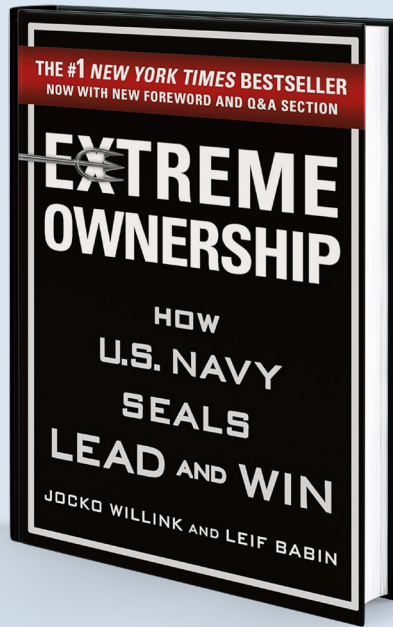


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Extreme Ownership

How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win

By Jocko Willink and Leif Babin

Jocko Willink was a Navy SEAL for 20 years, rising through the ranks to become commander of Task Unit Bruiser—the most decorated Special Operations unit of the Iraq War. After retiring, Willink continued on the disciplined path of success, co-founding Echelon Front, a premier leadership and management consulting company, writing several #1 New York Times bestsellers.

Leif Babin served 9 years as a Navy SEAL. He was in combat in Iraq during the Battle of Ramadi, a conflict that resulted in numerous medals for his efforts. After his tours, Babin served as a Navy SEAL instructor before forming Echelon Front with Jocko Willink, a leadership training group that uses the lessons and expertise the pair learned as SEALs to train leaders beyond the military.

A Book Review by Soundview

Fulfill Your Ultimate Purpose

In *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win*, Jocko Willink and Leif Babin explain and illustrate how good leadership relies on a set of concrete principles. These principles stand whether the leader in question is leading SEAL teams in Iraq, leading in the boardroom of a Fortune 500 company, or is leading a small non-profit. The skills Willink and Babin acquired in the military helped them launch their own civilian company in which they help struggling leaders turn their teams around by changing their own actions.

As retired SEALs, they do not allow leaders to pass the blame on to their team members. They believe in the concept of extreme ownership, and they expect every leader to take full responsibility for their team and the actions and outcomes that are derived from the work of the team. While this is true of the people at the top of the leadership chain, it is also true of leaders all the way down the ranks. As Willink and Babin believe it is important for people to understand what it is they are asked to do, they provide plenty of examples to help explain to their reader how and why these principles work. To do this, they begin each chapter with a detailed anecdote of a situation they encountered in Iraq or through training that demonstrates the need for the principle. They then describe the principle and finally conclude the chapter with an example of how the principle works in businesses in the real world. Their book also contains numerous photographs taken in Iraq during wartime.

Winning the War Within

The first of three parts of *Extreme Ownership* deals with winning the war within and explains the concept of extreme ownership. Throughout their book, Willink and Babin discuss the difficulty of urban combat in Iraq. The environment they were in where streets and buildings were not marked made determining who the enemy was and where both the enemy and friendly troops were difficult. On one night, hindered by darkness and the confusion of the presence of many troops, the tragedy of blue-on-blue assault ensued. This means that American and Iraqi forces were firing on soldiers on their own side. Willink describes it as “the worst thing that could happen.” Afterwards, people

up the chain of command wanted to know why and how this could happen. Such a breakdown occurred because people at all levels made mistakes. When attempting to piece together what happened, Willink came to one final conclusion: “I was responsible for everything in Task Unit Bruiser. I had to take complete ownership of what went wrong. That is what a leader does - even if it means getting fired. If anyone was to be blamed and fired for what happened, let it be me.” When meeting to discuss the incident, Willink took full ownership of what happened. Because he took ownership on himself, the leader, and because he took full responsibility for his people, his commanding officer and master chief developed more, not less, trust in him, and relevant parties were able to review the situation and make changes that could make such an incident less likely to happen again in the future.

