

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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A trained ethnographer, Simon Sinek has discovered some remarkable patterns about how people think, act and communicate, and the environments in which they operate at their natural best. He has devoted his life to sharing his thinking in order to help other leaders and organizations inspire action.

The Infinite Game

THE SUMMARY

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Chapter 1: Finite and Infinite Games

If there are at least two players, a game exists. There are two kinds of games: finite games and infinite games. Finite games are played by known players. They have fixed rules. There is an agreed-upon objective that, when reached, ends the game. Football, for example, is a finite 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. If they choose to break with convention, they can. The manner in which each player chooses to play is entirely up to them. They can change how they play the game at any time, for any reason. Infinite games have infinite time horizons. There is no finish line, no practical end to the game, so 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.

The game of business fits the very definition of an infinite game. We may not know all of the other players and new ones can join the game at any time. All the players determine their own strategies and tactics and there is no set of fixed rules to which everyone has agreed, other than the law (and even that can vary from country to country). Unlike a finite game, there is no predetermined beginning, middle or end to business.

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Although many of us agree to certain time frames for evaluating our own performance relative to that of other players—the financial year, for example—those time frames represent markers within the course of the game. None marks the end of the game itself. The game of business has no finish line.

In the Infinite Game, the true value of an organization cannot be measured by the success it has achieved based on a set of arbitrary metrics over arbitrary time frames. 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. While a finite-minded leader works to get something from their employees, customers and shareholders in order to meet arbitrary metrics, the infinite-minded leader works to ensure that their employees, customers and shareholders remain inspired to continue contributing with their effort, their wallets and their investments. Players with an infinite mindset want to leave their organizations in better shape than they found them.

In the Infinite Game of business, when our leaders maintain a finite mindset or put too much focus on finite objectives, they may be able to achieve a number one ranking with an arbitrary metric over an arbitrary time frame. That doesn't necessarily mean they are doing the things they need to ensure that the company can keep playing for as long as possible. In fact, more often than not, the things they do harm the company's inner workings and, without intervention, accelerate the company's ultimate demise.

Often finite-minded leaders place unbalanced focus on near-term results, and employ any strategy or tactic that will help them make the numbers. Some favorite options include reducing investment in research and development, extreme cost cutting, regular rounds of layoffs, opting for cheaper, lower quality ingredients in products, cutting corners in manufacturing or quality control, growth through acquisition and stock buybacks. These decisions can, in turn, shake a company's culture. People start to realize that nothing and no one is safe. In response, some instinctually behave as if they were switched to self-preservation mode. They may hoard information, hide mistakes and operate in a more cautious, risk averse way. To protect themselves, they trust no one. Others double down on an only-the-fittest-survive mentality. Their tactics can become overly aggressive. Their egos become unchecked. They learn to manage up the hierarchy to garner favor with senior leadership while, in some cases, sabotaging their own colleagues. To protect themselves, they trust no one. Regardless of whether they are in self-preservation or self-promotion mode, the sum of all of these behaviors contributes to a general decline in cooperation across the company, which also leads to stagnation of any truly new or innovative ideas.

Maintaining an infinite mindset is hard. Very hard. It is to be expected that we will stray from the path. We are human and we are fallible. We are subject to bouts of greed, fear, ambition, ignorance, external pressure, competing interests, ego... the list goes on. To complicate matters further, finite

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games are seductive; they can be fun and exciting and sometimes even addictive. Just like gambling, every win, every goal hit releases a shot of dopamine in our bodies, encouraging us to play the same way again to try to win again. We must be strong to resist that urge.

Chapter 2: Just Cause

When we play in a finite game, we play the game to win. Even if we hope to simply play well and enjoy the game, we do not play to lose. The motivation to play in an infinite game is completely different—the goal is not to win, but to keep playing. It is to advance something bigger than ourselves or our organizations. Any leader who wishes to lead in the Infinite Game must have a crystal-clear Just Cause. 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.

“Winning” provides a temporary thrill of victory; an intense, but fleeting, boost to our self-confidence. None of us is able to hold on to the incredible feeling of accomplishment for that target we hit, promotion we earned or tournament we won a year ago. Those feelings have passed. To get that feeling again, we need to try to win again. However, when there is a Just Cause which is a reason to come to work that is bigger than any particular win, our days take on more meaning and feel more fulfilling. They promote feelings that carry on week after week, month after month, year after year. In an organization that is only driven by the finite, we may like our jobs some days, but we will likely never love our jobs. If we work for an organization with a Just Cause, we may like our jobs some days, but we will always love our jobs. As with our kids, we may like them some days and not others, but we love them every day.

