

# Extreme Ownership Summary

By Jocko Willink

'A leader leads by example, not by force.' (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.)

*Extreme Ownership* takes us into the most stressful situation: warfare, to introduce us to lessons on leadership. Then, using what they learned from combat situations, the authors teach us that owning problems is the only way to solve them.

Jocko Willink explains that 'War is hell, but war is also a brutal teacher.' As a decorated Navy SEAL officer, Willink's no-nonsense, no-excuses approach, cuts through the BS, and shows us why he is so highly respected. Co-author Leif Babin is also a decorated Navy SEAL, who became the primary leadership instructor for graduating officers. *Extreme Ownership* is the *New York Times* bestselling book that explores leadership, accountability, and creating a team culture where everyone works together.

This summary briefly guides us through the principles of *Extreme Ownership*. Then, we'll look at responsibility and accountability, the fact that there are no bad teams, dealing with anxiety and procrastination, and how to build teams that will literally go to war for you.

## War As An Extreme Metaphor For Life

Willink, a lieutenant commander, and Babin, a ground force commander, are former Navy SEALs who served during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Together they were stationed in Ramadi, which was the center of the

skirmish. Later, they combined forces again to start a consulting firm, Echelon Front.

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu explains that 'The art of war is the art of deception.' Our authors suggest that warfare is basically a heightened version of life. Hence, we can look towards high-pressure situations to provide the best solutions to everyday problems. What's more, if you can lead successfully during a battle, you can transfer these skills to business and other relationships.

What Willink and Babin found was that there is indeed a single trait that all good leaders have. Great leaders don't just take ownership of their team, and their team's mistakes; they take *extreme* ownership. By being completely open and honest, they develop trust, which means that everyone works to optimize their own performance. So while it may seem incredibly simple, extreme ownership isn't easy.

## What Is Extreme Ownership?

What are your biggest goals and dreams? Why haven't you achieved them yet? Do you feel like you're being let down by a team, or that things just aren't working out for you in the way they do for other people?

Well, the first lesson of extreme ownership is that we all need to stop being victims, and start being leaders. Extreme ownership means owning every single thing. This means all decisions, consequences, actions, and reactions are on us. If we look at extreme ownership as represented by a simple formula, it's basically 100% responsibility, with 0% blame.

So, if we look at a situation, and we pass over just 1% of the blame to

someone else, or to an event we perhaps didn't foresee, this means we're not acting under extreme ownership. It's up to us to assess this ratio and to be self-reflexive. In any given situation, we should be asking ourselves how we're presenting our responsibility to blame ratio.

Leaders are ultimately responsible and accountable. If someone in the team makes a mistake, the leader needs to scrutinize this. Perhaps the mission or plan wasn't explained clearly enough, or maybe a team member was under-resourced or under-trained? It's up to a leader to train everyone in the team and make sure that everyone understands their role.

Furthermore, leaders take full responsibility for failures, never shift blame onto others, work from constructive criticism, and always look for ways to improve. This behavior inspires others and creates a culture where everyone in the team can trust the people in charge, and hence, everyone works for the benefit of the group.

Willink tells the story of how he learned the benefit of extreme ownership. Willink was leading his first major mission in Ramadi; however, owing to a lack of communication and confusion, SEALs were firing at each other and on friendly Iraqi soldiers. This blue-on-blue attack resulted in several injuries and the killing of a friendly Iraqi soldier. Willink was asked to investigate and report back to senior commanding officers. Initially he went through every detail, trying to find out who was to blame for each step. However, the further down the rabbit hole he got, the more he realized that the buck stopped with him. He was to blame. In front of the commanding officers and his troops, Willink stood up and took full ownership of the failure. What surely would have resulted in him being fired, led to the opposite. Willink's extreme ownership set a precedent and gained him tremendous respect.

How often do you blame others for your mistakes? How often do you look at other people's successes and make excuses for why you aren't in their position? The reason we're not living up to our full potential is that we're not taking ownership. We shift blame, and we don't take responsibility.

So every day, we need to look at the 100% 0% standard, because this is the standard that needs to be set.

