

The Infinite Game Summary

By Simon Sinek

How do you feel about playing the long game? Well, according to Simon Sinek, the bestselling author of numerous business and leadership books, we should all be looking a lot further ahead.

The Infinite Game explores leadership choices, and provides guidelines to implement an "infinite game" plan. Finite mindsets focus on winning, whereas infinite mindsets develop a more significant cause than ourselves or our business. Collaborating with others, around a shared purpose, builds a better resourced, and more caring world.

Sinek wrote *The Infinite Game* in 2019, as part of his own infinite game. His previous books, *Start with Why*, and *Leaders Eat Last*, lay the foundation for this, and his inspiration came from a book called *Finite and Infinite Games*. The author of *Finite and Infinite Games*, James Carse, explains how finite-minded leaders play to win, whereas infinite-minded leaders play to keep playing, ultimately for the good of the game. Building from this, Sinek evaluates finite and infinite leadership within different institutions, and he illustrates how remarkably different the results of each mindset can be.

This summary briefly guides us through the choice to adopt a finite or infinite mindset. As the players in the game of life, this is a crucial choice that we all have to make. Whether you're in business, politics, academics, or a parent, we all need to realize that an infinite or finite mindset will impact others, long after we're gone. So if you're interested in understanding the qualities required for leadership, *The Infinite Game* provides crucial insights.

We All Understand a Finite Game

If you open up any board game, there's usually a pamphlet containing the rules. We understand these games. For instance, if you play chess, Monopoly, or Settlers of Catan, there's a clear set of rules, and the aim is to come first. In the world of sports, the aim is to beat opponents, cross the finish line, get the highest score, or beat the clock. These are finite games, and they're centered around the self, competition, and our innate need to win.

If we apply this to business, currently, many businesses play a finite game, driven by short-term market gains and shareholder demands. They aim to create a winning company in terms of measurable results. But the reality is that each leader's time runs out, but the game lives on. And in business, careers, politics, and parenting, there's no such thing as an end-game winner.

Did you build Lego as a child? Irrespective of age, most of us know Lego. That's because it's a company that has used an infinite mindset for a long time. Instead of always focusing on the balance sheet, it consistently keeps its purpose, which is 'to create innovative play experiences, and reach more children every year.' A truly successful business is one where a succession of leaders play the infinite game, building something sustainable, that will contribute to the welfare of its staff and customers, and benefit future generations.

Many businesses start out playing an infinite game, but that mindset can shift under new leadership. On the other hand, some organizations make a decision to shift from a previous finite mindset, to see what's possible with an infinite mindset.

Finite and Infinite Mindset Leaders

There's a fundamental difference between a finite-mindset leader, and an infinite-mindset leader. Adopting an infinite mindset, requires conscious choice and assertive action, which isn't always easy. Choosing to lead with an infinite mindset, is like deciding to get into better shape, and consistency beats intensity. If we decide to focus on our health, we need to make certain long-term lifestyle choices, and prioritize things such as diet, sleep, and exercise. Similarly, if a business leader wants an organization to have long-term health, he or she will have to do five things - and importantly - do them all.

Number one, advance a Just Cause. Number two, build trusting teams. Number three, study your worthy rival. Number four, prepare for existential flexibility, and finally number five, demonstrate the courage to lead.

So let's unpack these, starting with a Just Cause.

Number One: Advance a Just Cause

In order to be happy, we need a sense of purpose or meaning; businesses are no different.

As an example, let's look at Sweetgreen. Sweetgreen is a quick-serve salad company, with a loyal customer base, who knows that it does more than just serve salads. Customers have the opportunity to live by their particular values, because Sweetgreen's mission is, 'to inspire healthier communities, by connecting people to real food.' They do this by supporting local farmers, and they adapt their menus to what they can source from them at any particular time. They have a very clear Just Cause. Their customers know what Sweetgreen stands for, and in turn, they want to be a part of this purpose.

On a far larger scale, the American Declaration of Independence, was very clear about its Just Cause. The American Declaration of Independence clearly states that, 'all men are created equal.' This simple five-word Just Cause, sets out complex ideals about equality and independence, and has become one of the cornerstones of Western ideology.

