



## Effective Communication from the Inside Out: Start with Why

Margaret Chang

Publication date: April, 2018

**Nursing English Nexus**

<http://www.janetorg.com/nexus>

ISSN 2433-2305

### Article citation

Chang, M. (2018). Effective Communication from the Inside Out: Start with Why. *Nursing English Nexus*, 2(1), 26-28.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Please contact the author for permission to re-print elsewhere.

## Effective Communication from the Inside Out: Start with Why



Margaret Chang,  
Miyagi University  
margaret@myu.ac.jp

When teacher-practitioners prepare for lessons, the first thing that often comes to mind is 'what' as in, "What main points am I going to teach?" or "What parts of the book do I have to cover today?" After that, the next question would most likely be 'how' as in, "How am I going to teach this concept?" Very rarely does the question 'why' come first or anywhere in the early stages of lesson planning. In my own experience, 'why' has often appeared in post-lesson reflection as in, "Why did that happen?"

In nursing practice as well, the foremost question when routinely working with patients would also most often begin with 'what' as in "What procedure needs to be done?" or "What should the patient be instructed or cautioned about?" In actual practice, the question 'why' would less likely be an initial consideration in nursing communication, especially concerning hospital routines with in-patients, when the reasons for the set procedures are often assumed to be understood.

However, a consultant in business management, sales and marketing — specialties in which working with people is

central to the nature of operations — has found significance and success in starting with the question, 'Why?' instead of 'What?' (which is what not only corporate managers, but also teachers and nurses do). In this paper, I would like to introduce some major concepts of Simon Sinek, which are rich in implications for informing and guiding effective English teaching practice and communication in nursing.

### Start with Why

Simon Sinek, a well-known and highly respected management theorist and leadership expert, makes a very strong case for businesses to start with the question, 'why.' He convincingly states that companies which excel and leaders who inspire have a clear vision for their existence and why they do what they do. As an example, he compares and contrasts two types of sales approaches, one typically based on 'what' and another which is more persuasively based on 'why.'

- (What) "If Apple were like everyone else, a marketing message from them might sound like this: *'We make great computers. They're beautifully designed, simple to use and user friendly. Want to buy one?'*"
- (Why) "Here's how Apple actually communicates. *'Everything we do, we believe in challenging the status quo. We believe in thinking differently. The way we challenge the status quo is by making our products beautifully designed, simple to use and user friendly. We just happen*

*to make great computers. Want to buy one?"*

He points out that the latter statement appeals to our emotions and inspires us, thus creating buy-in.

Sinek explains that unlike questions of 'what', which are processed by our outer brain (the neocortex), considerations of 'why' tap into the limbic area of our brain, the centermost part of the brain responsible for human feelings, decision-making and behavior, for example, in deciding whether or not to buy something or join a cause. In marketing and lesson-planning alike, we tend to begin with 'what,' which is less effective in its ability to motivate and inspire.

Sinek's message is, "People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it," so, in order to communicate effectively, go from the inside out and start with 'why' you do what you do, then proceed to 'how' you do it, and then finally to the 'what' of your product or whatever you are promoting or endeavoring to accomplish. This order of progression will help your message reach your listeners (and students) more effectively, and motivate and inspire them to take action.

### **Implications for teaching and nursing**

Sinek's advice runs contrary to what most teachers logically and intuitively do by starting with 'what' instead of 'why' in the planning process. We need to first reflect upon 'why' we do what we do. By changing my focus from 'what' to 'why,' my own

lesson activities have taken on a new dimension as the class atmosphere changes from practicing routine linguistic exercises to building a community. Learners begin to develop meaningful ongoing conversation threads which flow from their taking an interest and getting to know each other through the medium of English as the language of real communication and exchange, a process which continues throughout the other lessons of the course. In starting with 'why,' students are no longer merely practicing textbook English sentence patterns (what), but rather, their purpose or 'why' for talking is to truly learn more about each other.

This realization of the effectiveness of starting with 'why' in communication has great implications for nursing as well. Patients, during clinical visits, and even more so in cases of hospitalization, are bombarded with 'what' statements such as, "I'm going to take a blood sample now" or "The doctor ordered...." In many of these instances, the natural patient reaction is the often unaddressed: 'Why?' In their daily interactions as healthcare providers, nurses must communicate in a way so as to achieve patient understanding and agreement with the prescribed treatment.

In a survey of 6,722 adults in the continental U.S., 24% or approximately one in four respondents reported having failed to follow doctor's advice or treatment. Of those self-reported cases of non-compliance or non-adherence, the most frequently given reason was that the patient disagreed with the clinician's

prescribed course of treatment (Davis et al, 2002). In other words, although the patients understood 'what' the doctor wanted to do, they failed to understand or buy in to the reason, or 'why,' the prescribed treatment was deemed most appropriate by the attending healthcare professional.

The new school year offers a good opportunity for educators to consider and clarify our teaching purposes. We must also inform and educate our nursing students about the importance of 'why' in effective communication. Although the concepts that Sinek introduces are drawn from business and marketing, the practicality and applicability of his proposal can be summed up in his TED talk (2009) observation that: "... if you don't know why you do what you do, and people respond to why you do what you do, then how will you ever get people to vote for you, or buy something from you, or, more importantly, be loyal and want to be a part of what it is that you do."

This statement also rings quite true in both teaching and nursing where we must communicate in a way that makes students or patients feel included and "want to be a part" of what we do.

### References

- Sinek, Simon (2011). *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. London, England: Penguin Books, Ltd.
- TEDxPuget Sound. (2009, September).

*Simon Sinek: How great leaders inspire action* [Video file]. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action)

- Davis, Karen, Schoenbaum, Stephen C., Collins, Karen S., Tenney, Katie, Hughes, Dora L., & Audet, Anne-Marie J. (2002). *Room for improvement: Patients report on the quality of their health care*. New York: Commonwealth Fund.