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 which 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.

Think of the WHY like the foundation of a house; it is the starting point. It gives whatever we build upon it strength and permanence. Our Just Cause is the ideal vision of the house we hope to build. We can work a lifetime to build it and still we will not be finished. However, the results of our work help give the house form. As it moves from our imagination to reality it inspires more people to join the Cause and continue the work...forever.

A Just Cause is a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist. In order for a Just Cause to provide direction for our work, to inspire us to sacrifice, and to endure not just in the present but for lifetimes beyond our own, it must meet five standards. Those who are unsure whether their purpose, mission or vision statement is a Just Cause or those interested in leading with a Just Cause can use these standards as a simple test.

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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

A Just Cause that is preserved on paper can be handed down from generation to generation; a founder's instinct cannot. Like the Declaration of Independence, a written statement of Cause dramatically increases the chances that the Cause will survive to guide and inspire future generations beyond the founders and those who knew the founders. It's the difference between a verbal contract and a written contract. Both are legal and enforceable, but when a contract is written it prevents any confusion or disagreement about the terms of the deal...especially for people who weren't there when the deal was made.

A written cause works like a compass. With a compass in hand, each succession of leaders, their gaze looking beyond the horizon, can more easily navigate the technologies, politics and cultural norms of the day without the founder present.

Chapter 3: Cause. No Cause.

There are a few main reasons we fail to put forward a true Just Cause. Sometimes, the visionary, Cause-driven leader adopts a false cause by accident because they are struggling to find the words to embody what they imagine for the future. In other cases, the leader wants people to believe that they are Cause-driven when in fact, they have no vision at all. Common "imposter causes" include things like moon shots, a drive to "be the best," or mistaking "growth" for purpose. It is also common to find organizations confusing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) program for a Just Cause. Any of these may or may not work in the finite game, but they absolutely cannot lead an organization to survive and thrive in the Infinite Game.

A true Just Cause is deeply personal to those who hear it, and it must be deeply personal to those who espouse it. The more personal it is for people, the more likely our passions will be stoked to help advance it. If the words of a Just Cause are used simply to boost a brand image, attract passionate employees or help drive some near-term goal, like a purchase, a vote or support for the company, the impact will be short lived. As soon as we start working at an organization or interacting with its people, we will quickly find out whether they are offering us a Just Cause they truly believe in or just hollow words.

The so-called moon shot is often invoked by leaders who are trying to inspire their people to reach for something that seems impossible. Moon shots pass most of the tests of a Just Cause, so they usually work. In the case of Kennedy's actual moon shot, it is affirmative and specific. It is inclusive,

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service oriented and definitely worthy of sacrifice. However, it is not infinite. No matter how hard the challenge, no matter how impossible it seemed, the moon shot was an achievable, finite goal. More than an ideal future state, it is what Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, calls a BHAG, a big, hairy, audacious goal. It's easy to mistake a BHAG for a Just Cause because they can indeed be incredibly inspiring and can often take many years to achieve. But after the moon shot has been achieved the game continues. Simply choosing another big, audacious goal is not infinite play, it's just another finite pursuit.

Indeed, leaping from goal to goal can be fun for a while, but if that's all there is, over time the thrill of each achievement becomes less, well, thrilling. I often meet senior executives who seem to suffer from a kind of "finite exhaustion." They did well and were paid well for hitting each goal set for them so they kept repeating that pattern. At some point in their careers, they traded any fantasy of feeling like their work would contribute to something bigger than themselves for a rat race or a hamster wheel or some other unfulfilling running rodent metaphor. Racking up finite wins does not lead to something more infinite.

The question that a Just Cause must answer is: what is the infinite and lasting vision that a moon shot will help advance? A Just Cause is the context for all our other goals, big and small, and all of our finite achievements must help to advance the Just Cause. Indeed, if we become overly concerned with a finite goal, no matter how inspiring, we leave ourselves open to making decisions that are only good for the finite but may do damage to the infinite.

Chapter 4: Keeper of the Cause

Words matter. They give direction and meaning to things. Pick the wrong words, intentions change and things won't necessarily go as hoped or expected. Martin Luther King Jr. gave the *I have a dream* speech, for example. He didn't give the *I have a plan* speech. There is no doubt he needed a plan. We know he had meetings to discuss the plan. But as the "CEO" of the civil rights movement, Dr. King was not responsible for making the plan. He was responsible for the dream and making sure those responsible for the plans were working to advance the dream.