When we look at developing a Just Cause, there are a few things that we need to articulate. Firstly, we must stand for something that's inclusive, and exists primarily for the benefit of others. The cause must also be resilient and enduring. And, importantly, the cause should be idealistic, and probably unachievable because of its audacity. So if we were to put this in business terms, a Just Cause is always far greater than the products and services that the company offers. This vision should be recorded, so that clarity of purpose is passed down to the next generation of leaders.

In short, a Just Cause is a vision of a compelling future, making people want to be part of building this future, although they may never see it completed. However, sometimes what looks like a True Cause, is an Imposter Cause. For example, when a social responsibility program is

confused with a Just Cause, or when growth is mistaken for purpose. Perhaps it's just promoting a brand, or trying to hold onto being the best, but a resilient company is structured to last forever. Lego is resilient, but Garmin, which probably had the best GPS in 2007, is now worth less than a third of what its value was. While we could blame cellphone technology for this, the truth is that Garmin continued to focus on a business model, missing out on opportunities to develop new related technology, in line with a clear Just Cause.

Missing the clarity of purpose can be short-sighted, which is evident in a finite mindset. This short-sightedness is also apparent in capitalism in its current form. Sinek suggests that it's 'possible that, for the past 40+ years, we have been building companies, with a definition of business that's actually bad for business, and undermines the very system of capitalism it proclaims to embrace.' In 1970, Milton Friedman, a Nobel-winning economist, argued that the need for businesses to make good returns for shareholders, is crucial. This idea represents a finite mindset. In contrast, Adam Smith, the father of economics and capitalism, had an infinite mindset, stating that a company should always put consumer interests first.

The true notion of capitalism is being undermined, because essentially capitalism is about progress. In its current form, capitalism is broken because it serves those who play the system for personal gain. The Economic Policy Institute reports that, in 1978, the average CEO's pay was 30 times more than the average worker earned. By 2016, this had increased by over 800%, and was 271 times the average worker's pay. And when executive packages are linked to short-term market performance, the likelihood of layoffs, cost-cutting, and lower salaries increases. However, in the infinite game, people associated with the company - both internal and external - are protected. And of course

profit matters, but it's not an end in itself. Rather, profit is there to protect everyone associated with the business so that the infinite game can play out.

Profit should never be the core focus of a business, because when results are the only thing that count, it's likely that over time, we'll witness ethical fading. Ethical fading is where people use unethical means to meet stringent work targets. For example, at Wells Fargo Bank, management seemed to turn a blind eye, to evidence that their corporate culture encouraged unethical, and even criminal behavior. And, ethical fading isn't just one event; it's a toxicity that builds over time. Minor transgressions become common, little white lies are acceptable, and self-deception is the name of the game. Ethical fading is fundamentally a people problem, and it's the fault of poor leadership. An example of unethical leadership, was when Mylan, a company that produces the EpiPen brand, a life-saving autoinjector for allergies, was found guilty of unethical pricing. In response, the CEO stated: 'I wasn't going to be apologetic for operating in the system that existed.'

Simply put, if we have a flawed definition of capitalism, it's easy for businesses to play according to a broken set of rules. And if you're a finite leader, it's not your problem, as long as you're raking in the profits. The next CEO or the next generation can fix it. However, leaders who play the infinite game, can see beyond profits, and are accountable to their purpose and employees. Patagonia, an outdoor clothing company, are activists for change, but they work within the system. Their aim is to try to make a great product, in an environmentally friendly way. This infinite mindset was conveyed by their CEO, who said, 'we plan to be here in the next one hundred years, so we think about long-term results.'

So business leaders need to be keepers of the cause. Many businesses,

like Walmart, had founders with a clearly articulated Just Cause. Subsequently, more finite-minded CEOs derailed this by focusing first and foremost on results, threatening the business's long-term sustainability. Inevitably there was some downward spiraling, until different mindsets gained traction again. We need to remember that words matter. For instance, we know what the job of a CFO (Chief Financial Officer) and COO (Chief Operating Officer) involves. The words, 'financial' and 'operating' tell us this. But what do the words CEO (Chief Executive Officer) imply? Sinek suggests that CVO, (Chief Vision Officer) actually says far more about the core responsibility of a leader. Hence, we need to remember, that when it comes to leading, we need to focus on our Just Cause, and have a keen sense of vision.

Number Two: Build Trusting Teams

You can't build on a vision without a strong and trusting team. One of the fundamental aspects of being a leader is looking after employees. This should be at the core of any business, because if employees aspire to a company's Just Cause, and feel as if they're part of the team, they will want to do the right thing.