## **There's No "Bad" In Team**

We're often told there's no "I" in team. Many books go into depth about what kind of leaders there are, and how you can pinpoint a particular leadership style. *Extreme Ownership* argues that this is all nonsense, and that leadership is straightforward. There are two types of leaders, effective and ineffective.

So, how do we know what type of leader we are? Well, we should look at how our team is doing.

Our authors argue that there's no such thing as a bad team. If a team isn't performing, it's because of bad leadership. This doesn't mean that teams aren't allowed to fail, but it's how they deal with failure that's significant. No team has a perfect track record, and failure is inevitable. But, how the team bounces back, and how they learn from the experience is essential.

You might think this comes straight from a Disney movie plot. You know the one where a group of misfit kids gets lumbered with a disinterested down and out coach? The coach could have been someone, but he threw it away, and now his only hope of redemption is coaching his team of no-hopers to the final, and winning the big game. In the end, the team miraculously comes together; the coach is victorious, the underdogs win. But real life isn't a Disney movie, right?

Well, according to our authors, Disney screenwriters may be onto something. According to our authors, any team can be a winning team with exemplary leadership.

You may have heard the legend of "Hell Week" in Navy SEALs training. It's the week where troops are put through their paces and are mentally and physically exhausted. One of the exercises involves being split into teams with a rubber boat, and completing a series of grueling obstacle courses across the beach and into the ocean. Each team has a crew leader who communicates orders from a central training instructor. The winning crew gets to rest, while the others endure punishment. The lesson is clear; it pays to be a winner.

Our authors describe one particularly memorable Hell Week. Boat crew two were killing it and were on an impressive winning streak, whereas boat crew six had the opposite problem. Boat crew six blamed each other, and there was a lot of bickering and in-fighting. The leader of boat crew six resided himself to failure because he'd been lumbered with "the duds." Finally, one of the training officers decided to make a point, so he switched the leaders of crew two and crew six. With the new leadership change, boat crew six experienced a massive culture shift and won the next challenge. As for boat crew two, they came second because they'd already experienced what good leadership could do.

The lesson here is to stop complaining about the people around you. Stop blaming colleagues, teammates, and family members. Instead, be like the leader of boat crew two. Step up, and take responsibility.

## **Extreme Belief**

To be a good leader, you have to have belief and a sense of conviction.

If we can't explain and describe our purpose or mission, then there's no way we'll encourage buy-in. Furthermore, if we don't believe in what we're doing, we're doomed to fail. Doubt is something that spreads from the top and works its way down. To inspire confidence and trust, leadership has to believe that their plan or mission will succeed.

Everyone needs to be in on the mission or purpose, and each person should know what role they play. A team is a sum of its parts, and if there's one person who doesn't believe in a successful outcome, then the whole team is at risk. Hence leaders need to be very clear and deliberate about plans, and have an indomitable belief in what they're doing.

If you don't believe in the plan, then it's up to you to change it. Leaders need to deal with their egos and the egos of other people. If we're unsure of plans and genuinely don't believe that goals are achievable, then we need to have the courage to step up and adjust them. As we know from *The Rise of Superman*, goals and objectives should stretch us, but not cause us to snap. In other words, they should be challenging but doable.

As leaders, we need to inspire hope, and see a positive future outcome. If we fail to recognize hope or a future, there's no way that we can be engaged or motivated. Belief is a huge motivator, and to be motivated, we need to have faith that we can achieve our goals. When we don't believe that we will succeed, procrastination and de-motivation creep in.

## **Extreme Decision-Making and Teamwork**

How do you react when you feel anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed?

War is unbelievably chaotic, and if you can navigate a battlefield, most other contexts seem easy. The message here is that whatever context we're in, great leaders can see through the fog. Effective leaders can assess a situation and execute a strategic plan because they know how to prioritize what needs to be done immediately. Being in control is pivotal, and this means being able to clear the fog and list priorities. Once priorities have been ascertained, they should be executed methodically.

In stressful situations, the best thing is to move systematically through procedures and clear the mind of distractions.