Leaders in the Infinite Game will be better equipped to fulfill their responsibilities if they understand that they are stepping into the role of a "Chief Vision Officer," or CVO. That is the primary job of the person who sits at the pointy end of the spear. They are the holder, communicator and protector of the vision. Their job is to ensure that all clearly understand the Just Cause and that all other C-level executives direct their efforts to advancing the Cause inside the organization. It's not that an infinite-minded leader is entirely unconcerned with the organization's finite interests. Rather, as the keeper of the Cause, they take accountability for deciding when short-term finite costs are worth it to advance the infinite vision. They think beyond the bottom line.

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A CVO is not an operations or a finance job. Whereas CVOs focus on up and out, CFOs and COOs focus on down and in. One requires eyes on the infinite horizon; the other requires eyes on the business plan. One envisions the very distant, abstract future. The other sees the steps to take in the tangible near term.

This is one of the reasons the best organizations are often run in tandem by the combination of the keeper of the vision (CVO) and the operator (the CFO or COO). It is a partnership of complementary skill sets. We are more likely to get these partnerships if we adjust the formal hierarchies in our companies to promote the right mindset to fit the purpose of the job. This means that we need to stop seeing the CEO as number one and the CFO or COO as number two and start thinking of them as vital partners in a common cause. One does not know how to do the other's job better than they do (which is why they need each other.)

Though the CVO is more often in the spotlight, and though the CVO is often given more of the praise, publicly at least, both players must have the strength of ego to know it is a trusted partnership. The CVO knows they cannot advance their vision alone and need someone by their side. The COO or CFO knows that their skills can work to vastly greater scale and meaning if they are applied to help advance an infinite Just Cause; something bigger than themselves or the company. When these partnerships work, the CVO and the COO or the CFO spend more time thanking and celebrating each other than competing for attention.

Chapter 5: The Responsibility of Business (Revised)

In a watershed article from 1970, Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, who is considered one of the great theorists of today's form of capitalism, laid out the foundation for the theory of shareholder primacy that is at the heart of so much finite-minded business practice today. According to Friedman, the sole purpose of business is to make money and that money belongs to shareholders. These ideas are now firmly ingrained in the zeitgeist. Today it is so generally accepted that the "owner" of a company sits at the top of the benefit food chain and that business exists solely to create wealth that we often assume that this was always the way that the game of business was played and is the only way it can be played. Except it wasn't...and it isn't.

The finite-minded form of capitalism that exists today bears little resemblance to the more infinite-minded form that inspired America's founders (Thomas Jefferson owned all three volumes of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*) and served as the bedrock for the growth of the American nation. Capitalism today is, in name only, the capitalism that Adam Smith envisioned over 200 years ago. It looks nothing like the capitalism practiced by companies like Ford, Kodak and Sears in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, before they too fell prey to finite thinking and lost their way. What many leaders in business practice these days is more of an abuse of capitalism, or "capitalism abuse." Like in the case of alcohol abuse, "abuse" is defined as improper use of something or to use something for a reason other than that for which it was intended. If capitalism was intended to benefit the consumer and the leaders of companies were to be the stewards of something greater than themselves, they are not using it that way today.

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It doesn't take an MBA to understand why. As Dr. Stout explains in her book, *The Shareholder Value Myth*, "If 80 percent of the CEO's pay is based on what the share price is going to do next year, he or she is going to do their best to make sure that share price goes up, even if the consequences might be harmful to employees, to customers, to society, to the environment or even to the corporation itself in the long-term." When we tie pay packages directly to stock price, it promotes practices like closing factories, keeping wages down, implementing extreme cost cutting and conducting annual rounds of layoffs—tactics that might boost the stock price in the near term, but often do damage to an organization's ability to survive and thrive in the Infinite Game.

Finite-focused leaders are often loath to sacrifice near-term gains, even if it's the right thing to do for the future, because near-term gains are the ones that are most visible to the market. The pressure this mindset exerts on others in the company to focus on the near-term often comes at the detriment of the quality of the services or the products we buy.

The call to abandon Milton Friedman's style of business, like any challenge to any status quo, can come from the people or from the leaders. From outside or from inside. Take heed of the red flags all around us. The rise of a populist voice in America and around the world is growing. All those in a seat of power—be they in business or in politics—are in a position to effect change. Make no mistake, change is coming because that's how the Infinite Game works. This finite system we have now will run itself dry of will and resources eventually. It always does. Though some may enrich themselves with money or power for now, the system cannot survive under its own weight. If history and almost every stock market crash is any indicator, imbalance is a bitch.

