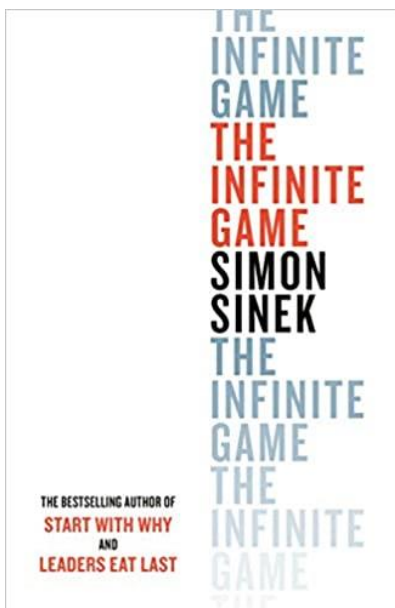


<p>THE CENTRE FOR ARMY LEADERSHIP</p> <p>Book Review</p> <p>No.24 November 2021</p>		<p><i>The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and so further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. Book Reviews are written by and for serving soldiers and officers, summarising a wide range of notable leadership-related books.</i></p>
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Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (2020)

Reviewed by SSgt Ben Calloway



In this book, Simon Sinek carries out an important critique of capitalism today and examines how it negatively affects the longevity of companies, their general benefit and impact on society. Sinek argues that a change in business culture, rather than government intervention, will improve this decline. Sinek builds upon the work of Professor James P. Carse (*Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, 1986) who has suggested that life can be broken down into finite games, where players win, lose or draw, and infinite games – like politics, careers and friendships – where there are no clear winners or losers and no potential end state. Sinek builds upon Carse's work to argue in favour of a stronger and clearer 'Infinite Game' approach in business.

The book starts with a look at the Vietnam War and how the US won almost every battle and yet still lost the war. Sinek explains that the Vietnamese were prepared for a forever war against foreign intervention. The US did not understand the commitment and determination of the Vietnamese and expected a quick win. As the war dragged on, public support for the war effort waned and eventually led to a complete US withdrawal. This, according to Sinek is a clear case of Infinite vs Finite visions.

In the chapter "The Responsibility of Business", Sinek explains how capitalism has changed over the last 50 years and how it has greatly reduced "the average life span of a company from 60 years down to less than 20 years" (p. 70). Sinek refers to Milton Friedman, who argued that in a capitalist system the only social responsibility of a company is to make as much money for the business owner as

possible “within the bounds of the law”. However, as Sinek argues, the bounds of the law are low and do not take into account the safety and wellbeing of individuals and the good of society as a whole.

Sinek explains that Finite Games are played by companies who seek to exploit the consumer for maximum profit as quickly as possible. This often comes at the expense of the product, the workers who produce it, and society. When these behaviours are exposed as unethical, they often damage consumer confidence and inevitably customers end up moving their custom elsewhere.

Infinite Games, on the other hand, are played by companies that are constantly innovating for the future and aim to capture the imagination of their consumer base. Examples of this approach include Tesla and Apple, whose stated objective is to enhance the life of their consumers by creating a trust relationship with the companies product’s and service’s.

After having made a convincing case in favour of an Infinite Game approach, Sinek identifies five essential practices to correct the current trend and to move from a Finite to Infinite Game approach. He dedicates one chapter to each practice:

- *Advance a Just Cause*

The Just Cause is a vision or purpose that inspires the individual to follow. Sinek compares the products created by competing companies, Apple and Microsoft. Whilst the Microsoft product was of a better quality, the company itself failed to capture the imagination of the Apple consumers they were trying to target. Apple, on the other hand, created a Just Cause by being appealing to the individuality of their customer base and by creating a vision of what Apple wanted to produce, a vision customers could identify with. Communication is essential and Sinek provides practical advice on how to use the right language.

- *Build trusting teams*

Sinek views trusting teams as teams where individuals can be truly open about their hopes, fears, doubts and insecurities, with no fear of reprisal or criticism. Diversity of thought and new ideas are welcome. Sinek uses examples from Shell URSA, the Navy Seals and Ford, where trust is more important than performance. Trusting teams work together for the benefit of a higher purpose and share a common vision. Sinek argues that “It is the combination of what we value and how we act that sets the culture of the company. Culture = Values + Behaviour” (p. 121).

- *Study your worthy rivals*

Viewing the competition as a worthy rival changes a business’ perspective. Competitors should not be seen as a threat but rather as an opportunity to examine their strengths, to learn and to improve in those areas. Ideally, according to Sinek, this process should become a habit and should allow infinite growth, both for individuals as well as for the entire business.

- *Prepare for existential flexibility*

In Sinek's view, it is crucial for businesses to remain open and flexible. The examples given to highlight the point are quite stark in comparison: Walt Disney stepping away from Disney Pictures to create Disney Land and Kodak, the company that buried digital camera technology so it could maintain a decade of market domination but is now shadow of its former self. Sinek argues that companies must be prepared to diverge from their initial vision and to change the way in which they operate. In a similar vein, companies must embrace new technologies and be early adopters. This will ensure their survival.

- *Demonstrate the courage to lead*

Companies that are brave and make choices can take a short term hit to their stock value, but they will grow in the long term. Sinek uses the example of CVS, the American chemist company, which in 2014 decided to stop selling cigarettes. This decision was initially viewed as market suicide; it was argued that the customers would go elsewhere. However, customers did not leave CVS, in fact more flocked in. In addition, there was an overall reduction in cigarette sales in the areas where CVS operated. A brave decision became a win for CVS and a win for society.

Sinek argues that in the long term, an ethical business culture reaps greater rewards and returns in the future. Sinek's arguments are compelling. The writing style is clear and accessible. This book inspires its readers, and it gives practical advice about how to move to an Infinite Game approach for the benefit of companies and of society.

Ben Calloway

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