A good leader can simplify and make the ground more tenable. A leader also knows how to protect their team and how to make them feel safe and secure. And, a good leader never goes into spinning or spiraling mode, or loses control.

For example, while on a nighttime mission in a village in Iraq, Babin and a few troops chased after someone escaping from the building they were targeting. This chase led them into trouble because they were separated from the rest of the team. The other SEALs didn't know where they were, and men were approaching them with AK-47s. Babin went through a list of what needed immediate attention: search the escapee for a suicide belt, escape the approaching men, find the rest of the team, and bring the mission on track.



Babin remembered what Willink told him to do in high-pressure situations: 'Relax. Look around. Make a call.' In cases such as this, it's about prioritizing and then executing accordingly. The approaching enemies were priority number one because they were the most immediate threat. So Babin's troops opened fire on the approaching men, and killed and injured several of them; the remainder dispersed. Next, they adopted the "cover and move approach." This is a leapfrogging move where some troops move forward while others provide cover, and then those who provided cover move forward, while those they were covering take over. Finally, they searched their captive and regrouped with the troops to continue with the mission. While this particular mission didn't end up a complete success, Babin learned valuable insight into enemy terrain and tactics. He also learned the benefit of thinking carefully and clearly under extreme pressure.

A team is successful when everyone feels safe. We learned about this in *Leaders Eat Last* and *Dare to Lead*. When everyone in a group knows their role and feels supported, they work towards a common goal. If outcomes aren't successful, avoid blaming others, and take responsibility. However, at the end of the day, a true leader also has faith and trusts that everyone will do their job.

A good leader also keeps their ego in check and doesn't make things convoluted. Plans should be simple and easy to understand. In *The Checklist Manifesto*, we learned about the power of lists and procedures, and how ego often gets in the way of utilizing these. For example, medical professionals often think they're above simple things like checklists, and that they don't need them. Finally, a good leadership structure relies on a decentralized chain of command. One person can't shoulder the responsibility of leading too many people. So teams should be broken up into smaller groups with a designated leader who has a

clear purpose and direction.

Most people don't want to take extreme ownership, so they put off their number one priority. Instead, they'll do anything else but deal with what they need to do, and procrastinate and make excuses. So, find your number one goal or purpose, write it down, commit to it, and take responsibility for getting it done.

## **Never Hit Snooze**

Willink talks about the fact that he has three different alarm clocks to get him up in the morning. This may seem extreme, but embracing extreme ownership is supposed to be. Willink explains that having three alarm clocks means that he can't blame anything or anyone other than himself for failing to wake up on time. If he oversleeps or hits snooze, that's on him.

Every day we face a series of tests and encounter numerous choices. Each day, our first test is waking up. We either pass this test, or we fail it. Oversleeping, hitting snooze, or wasting time delaying getting out of bed sets the tone for the rest of the day. If we're disciplined and stick to our plan of waking up at a specific time, and begin our day as we'd planned, we're likely to be more effective throughout the day. However, if we avoid waking up on time, this has a knock-on effect where other routines fall by the wayside.

Our authors explain that 'Discipline equals freedom.' Every decision we make is a test, and we have to ask ourselves whether we've made a good choice or a bad choice. We need to look at every decision and question whether it brings out the best in us. The thing is, once we're disciplined

and we've learned the rules, we're able to respond more creatively. We can unleash our creativity when we're entirely focused because we know that we understand the fundamentals.

## **In Conclusion**

Extreme ownership is contagious.

Being a great leader is about finding balance. Exceptional leaders can balance humility with confidence, and determination with mildness. Leaders should be calm under pressure, but also have an enthusiasm to lead effectively.

A good leader always puts the team first and can shelve any kind of personal agenda or need for recognition. So many people want to be leaders without understanding the pressure and responsibility that such a role takes. Leadership isn't about fancy offices, promotions, accolades, and feeding off a team's success. Leadership is about taking extreme ownership and instilling a sense of accountability and responsibility. It's about encouraging every member of a team to trust each other and know what role they play, so that they take responsibility for their actions and behaviors.

Michael Jordan famously said, 'There's no I in team, but there is an I in win.' So if you want to win, you have to take responsibility, and lead.