Friedman proposed that a business has a single responsibility—profit; a very finite-minded view of business. We need to replace Friedman's definition with one that goes beyond profit and considers the dynamism and additional facets that make business work. In order to increase the infinite value to our nation, our economy and all the companies that play in the game, the definition of the responsibility of business must:

1. Advance a purpose. Offer people a sense of belonging and a feeling that their lives and their work have value beyond the physical work.
2. Protect people. Operate our companies in a way that protects the people who work for us, the people who buy from us and the environments in which we live and work.
3. Generate profit. Money is fuel for a business to remain viable so that it may continue to advance the first two priorities.

Simply put, 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 those things for as long as possible. An organization can do whatever it likes to build its business so long as it is responsible for the consequences of its actions.

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Where Friedman believed the results of our hard work should be for the primary benefit of an elite ruling class (the owner), the more infinite-minded leader would ensure that, so long as there are shared goals, all who contribute will benefit across all three pillars. We are all entitled to feel psychologically protected at work, be fairly compensated for our effort and contribute to something bigger than ourselves. These are our inalienable rights. Business, like any infinite pursuit, is a more powerful force when it is empowered for the people, by the people. Disruption is not going away anytime soon, that's not going to change. How leaders respond to it, however, can. Where Friedman's finite definition of the responsibility focuses on maximizing resources, a revised infinite definition also considers the will of the people.

Chapter 6: Will and Resources

In any game, the two currencies required to play are will and resources. Resources are tangible and easily measured. When we talk about resources, we're usually talking about money. Depending on an organization's preferences or the standards of the day, those resources can be counted in multiple ways—revenues, profit, EBITDA, EPS, cash flow, venture capital, private equity, stock price and so on. Resources generally come from outside sources, like customers or investors, and represent the sum of all the financial metrics that contribute to the health of the organization. Will, in contrast, is intangible and harder to measure.

When we talk about will, we're talking about the feelings people have when they come to work. Will encompasses morale, motivation, inspiration, commitment, desire to engage, desire to offer discretionary effort and so on. Will generally comes from inside sources like the quality of leadership and the clarity and strength of the Just Cause. Will represents the sum of all the human elements that contribute to the health of the organization.

All leaders, whether operating with a finite or infinite mindset, know resources are essential. Both finite- and infinite-minded leaders agree that will is also essential. I have yet to meet any CEO who thinks their people are unimportant. The problem is, will and resources can never be equally prioritized. There are always circumstances in which one is pitted against the other, times in which a leader must choose which one they are willing to sacrifice. The question is, which one will they choose? Every leader has their bias.

The finite-minded leader tends to show a bias for the score. As a result, they often opt for choices that demonstrate results in a short time frame, even if doing so, "regrettably," comes at a cost to the people. These are leaders who, during hard times, for instance, will turn first to layoffs and extreme cost cutting measures rather than explore alternatives that may not demonstrate the same immediate results, even if they have longer-term benefits. If a leader has a bias for resources, it is much easier for them to calculate the immediate savings of reducing 10 percent of their workforce next week than it is to choose an option in which the savings take longer to hit the balance sheet.

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Infinite-minded leaders, in contrast, work hard to look beyond the financial pressures of the current day and put people before profit as often as possible. In hard times, they are less likely to look at their people as just another expense to be cut and more willing to explore other ways to save money, even if the results may take longer to realize. The infinite-minded leader may opt for furloughs instead of lay-offs to help manage the resources. An example might be requiring every employee to take two or three weeks of unpaid time off. Though people may be asked to sacrifice some money, everyone keeps their job. When a group shares in the suffering, it actually brings a team together. It is the same reason people come together after a natural disaster. However, when some are forced to bear an unbalanced amount of the burden, it can rip a culture apart.

Thinking beyond the hard times, an infinite-minded leader is okay to wait the quarter or the year or more for the savings to accumulate if it means safeguarding the will of the people. They understand that the will of their people is the thing that drives discretionary effort, as well as problem solving, imagination and teamwork—all things essential for surviving and thriving in the future. The value of strong will over resources simply cannot be underestimated.

When those with a bias for the resources hear folks like me talk about the need to put people before profit, the hair on the back of their necks stands up. What they hear is that I think the money is not important. False. What they hear is that I don't think they care about their people. Also false. It's not an either-or choice. The bias doesn't even need to be extreme.

