



Professional Practices

For the 21st Century Leader

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About the Author



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Rethinking School Improvement: Planning with Purpose and Living the Plan

I have been thinking and rethinking about school improvement planning and the plans that result from that planning. We're coming to the time in the school year where we might have a bit of time to reconsider why and how we go about the activity of developing the school improvement plan. Soon, our standardized data will be in (useful or not, improved or not) and we begin a new cycle of identifying needs and strategies that are intended to elevate performance. I believe that our primary goal in education is to improve and increase outcomes for all students. I believe that we need to be able to measure progress in ways that inform our decisions for improving and increasing those outcomes and that we should write those down (and revisit periodically) to help remind us and keep us all accountable. Mostly, I believe that we must begin from our purpose, the why. And from the why, the how and what come naturally and authentically. After all, how many of us can say that our SIPs are authentic and come from our why, our purpose, our core values? I bet that if we could, the planning wouldn't feel like a chore and the plans would lead to real sustainable improvement.

In this issue of *Professional Practices*, I explore three big ideas that I believe could change the nature of school improvement planning and plans.

Three Big Ideas

1. How knowing your why can motivate and inspire your teams and goals
2. How implementing a responsive approach to planning can lead to a learning organization
3. How to work and live the plan with purpose, on purpose



What's Your Why?

“Every person has a **WHY**. Most of us live our lives by accident. Fulfillment comes when we live our lives on purpose. Knowing your **WHY** provides a filter through which you can make decisions, every day, to act with purpose.”

—Simon Sinek

I try to work and live by these powerful words. Sometimes I am successful and other times I come close; still other times, I fail miserably. Nothing reminds you more of your **WHY** than being a parent. I continually evaluate parenting decisions around my intentions to raise a moral, independent, kind, curious, and happy person. I find that when I reflect on my **WHY**, our core values, I am better able to communicate sometimes unpopular decisions. Starting with the **WHY** helps us get to the **HOW** and **WHAT** with greater ease. As Sinek asked, “Wouldn't it be great to work (or live) with purpose, on purpose?”

Here's how that sounds in my house:

“Open communication is a sign of a strong family and we believe that sharing meals together is one way to reconnect after busy days, so we all will make it priority and there will be no technology at the table while we eat. Park and silence your phones.”

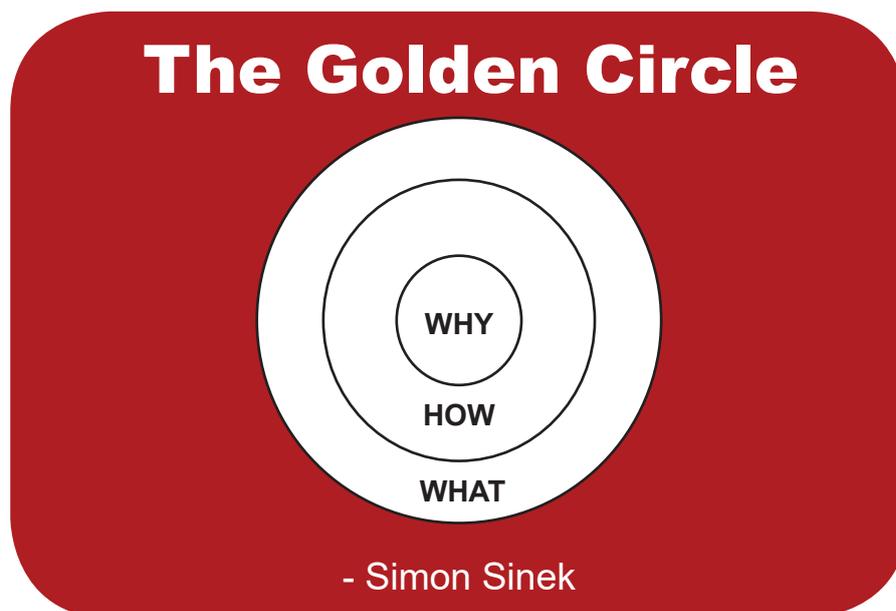
Apply that notion to school improvement planning. The Golden Circle model is one that works professionally and personally. Here's how Sinek explains it from a blog called *The Science of WHY*, November 2017. www.linkedin.com/pulse/science-why-simon-sinek.