Who would expect a group of hardy employees on an oil rig, to be willing to sit in a circle and talk about emotions? What possible benefit could there be? Shell Oil Company knew that safety is a significant issue on the rigs. Hence, they developed a group process, that encouraged staff to shift from transactional and superficial communication, to interaction leading to deeper trust and more vulnerability. This allowed them to ask for help, and to be able to admit to mistakes.

Through this process, Shell discovered that trusting teams are a fundamental part of an infinite game, and on an oil rig, trust saves lives.

After conducting workshops across the company, Shell URSA had one of the best safety records in the industry, and after conducting workshops across the company, Shell reported that accidents declined by 84%. This can be further expanded when we look at the Navy SEALs. Overall performance is crucial in life or death situations, yet, they value trust above performance.

Number Three: Study the Worthy Rival

Sun Tzu says, 'know your enemy.' In fact, he actually said something a lot more eloquent, he said, 'if you know the enemy and yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not your enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither your enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.'

This isn't to say that opponents or competitors are necessarily enemies, but in the infinite game, you need to be acutely aware of who your opponents are. The truth is that all games have rivals, so the infinite game requires us to study the worthy rival. The focus on the notion of what constitutes a worthy rival is important here.

Let's think about it this way. Do you play a competitive sport? How do you feel when you face someone who gives you a run for your money?

The suggestion here, is that instead of seeing the opposition as a competitor, we should regard them as worthy rivals, who could help us to improve and up our game. As an opponent they may do some things as well as us, some things better, and some things not as well. Considering one's worthy rival, allows us to gain insight into how we can improve and strengthen our weak areas. Furthermore, they remind us to be humble

and agile, because they show us that there's room for all of us in the game, and ultimately, sport benefits when there are more people playing.

IBM showed up in the personal computer space, where Apple had the most significant share. What did Apple do? They put out an ad in *The New York Times* welcoming IBM into the space, confirmed their Just Cause, and signed off by saying, 'Welcome to the task.' This is the epitome of acknowledging a worthy rival.

Number Four: Prepare for Existential Flexibility

Who wouldn't enjoy escaping into a fantasy world for a while; far from the harsh realities of everyday life?

Paying a visit to Disneyland is precisely that. Walt Disney risked everything when he left Walt Disney Productions, wanting to find another way to further his Just Cause. This defines existential flexibility, because it shows that an infinite player is disruptive, and is able to change course significantly in the pursuit of a Just Cause. Infinite leaders flex - and this practice is neither reactive nor defensive - and then they inspire others to join the trusted team. It's an existential flex because of the huge uncertainty, as well as the threat of possible failure. However, the team looks beyond the industry's confines, and envisions what it could provide to a broader community. And as Walt Disney intended, and as any true Infinite Leader would understand, Disneyland will always be a work in progress.

Finally, Number Five: Courage to Lead

It takes extreme bravery to keep holding onto a Just Cause. Holding onto

ideas that may seem idealistic, and are very often audacious, means you have to take a risk. Very often a leader's job is at stake, and taking risks for an unknown future, and seeing a world beyond what's prescribed by societal or capitalist norms, takes extraordinary vision.

When Apple decided to pivot in 1979, threatening the stability of the company, Steve Jobs said: 'Better we should blow it up than someone else.' The key message here is that if leaders are not prepared to challenge convention, and risk the wrath of Wall Street, then their Just Cause is just more feel-good marketing.

In Conclusion

Society relies on business and politicians to play the infinite game. A study by McKinsey, indicates that since the 1950s, the average lifespan of an S&P 500 company has dropped, from 61 years, to less than 18 years. One contributing factor, could be that leaders are not building companies that last. If leaders aspire to a Just Cause, and share this with their teams, we can build sustainable companies that create a better world.

There are three crucial aspects of the infinite Game. These are, to advance a purpose, to protect people, and finally to generate a profit. Sinek argues that: 'The responsibility of business is to use its will and resources, to advance a cause greater than itself, protect the people and places in which it operates, and generate more resources, so that it can continue doing all these things for as long as possible.'

So maybe it's time to throw out the rulebook, develop your Just Cause, and focus on developing a vision for the future. Because, after all, the game has no end, and shifting focus will create a more meaningful legacy.