One reason companies that operate with a bias for will ultimately fare better in the Infinite Game has to do with what we can control. Though we have control over how we spend or manage our money, we have a lot less control over how we make it. Politics, economic cycles, market fluctuations, the actions of other players, customer preferences, technological advancements, the weather and all other forces can wreak havoc with our ability to amass resources. Leaders can exert only limited control over any of these things. However, leaders have near total control over the source of will. Will is generated by the company culture.

Unlike resources, which are ultimately limited, we can generate an endless supply of will. For this reason, organizations that choose to operate with a bias for will are ultimately more resilient than those who prioritize resources. When hard times strike (and hard times always strike), in companies with a bias for will, the people are much more likely to rally together to protect each other, the company, the resources and their leaders. Not because they are told to, but because they choose to. This is what happens when the will of the people is strong.

Chapter 7: Trusting Teams

There is a difference between a group of people who work together and a group of people who trust each other. In groups of people who simply work together, relationships are mostly transactional, based on a mutual desire to get things done. This doesn't preclude us from liking the people we work with or even enjoying our jobs but those things do not add up to a Trusting Team. Trust is a feeling.

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Just as it is impossible for a leader to demand that we be happy or inspired, a leader cannot order us to trust them or each other. For the feeling of trust to develop, we have to feel safe expressing ourselves first. We have to feel safe being vulnerable. That's right, vulnerable. Just reading the word makes some people squirm in their seats.

When we work on a Trusting Team we feel safe to express vulnerability. We feel safe to raise our hands and admit we made a mistake, be honest about shortfalls in performance, take responsibility for our behavior and ask for help. Asking for help is an example of an act that reveals vulnerability. However, when on a Trusting Team, we do so with the confidence that our boss or our colleagues will be there to support us. "Trust is the stacking and layering of small moments and reciprocal vulnerability over time," says Brené Brown, research professor at the University of Houston in her book *Dare to Lead*. "Trust and vulnerability grow together, and to betray one is to destroy both."

When we are not on a Trusting Team, when we do not feel like we can express any kind of vulnerability at work, we often feel forced to lie, hide and fake to compensate. We hide mistakes, we act as if we know what we're doing (even when we don't) and we would never admit we need help for fear of humiliation, reprisal or finding ourselves on a short list at the next round of layoffs. Without Trusting Teams, all the cracks in an organization are hidden or ignored. If that continues for any length of time, it will compound and spread until things start to break. Trusting Teams, therefore, are essential to the smooth running of any organization.

In a culture dominated by intense pressure to meet quarterly or annual targets, too many of our leaders value high performers with little consideration of whether others on the team can trust them. Those values are reflected in whom they hire, promote and fire. The problem is, the toxic team members are often more interested in their own performance and career trajectories than they are with helping the whole team rise. Though they may crush it in the near term, the manner in which they achieve their results will often contribute to a toxic environment in which others will struggle to thrive. Indeed, in performance-obsessed cultures, these tendencies are often exacerbated by leaders who encourage internal competition as a way to further drive performance.

If leaders, in any profession, place an excess of stress on people to make the numbers, and offer lopsided incentive structures, we risk creating an environment in which near-term performance and resources are prioritized while long-term performance, trust, psychological safety and the will of the people decline.

In the Infinite Game, however, we need more than strong, trusting, high-performing teams today. We need a system that will ensure that that trust and that performance can endure over time. If leaders are responsible for creating the environment that fosters trust, then are we building a bench of leaders who know how to do that?

The ability for any organization to build new leaders is very important. Think of an organization like a plant. No matter how strong it is, no matter how tall it grows, if it cannot make new seeds, if it is

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unable to produce new leaders, then its ability to thrive for generations beyond is nil. One of the primary jobs of any leader is to make new leaders; to help grow the kind of leaders who know how to build organizations equipped for the Infinite Game. However, if the current leaders are more focused on making their plant as big as possible, then, like a weed, it will do whatever it needs to do to grow. Regardless of the impact it has on the garden (or even the long-term prospects of the plant itself.)

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 way to drive performance in an organization is to create an environment in which information can flow freely, mistakes can be highlighted and help can be offered and received. In short, an environment in which people feel safe among their own must be embraced. This is the responsibility of a leader.

Chapter 8: Ethical Fading

Ethical fading is a condition in a culture that allows people to act in unethical ways in order to advance their own interests, often at the expense of others, while falsely believing that they have not compromised their own moral principles. Ethical fading often starts with small, seemingly innocuous transgressions that, when left unchecked, continue to grow and compound.

