Samuel L. Odle, FACHE, senior policy advisor, Bose Public Affairs Group, Indianapolis, and former executive vice president and COO of Indiana University Health, is a Past Chairman of ACHE. In his Chairman’s remarks at the 2005 Congress on Healthcare Leadership in Chicago, he spoke eloquently about the choice of healthcare as a career: “The daily issues that press on us can leave us overwhelmed and fatigued. … We can so easily get wrapped up in personnel issues, in operational problems, in chasing technology, in asset management, and in measuring clinical outcomes. … But we who have chosen leadership roles in healthcare have chosen more. We have chosen what is at its heart a career committed to health, to healing and to compassion. It is the legacy we leave in support of these great purposes that will mark us as having led careers of significance.”

Great healthcare leaders not only know what is at the heart of the business, but they also feel it deeply and express it consistently in the everyday life of their organization.

So what can we do to strengthen our own careers of significance and encourage others to do the same? Here are three ideas:

**Start with “why” in your planning and decision making.** Leadership expert Simon Sinek, in his highly rated September 2009 TED talk, *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*, makes the point that people do not buy what you do, but, rather, they buy why you do it. And by why he means your purpose, your cause and your belief.

Sinek’s point is that great companies and great leaders start from the why and then make known the how (the goals, the operating model) and finally the what (the everyday product). Not starting with the
why, he argues, makes for an unexceptional, uninspired organization, which ultimately is unattractive to customers. It is the reason why it made all the difference that “[Martin Luther King Jr.] gave the I Have a Dream speech, not the ‘I have a plan’ speech,” Sinek said in the talk.

Let your passion and the “why” permeate your conversations.

Focus on improving the lives of patients and the community as you formulate strategies and goals, and positive results will follow. You will also inspire passion and creativity among your employees.

If you are a leader who has a passion for care, then talk about it every day and encourage others to talk about their passion every day. Don’t be shy about it. People around you, including those patients, families and communities you serve, need to hear you talk about your caring again and again.

As a society, we spend a good deal of time inside and outside of work categorizing and grouping people by profession, organizational level, background, gender, ethnicity, age and experience. To focus on health, healing and compassion is to remind us all of that which binds us together and unites us, even while respecting our many differences. The why of healthcare—health, healing and compassion—is the tie that binds us together for a common cause.

Decide if this is the right place for you and for those you lead. There is too much at stake in healthcare for us to carry leaders who are disconnected from or disregarding of this great calling. If you as a healthcare leader are not called to healthcare, then I encourage you to do the honorable thing and seek a career of significance in another field or industry.

If you have people working for you who may be good but who do not seem to share a passion for care, then help them assess their alignment with the values of the profession. If it becomes clear they do not share a passion for care, help them leave the organization with greater self-awareness.

If you are passionate about healthcare but find that passion eroded by your current organization—and you have tried your best to change the environment—then, when possible, seek an organization that honors and is hungry for your passion.

I have met and know many caring leaders. By continuing to start with the why in our decision making, sharing our passion for our patients and communities and assessing our professional calling, we will all get to the heart of the business and lead careers of significance. ▲

Jack A. Gilbert, EdD, FACHE, is clinical associate professor and director of executive and professional development, College of Health Solutions and College of Nursing and Health Innovation, and director, Transdisciplinary Consortium for Innovation Leadership in Healthcare, Arizona State University, Phoenix. He can be reached at jack.gilbert@asu.edu.