The Golden Circle

According to Sinek, every organization—even schools and school districts—operates on three levels, as shown in the illustration below: What we do, how we do it, and why we do it. We all know what we do: the products we sell, the services we offer or the jobs we do. Some of us know how we do it: the things that we think make us different or stand out from the crowd. But very few of us can clearly articulate why we do what we do.

The **WHY** is the purpose, cause, or belief that drives every organization and every person's individual career. Why does your company exist? Why did you get out of bed this morning? And why should anyone care?

Sinek uses this embedded model to demonstrate his ideas. And outlines them in this compelling TedTalk, www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action



The WHY Effect

Once you understand your **WHY**, you'll be able to clearly articulate what makes you feel fulfilled and to better understand what drives your behavior when you're at your natural best. When you can do that, you'll have a point of reference for everything you do going forward. You'll be able to make more intentional choices for your school and district, your career and your life. You'll be able to inspire others to learn from you, work with you and join your cause. Never again should you have to play the lottery and act on gut decisions that are made for reasons you don't really understand. From now on, you can work with purpose, on purpose. From now on, you can start with **WHY**.

It's About the Planning and the Plan

I am reading a new release, *The New School Rules: 6 Vital Practices for Thriving and Responsive Schools* by Anthony Kim and Alexis Gonzalez-Black and find it fits into my revised thinking about school improvement planning and plans. Here are my takeaways:

- Responsive schools and districts are alive and changing.
- Responsive schools and districts have a clear and motivating purpose. They know their why.
- Responsive schools and districts are continuously acting, evolving, improving, and aiming higher.

The first "rule" is around planning. Kim and Gonzalez-Black remind us to not get sidelined by our strategies, action steps, and rubrics, which can take on a life of their own. We need to approach planning as a way of thinking, not a stand-alone product. Our planning should inspire, lead, and unify our teams. Otherwise, we risk achieving the plan, but not the purpose we set out to achieve...our why.

Our leadership team has drafted plenty of plans that became more important than the purpose they were intended to achieve. Some were so long and complex that no one understood them, used them, or even cared about them, except when we reviewed them to learn that we weren't doing the things we said we would. The plan was too far removed from the day-to-day work. I daresay that our improvement plan was a "comforting illusion" (coined by Kim and Gonzalez-Black). In our efforts to be so directive, prescriptive, and controlling with every aspect of the classroom, we did not leave room for our learning. When we fell short of our goals, we looked at how we implemented to plan and blamed our failure on lack of fidelity to the plan. Our plans should account for learning along the way and we should not confuse control with planning.

The goal of planning is to get directional clarity so people know where to focus their attention and how to make sense of situations as they arise. Kim and Gonzalez-Black suggest we plan for change and not perfection. We need permission to change the plan when new and overwhelming data suggest a change. Just like we want teachers to use their formative assessments to guide their next lesson, we need to be as flexible with our school improvement plan by setting up feedback mechanisms and using what we learn from them. The chart below is adapted from chapter one, Planning. It succinctly illustrates the comparison of planning approaches.

Building Strong School Cultures: Signs of Progress

Plan and Control

Develop the plan, gain support for it, then execute it.

The plan is driven by past behaviors and information.

Build plans that are extremely detailed and as close to perfection as possible.

Stick to the plan in order to measure the success of the plan.

Plan and Iterate

Develop the plan, execute it, then rework it based on feedback.

The plan is driven by real-time observations and data.

Build plans that are good enough for now, recognizing that more information and learning are to come.