While ethical lapses can happen anywhere, organizations run with a finite mindset are especially susceptible to ethical fading. Cultures that place excessive focus on quarterly or annual financial performance can put intense pressure on people to cut corners, bend rules and make other questionable decisions in order to hit the targets set for them. Unfortunately, those who behaved dubiously but hit their targets are rewarded, which sends a clear message about the organization's priorities. Indeed, the reward systems in these organizations work to incentivize such behaviors. Those who meet their goals are given bonuses or promoted often without consideration of the manner in which they met their goals, while those who acted with integrity but missed their targets are penalized by being overlooked for recognition or advancement.

This sends a message to everyone else in the organization that making the numbers is more important than acting ethically. Those who may have been loath to follow the unethical examples set by their colleagues succumb to the pressure as they start to feel it is the only way for them to get a bonus, get ahead or even protect their job. They will lose perspective and rationalize their ethical transgressions. "I gotta put food on the table," "It's what management wants," "I have no choice," and my personal favorite, "It's the industry standard," are all rationalizations we tell ourselves or tell others to help us mitigate any sense of guilt or responsibility we may feel.

As human beings we are blessed and cursed with our ability for rational thought. We try to make sense of the world around us. We can understand complex equations and we have the ability to be introspective. It is with our capacity for rational and analytical thought that we can think through hard problems and advance technology. We can also use this capacity for analytical thinking to

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explain or justify our behavior when we know it violates some deep-seated code of ethics or helps us avoid some sense of guilt we may harbor for a decision or action we took. It's like stealing something from a rich friend and saying to yourself, "They won't even notice. Besides they can afford another one." We can rationalize it any way we want; we still stole something from our friend. When such rationalizations become commonplace within the organization, the snowball grows and grows until unethical behavior pervades the entire organization.

The best antidote—and inoculation—against 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. This is not because they are told to, not because there is a checklist that requires it and not because they took the company's online course on "acting ethically." They did so because it's the natural thing to do. We act ethically because we don't want to do anything that would do damage to the advancement of the Just Cause. When we feel a part of a Trusting Team, we don't want to let down our teammates. We feel accountable to our team and the reputation of the organization, not just to ourselves and our personal ambitions. When we feel part of a group that cares about us, we want to do right by that group and make our leaders proud. Our standards naturally rise.

As social animals, we respond to the environments we're in. Put a good person in an environment that suffers ethical fading, and that person becomes susceptible to ethical lapses themselves. Likewise, take a person, even one who may have acted unethically in the past, put them in a stronger, more values-based culture, and that same person will also act in accordance with the standards and norms of that environment. As I've said before, leaders are not, by definition, responsible for the results. Leaders are responsible for the people who are responsible for the results. It's a job that requires constant attention because when little things compound, things eventually break.

Infinite-minded leaders accept that creating a culture that is more resistant to ethical fading requires patience and hardwork. It requires devotion to a Cause, a bias for will before resources and the ability to nurture Trusting Teams. It may take longer than a quarter or a year (depending on the size of the company) to feel the impact of the investment. Once the ethical standards are established (or re-established) they must be guarded vigilantly. If ethical fading is powered by self-deception, maintaining ethical behavior demands complete honesty and constant self-assessment. Ethical lapses happen and are part of being human. Ethical fading, however, is not a part of being human. Ethical fading is a failure of leadership and is a controllable element in a corporate culture which means the opposite is also true. Cultures that are ethically strong are also a result of the culture the leaders build.

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Chapter 9: Worthy Rival

A Worthy Rival is another player in the game worthy of comparison. Worthy Rivals may be players in our industry or outside our industry. They may be our sworn enemies, our sometimes collaborators or colleagues. It doesn't even matter whether *they* are playing with a finite or an infinite mindset, so long as *we* are playing with an infinite mindset. Regardless of who they are or where we find them, the main point is that they do something (or many things) as well as or better than us. They may make a superior product, command greater loyalty, are better leaders or act with a clearer sense of purpose than we do. We don't need to admire everything about them, agree with them or even like them. We simply acknowledge that they have strengths and abilities from which we could learn a thing or two.

We get to choose our own Worthy Rivals and we would be wise to select them strategically. There is no value in picking other players whom we constantly outflank simply to make ourselves feel superior. That has little to no value to our own growth. They don't have to be the biggest players or any of the incumbents. We choose them to be our Worthy Rivals because there is something about them that reveals to us our weaknesses and pushes us to constantly improve... which is essential if we want to be strong enough to stay in the game.

