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Leaders Eat Last: Simon Sinek on Creating Strong and Safe Workplaces

Management guru Simon Sinek explains why exceptional leaders place the welfare of their teams above their own

By Lore Lawrence, Staff Engagement and Internal Communications, ECR



[Simon Sinek](#) is a recognized authority on leadership and a best-selling author whose works include "Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't" and "Start with Why." Photo: Nazanine Atabaki.

hostile and paranoid workplace or a peaceful and productive one. Sinek is a recognized authority on leadership and a best-

August 5, 2014—It's a hot-button question to be sure, but does your manager's personal agenda come first, or does he or she make sure that you and your colleagues are destined to succeed?

The difference, says management expert [Simon Sinek](#), can turn an organization into a

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Main Points

- Leadership and authority are not the same, says expert Simon Sinek. Leadership is a responsibility, not a rank.
- Leaders are people who put the needs of the

selling author whose works include “Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don’t” and “Start with Why.” He is also a [TED Talk speaker](#), teaches at Columbia University, and is an adviser to the RAND Corporation. (Not bad for a hipster.)

Sinek recently spoke on July 15 event sponsored by ECR’s Events Program and [webcast on World Bank Live](#) which was held in the Preston Auditorium in Washington. Sanjay Pradhan, vice president of Leadership, Learning, and Innovation at the World Bank Group introduced Sinek to an eager, standing-room only crowd.

So what’s the scoop on leadership?

Leaders aren’t necessarily people in authority—they are people who look out for the welfare of their colleagues, regardless of their position in an organization’s hierarchy, said Sinek. They are the people who foster trust and cooperation and make others feel valued. When someone believes in us and is willing to risk for us, he noted, we don’t want to let that person down. We want to prove to them that their sacrifice is worth it. We will do anything to make them proud and continue the relationship. That is the result of leadership.

Authority is no guarantee of leadership, said Sinek. Some people may have authority over others, but that does not necessarily mean others will follow.

That’s an important distinction for organizations in an age where everything, including cutting-edge competition, is on a global scale. Although an organization cannot control threatening outside forces—competition, economies, and other variable—it can change internally through leadership, said Sinek.

“The only influence we have, the only variable are the conditions inside the organization,” he stated. “And this really is the value of leadership. Leaders will set the tone and leaders are responsible for building the conditions in which we work. We are social animals and we respond to the environment we’re in.”

As the charismatic Sinek moved across the stage, he said the “leaders eat last” concept is based on the American Marines’

group before their own and trust is essential for true leadership to occur.

- Organizations that do not cultivate caring leadership are vulnerable to decline.

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tradition of having its lowest-ranking members eat first, while officers deliberately remain at end of the chow line.

At Marine mess halls around the world, Sinek said, “Although the senior person has every right to eat first, that’s not what happens. They line up in rank order from the most junior to the most senior. The most junior person will always eat first and the most senior person will always eat last.

“It’s not in any rule book and nobody tells them they have to. It’s because of how they view the leadership,” said Sinek. “They view it as a responsibility to look after the person in their care and in their charge.” The attitude is not unlike good parenting, he said.

At the heart of that style of leadership, Sinek said, is trust.

The quality of this kind of leadership determines the success of an organization in achieving its goals. A social contract is made between workers and supervisors. No one objects to managers making more money than subordinates, Sinek said, provided the social contract that managers protect their employees and give them a safe space in which to work is honored.

When we are in a circle of safety, the natural feeling and response is trust and cooperation, he added. If however we fear the people with whom we work, the natural human response is paranoia, fear, and cynicism—not the best environment to bring an organization to the forefront of a competitive world.

Even in the first days of humans, Sinek noted, trust was paramount to survival.

“There are inherent benefits in living and working with people we trust. It means I can fall asleep at night and trust that someone within my tribe will alert me to danger. If I do not trust you, I can’t fall sleep at night and that’s not a very good model.”

To showcase a good example of leadership yielding loyalty, Sinek told of deployed Marines at chow time. As was the custom, the officer waited to eat last—only that day, food ran out and there was nothing left for the officer. One by one, his men went back out into the field and shared their food with



their leader.

“That’s the beauty of leadership,” said Sinek, only half-jokingly. “Officers never go hungry.”



Many staff and external guests tuned in to hear the scoop on leadership. Photo: Nazanine Atabaki.

And then, Sinek zeroed in as to exactly what it takes to be a great leader.

“It’s the leader who is willing to go first—that’s why we call them leaders, because they are willing to take the risk first, because they are willing to sacrifice first, because they are willing to put themselves and their person on the line when it matters to keep their people safe,” he said, with more than a little passion in his voice.

“When we are certain they are willing to sacrifice themselves for us, the natural human response is we will work tirelessly, we will give our blood and sweat and tears to see that leader’s mission is advanced and that they are kept safe.”

But there is a caution.

“If they work to protect themselves, then we do the same.” Sinek continued. “We step back and we do exactly the same.” The end result is an organization in decline. “Leadership is a choice, not a right.”

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