

The Infinite Game

BY SIMON SINEK

The best authors entertain us while also providing us a unique perspective on the world, helping to put events into an understandable context, as well as offering guidance on how to improve our lives. From the acclaimed author of *Start With Why*, Simon Sinek presents another superb addition to our understanding of leadership and life in *The Infinite Game*.

Why this book matters: Infinite games are all around us (and we probably didn't even realize it): in business, health, relationships and many other areas. We need to recognize that the rules for infinite games are **much different** than the more typical finite games we are used to playing.

What are the differences between Finite and Infinite Games? Games are everywhere; if there are at least 2 "players", a game exists. Classically, we view most games as the familiar "finite games" such as chess or football, with known players, fixed rules, and a clear beginning, middle and end. But many of the "games" that we play are not so clearly finite. To be successful at playing a game, you need to know which kind of game you are playing.

In 1986, Professor James Carse wrote a ground-breaking treatise *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. In contrast to finite games, "infinite games" are played by known and unknown players. There are no exact or agreed-upon rules. Though there are typically norms, conventions, or laws that govern how players conduct themselves, within those broad boundaries, the players can operate however they want. The manner in which they play is entirely up to them and can change at any time.

Trait	Finite Game	Infinite Game
Players	Known	Known and Unknown
Rules	Fixed	No Exact Rules
Referee	Yes	No
Time Frame/ Finish Line	Finite /Yes	Infinite /No
Goal	Win	Keep Playing
Examples	Football/Chess	Business, Geopolitics, Relationships, Health

Infinite games have infinite time horizons, and without a finish line, no one can ever "win" an infinite game. Critically, you cannot lose an infinite game unless you "stop playing". In fact, the primary objective is to keep playing, and thus perpetuate the game.

To represent the difference, Simon explains why the US "lost" the Vietnam War, despite winning nearly every battle and regularly decimating our adversary. US Generals were fighting (and "winning") a finite game, while the North Vietnamese viewed the war as a struggle for their independence and survival, an infinite game that they would fight until their last breath.

Mr. Sinek has expanded upon Professor Carse's work, after he began to notice Infinite games all around us. There is no such thing as winning in marriage or friendship, long-term education, business, careers, or global politics.

In the business world, the finite approach to short-term profit and success received a major boost in 1970, when Nobel-winning Economist Milton Friedman published the essay "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits." He insisted that "there is one and only one social responsibility of business, to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so

long as it stays within the rules of the game." (i.e., the sole purpose of business is to make money for the shareholders).

Widely accepted, this approach has led to the short-term business mindset, unethical behavior, and a substantial growth in income inequality. Clearly, the business world needs a new mindset, but the infinite mindset can just as easily apply to many other circumstances.

Health should also be viewed from an infinite mindset; there is no one thing that we can do to get in shape and live a healthy lifestyle. We can't simply go to the gym for nine hours and expect to be in shape. However, if we go to the gym every single day for 20 minutes, we will absolutely get in shape. Consistency becomes more important than intensity. And though we may have finite fitness goals we want to reach (lose 20 pounds or run a half marathon), if we want to be as healthy as possible, the lifestyle we adopt matters more than whether or not we hit our goal on the arbitrary dates we set. With any health regimen, there are certain things we need to do—eat more vegetables, move/exercise on a regular basis, and get enough sleep. Adopting an infinite mindset is exactly the same

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN DECIDING HOW TO LEAD:

- We don't get to choose whether a game is finite or infinite
- We do get to choose whether or not we want to join the game
- Should we choose to join, we can choose whether we want to play with a finite or infinite mindset

So, how do we lead with an infinite mindset?

The rest of the book provides guidance on

the 5 essential practices that you need to play in infinite games. Highlights from each section:

1. Advance a Just Cause:

- a. We need to have a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist, a state which is so appealing that people are willing to make sacrifices in order to help advance toward that vision
- b. We can develop our own, or join another's Just Cause
- c. Working to advance a Just Cause gives our work and our lives meaning
- d. A Just Cause inspires us to stay focused beyond the finite rewards and individual wins
- e. Russian botanist Nikolai Vavilov committed his life to ending hunger and preventing future food crop ecological disasters by building a massive seed collection in the 1920s. Housed in Leningrad, Vavilov and his team protected the collection during the 900-day World War II Nazi siege of the city. Instead of eating the seeds, over 1 million Russians died from starvation, including his team, so that they could keep the seed collection protected for future generations
- f. The Founding Fathers of the United States risked their lives by signing the Declaration of Independence, knowing that they would likely be hanged as traitors if the American Revolution failed
- g. A Just Cause must be:
 - i. For Something: affirmative and optimistic
 - ii. Inclusive: open to all those who would like to contribute
 - iii. Service oriented: for the primary benefit of others
 - iv. Resilient: able to endure political, technological and cultural change
 - v. Idealistic: big, bold, and ultimately unachievable

2. Build Trusting Teams:

- a. The Navy Seal selection process screens applicants for both performance

and trust, and board members will prioritize Medium Performance/High Trust Sailors over ones with High Performance/Low Trust.

- b. High trust is necessary for smooth information flow from frontline employees to the top of an organization
 - c. Ethical Fading: 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
 - d. "Ethical Fading" in the military: Drs Wong/Gerras, 2 retired Army Officers, wrote "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession", about systemic ethical fading due to excessive process, procedure, or demands placed on Soldiers. This combination of training requirements and other tasks were simply impossible to complete, but reports show that everything was done.
- ### 3. Worthy Rival
- a. Find another player in the game that does something (or many things) as well or better than us, that has strengths and abilities from which we could learn a thing or two.
 - b. We should choose our Worthy Rivals because there is something about them that reveals our weaknesses and pushes us to constantly improve.
 - c. Apple welcomed IBM into the personal computer market, and used its presence to drive innovation, while IBM focused more on competing with Apple for market share
 - d. World Geopolitics seemed clearer when the USA and USSR were generally balanced rivals during the Cold War

4. Existential Flexibility

- a. The capacity to initiate an extreme disruption to a business model or strategic course in order to more effectively advance a Just Cause.

- b. 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.
- c. Walt Disney, after creating numerous ground-breaking animated movies (his Just Cause: inviting people to leave the stresses of life behind and enter a more idyllic world of his creation), risked his entire wealth to open Disneyland, taking his Cause to the next level.

5. Courage to Lead

- a. In business, leaders often make decisions which go against positive vision statements, in order to increase profits.
- b. CVS, when evaluating its Just Cause for improving the health and well-being for its patrons, made the difficult financial decision to eliminate tobacco products from their stores (loss of \$2 billion/year)
- c. CVS customers actually smoked less (didn't transfer to other stores), and bought more smoking cessation materials; health companies decided to sell more products in CVS; stocks dipped briefly but increased greatly over the next few years.
- d. The Courage to Lead is a willingness to take risks for an unknown future and ignore the naysayers who question our dedication to our Just Cause.

CONCLUSION:

- Infinite Games are all around us, we need to learn how to play
- Finite leadership techniques will lead to short-term gains. Go for the Infinite Mindset
- "Health" is an Infinite Game! Consistency is more important than intensity in our (and our patients') health behaviors
- Reject the win/lose mindset of finite games, and instead pick a Worthy Rival to drive you to constant improvement