Traditional competition forces us to take on an attitude of winning. A Worthy Rival inspires us to take on an attitude of improvement. The former focuses our attention on the outcome, the latter focuses our attention on process. That simple shift in perspective immediately changes how we see our own businesses. It is the focus on process and constant improvement that helps reveal new skills and boosts resilience. An excessive focus on beating our competition not only gets exhausting over time, it can actually stifle innovation.

Another reason to adjust our perspective toward seeing strong players in our field as Worthy Rivals is it helps keep us honest. It's like a runner who is so obsessed with winning, they forget the rules, ethics or why they started running in the first place. They may spend time and energy to undermine someone who is running faster than they are and resort to tripping their competitor. Perhaps they will take performance-enhancing drugs to give them a secret edge. Both tactics will absolutely increase the chances they will win the race, but such strategies will leave them ill-equipped for success beyond those races. Eventually those strategies run dry and they are still left a slow runner. When we view the other players as Worthy Rivals it removes the pressure of being in a win-at-any-cost struggle and so by default we feel less need to act unethically or illegally. Upholding the values by which we operate becomes more important than the score, which actually motivates us to be more honest.

Like in business, times change and so do the players and, like in business, if a big company goes bankrupt, it doesn't mean the game is over or that any company is the winner. The players left standing know that other companies will rise up and new ones will join the industry. When our most important Worthy Rival, the one who pushes us more than any other, drops out of the game, it does

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not mean that there are others on the bench waiting to immediately rush into play either. It can take years for a new or different Rival or Rivals to replace them. The advanced player in the Infinite Game understands this and works to remain humble at the loss of a major Rival. Cautious not to let hubris or a finite mindset take hold, they play knowing that it is just a matter of time before new players emerge. Patience is a virtue in infinite play.

Without a Worthy Rival we risk losing our humility and our agility. Failure to have a Worthy Rival increases the risk that a once-mighty infinite player, with a strong sense of Cause, will gently slide into becoming just another finite player looking to rack up wins. Where once the organization fought primarily for the good of others and for the good of the Cause, without that Worthy Rival they are more likely to fight primarily for the good of themselves. When that happens, when the hubris sets in, the organization will quickly find its weaknesses exposed and too rigid for the kind of flexibility they need to stay in the game.

Chapter 10: Existential Flexibility

Existential Flexibility is the Capacity to initiate an extreme disruption to a business model or strategic course in order to more effectively advance a Just Cause. It is an infinite-minded appreciation for the unpredictable that allows them to make these kinds of changes. Where finite-minded player fears things that are new or disruptive, the infinite-minded player revels in them. When an infinite-minded leader with a clear sense of Cause looks to the future and sees that the path they are on will significantly restrict their ability to advance their Just Cause, they flex. Or, if that leader discovers a new technology that is more likely to help them advance their Cause going forward than the technology they are currently using, they flex. Without that sense of infinite vision, strategic shifts, even extreme ones, tend to be reactive or opportunistic. Existential Flexibility is always offensive. It is not to be confused with the defensive maneuvering many companies undergo to stay alive in the face of new technology or changing consumer habits.

An Existential Flex doesn't happen at the founding of the company, it happens when the company is fully formed and functioning. To all the finite-minded observers, it is existential because the leader is risking the apparent certainty of the current, profitable path with the uncertainty of a new path—which could lead to the company's decline or even demise. To the finite-minded player, such a move is not worth the risk. To infinite-minded players, however, staying on the current path is the bigger risk. They embrace the uncertainty. Failure to flex, they believe, will significantly restrict their ability to advance the Cause. They fear staying the course may even lead to the eventual demise of the organization.

Again, the motivation for an infinite-minded player to Flex is to advance the Cause, even if it disrupts the existing business model. To the finite-minded player, the reason not to Flex is expressly to protect the current business model, even if it undermines the Cause. If the company is the vehicle a leader uses to advance their Cause, then making a dramatic shift in strategy to keep a company going for a very long time, in one form or another, is also of paramount importance in the Infinite Game.

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Existential Flexibility is bigger than the normal day-to-day flexibility required to run an organization. We must not confuse shiny-object syndrome with Existential Flexibility, either. There is a whole category of frustrated employees around the world who work for well-meaning, sometimes visionary leaders who, like a cat reacting to a shiny object, want to chase every good idea they come across with, “This is it! We have to do this to advance the vision!” When an Existential Flex happens, it is clear to all those who believe in the Cause why it has to happen. Though they may not enjoy the upheaval and short-term stress such a change may cause, they all agree it is worth it and want to do it. Shiny-object syndrome, in contrast, often leaves people flummoxed and exhausted rather than inspired.