Adapt the plan to support purpose (our why) in order to measure the success of the plan.

Another key takeaway from the planning chapter is to build roadmaps, not manuals. Rather than dictating specific actions, we should give people the tools they need to make quicker and better decision on their own. In each of the school districts in which I taught, was a principal, and was a district leader, we wrote plans that were so detailed including curriculum pacing guides that spelled out every action of every teacher. It was stifling and unmotivating. Our intentions were to provide resources and materials for teachers, then we thought it would be helpful to unpack state standards for teachers, then we thought it would be helpful to write assessments for teachers, and finally, we used management systems and data warehouses to analyze the data for teachers. What are we thinking?! No wonder we can't keep teachers and no wonder our SIPs sit on a shelf collecting cobwebs! Instead, we need to teach teachers to learn from feedback and design plans that reflect their learning.

We school leaders need to understand that course corrections are a normal part of a learning organization. We district leaders need to support our principals in creating a learning organization by reducing an overreliance on the “plan” and artificial deadlines. Planning should occur often and with responsiveness and always be aligned with our why.

Living and Working the Plan

Who doesn't want to work and live purposefully on purpose? Begin with the **why** then move to the **how** and end with the **what**. Give it a try. Here's an example:

WHY:

We think that engaged students are more involved in the academic and social life of the school. How will we promote increased engagement in every class.

HOW

- **Using the 10:2 Theory.** For every 10 minutes of instruction allow the students 2 minutes to process and respond to the instruction. This can be done in various ways by having them write what they have learned, questions they may have, or by discussing the content with a fellow student.
- **Incorporating movement into lessons.** Require students to respond to a question by moving to a certain spot in the room, writing on whiteboards, or standing (or sitting) when they are done thinking about the question, etc.
- **Picking up the pace.** Evidence shows that when teaching is at a brisk instructional pace, students have more opportunities to engage, respond, and move on to the next concept
- Providing frequent and effective feedback.
- **Using Wait Time.** Allow students 3-5 seconds of 'think-time' after asking a question. At the end of that time draw a random name to answer the question.
- **Using 3-2-1.** Have students summarize by recording three things they learned, two interesting things, and one question they have about what was taught. Allow them time to share their findings with a peer.

WHAT

Now, that is an understandable goal that is aligned to core values with observable strategies that should be seen in all classrooms. Teachers, students, and parents can understand and support a goal like this rather than the typical goal like, “students will increase math achievement from 58% proficiency to 75% as measured by the state-administered assessment.”

We can easily keep this alive by talking about engagement strategies, noticing engagement strategies as they are used in lessons, and talking with students about their work and progress. I experience state and district SIP templates that don't really lend themselves to this kind of thinking, but nothing prevents you from taking the required SIP and put it into a structure that is much more understandable, friendly, and starts with your **WHY**. The difference is that you'll be working with purpose, on purpose. How can you argue with that?

School Improvement Self-Study: Are We Planning With Purpose and Living Our Plan?

Have all staff complete this self-study. Use the data collected to set goals for your coming year and reset goals on a quarterly basis. Start working with purpose on purpose from the beginning of the year.	We are There!	We are Doing Some of This.	We Are Taking About This.	This is not on our radar.
We take time for planning throughout the year, making our improvement plan alive and authentic.				
We learn from progress data and use it to adjust our plan. We are responsive and not reactive.				
We talk about our core values and our purpose (our why). These are reflected and identifiable in our plan.				
We know the why, how, and what of our Golden Circle.				
Our planning is inspiring and our plan is motivating.				
We build our plan to be good enough for now, recognizing that more information and learning are to come.				
Our plan is driven by real-time observations and data.				
Our plan is a road map, not a manual.				
We live and work our plan. Everyone knows it and is part of it. Our goals are understandable and not filled with jargon.				
We work together with purpose, on purpose.				

What will we do next to move forward with purposeful planning?

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