When a visionary leader makes an Existential Flex, to the outside world it appears that they can predict the future. They can’t. They do, however, operate with a clear and fixed vision of a future state that does not yet exist—their Just Cause—and constantly scan for ideas, opportunities or technologies that can help them advance toward that vision. Where a more finite-minded leader is also looking for opportunities, their gaze tends to be within their industries, on the balance sheet or toward the horizon. An infinite-minded leader with a Just Cause looks outside their industry and miles beyond the horizon—to a place that requires imagination to see.

Chapter 11: The Courage to Lead

The courage to see the Infinite Game—to see the purpose of business as something more heroic than simply making money, even if it’s unpopular with the finite players around us—is hard. True Courage to Lead holds the company and its leadership to a much higher standard than simply acting within the bounds of the law. Only when organizations operate on a higher level than federal, state and local laws can we say they have integrity. Which, incidentally, is the actual definition of integrity—firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values: incorruptibility. Indeed, the pursuit of a Just Cause is a path of integrity. It means that words and actions must align. It also means that there will be times when leadership must choose to ignore all the voices calling for the company to serve the interests of those who don’t necessarily believe in the Cause at all.

Integrity does not just mean “doing the right thing.” Integrity means acting before the public outcry or scandal. When leaders know about something that is unethical and only act after the outcry, that’s not integrity. That’s damage control. “They wait for public opinion to tell them what to do,” said Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a professor at Harvard Business School, when talking about how CEOs make decisions today. “CEO courage is in short supply.”

Human beings are messy and imperfect. There is no such thing as a perfectly infinite-minded leader and there is certainly no such thing as a perfectly infinite-minded organization. In reality, even the most infinitely focused companies can stray on to a finite path. When that happens, it takes the Courage to Lead to recognize that the organization has strayed from its Cause and it takes courage of leadership to get back on course.

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This is sadly common once an organization has achieved great success. Whereas the infinite-minded player sees that they are still at the tip of the iceberg no matter how much traditional success they enjoy, the finite player will often transition into playing defense to guard their pole position. It takes Courageous Leadership to stay in the Infinite Game after you arrive at the top. To recognize that, regardless of how much success has been achieved, the Cause is infinite. Unfortunately, the temptation to convert to finite is so, so tempting.

Major events, like an IPO or change in leadership, can force an organization to choose one path over the other too. However, there need not be a specific event to cause an organization to veer from the infinite path to a finite one. Such veerings or splits off the infinite path are actually quite normal. People stray from their own paths all the time. We often stray from a healthy routine or fall off other healthy bandwagons. As companies are run by people, it would be expected that these things will happen. What causes an organization to stray off course is often quite consistent. It occurs when leaders become more interested in their own finite pursuits than the Infinite Game and drag the organization along with them.

Organizations will also find themselves at a crossroads when their leaders start to believe their own myths—that the success the company enjoyed under their leadership was a result of their genius rather than the genius of their people, who were inspired by the Cause they were leading. These leaders too often fixate on advancing their own fame, fortunes, glory and legacies at the expense of the company and its Cause. Management becomes disconnected from the people and trust breaks down. When performance necessarily starts to suffer as a result, these same leaders are quicker to blame others than to look at what set the company on the new path in the first place. In order to “fix” the problem, their faith in the people is replaced with faith in the process. The company becomes more rigid and decision-making powers are often taken away from the front lines. It can’t be a good thing when the captain of the ship, who is supposed to be on deck navigating toward the horizon, is now in the ship tinkering with the engine trying to make it go faster.

Courageous Leaders are strong because they know they don’t have all the answers and they don’t have total control. They do, however, have each other and a Just Cause to guide them. It is the weak leader who takes the expedient route. They are the ones who think they have all the answers or try to control all the variables. It requires less strength to announce layoffs at the end of the year to quickly squeeze the numbers to meet an arbitrary projection than it does to explore other, maybe untested, options. When leaders exercise the Courage to Lead, the people who work inside their organization will start to reflect that same courage. Like children who mirror their parents, so too do employees mirror their leaders. Leaders who prioritize themselves over the group breed cultures of employees who prioritize their own advancement over the health of the company. The Courage to Lead begets the Courage to Lead.