Willink and Babin believe that quality leadership is vital, and that leads to the title of their second principle: “No Bad Teams, Only Bad Leaders.” In this section, they write about the importance of standards. They do not believe what a leader says is as important as the behavior they either will or will not tolerate from those beneath them. This is so important because poor performance can ensue if leaders do not hold their subordinates accountable for high performance. To exemplify how important leadership is to a team, Willink and Babin discuss the performance of boat crews during Hell Week. During the competitions of one particular Hell Week, one team continually performed well, and one consistently performed poorly. Babin explains how they switched the leaders of these two teams, and suddenly the performance of the lower performing team came up on par with that of the previously best team. The good leader elevated his new team while the cohesion he developed in his previous team did not slack once he left. In short, the problem was not the team, but the leader.

Willink and Babin’s third principle states, “In order to convince and inspire others to follow and accomplish a mission, a leader must be a true believer in the mission.” In short, this means that leaders must understand why it is they are engaging in the mission they are in, so they can communicate that to others and so that they will be willing to take the risks necessary to carry out the task. They describe one business client that rolled out a new compensation plan for employees. Managers became angry at the new plan because they believed their people would seek out employment elsewhere when the plan rolled out. Once the CEO explained the rationale for the new structure and how it would help both individuals and the company, the managers came on board with it. Willink and Babin maintain that it is important for leaders to understand why they are asking their subordinates to perform certain tasks, and if they do not understand the rationale themselves, then they must ask those above them for clarification, so they can lead their team well.

The fourth and final principle related to “winning the war within” is to “check the ego.” Willink writes about how one SEAL commander suggested letting Iraqi troops figure out how to manage the space themselves rather than train them because he was afraid that the Iraqi troop was getting so well prepared that they could outperform the SEALs. This could lead to the SEALs losing their mission. Willink insisted that they must do

what is best for the mission even if that means the SEALs being relocated. This was not an isolated incident with one commander as Willink saw it elsewhere as well. He insists that “Ego clouds and disrupts everything: the planning process, the ability to take good advice, and the ability to accept constructive criticism.” While everyone has an ego, he insists that people keep it in check so groups can perform optimally.

Laws of Combat

The first law of combat the authors discuss is entitled “cover and move.” They explain that the basis of cover and move is teamwork. Teams must avoid performing in silos and pay attention to those around them. Since even the best member of a team fails if the team fails, teamwork is important for all. To illustrate this concept, they discuss a company in which the production manager has serious issues with a subsidiary company his team must use for transportation. In his estimation, this subsidiary company was incompetent and hurt his own objectives. Willink explains that the fact that both companies are owned by the same parent company should help them rather than hinder them because their objectives should be the same. He then explains how since their overall mission, what is best for the parent company, should be the same, and they should be working together to achieve that mission. He recommended that the production manager speak with the other team and find out a way to work together. When the production manager did this, he learned that the other company was seriously understaffed. Because he now understood that this company was not out to sabotage his own, they were able to work together to find solutions. They started working together for the betterment of all.

Willink and Babin’s second law of combat is to simplify. In this chapter, they discuss a proposed patrol that Willink found to be unnecessarily complex, especially in the dangerous area they were operating in. Because they simplified the patrol, when the patrol was attacked, they were closer to support and were able to get the help they needed. He explains that a more complicated plan could have been catastrophic. He also explains that it is not just in combat that things go wrong especially if they are too complex. Things go wrong all the time in all sorts of contexts, and simplified plans help people deal with these unexpected problems. Along with this, a leader’s team must understand the plan clearly. If they do not understand the plan, it may need to be simplified. He writes, “You must brief to ensure the lowest common denominator on the team understands.”

Next Babin goes on to explain prioritizing and executing, the third law of combat. To explain this law, he describes a situation in Iraq in which the troops were in a building, and when they went to leave it, they learned that there was an IED near their only viable exit. The fighters made their way to an uncovered roof top, and one of the men fell many feet to the ground between buildings and needed rescue. To get out of this predicament safely, leadership had to prioritize and execute. In short, they had to determine what needed to be done first, and then do it before moving on to the next objective. Because they used this technique, all of the fighters were able to get out of the situation safely, including the man who had



The idea of prioritizing and executing can help when people find themselves overwhelmed.”

fallen. He explains how problems can snowball in combat, and it is the job of the leader to remain calm. To remind themselves of this, they say, “Relax. Look around, make a call.” It does not work to try to complete multiple tasks at one time. The idea of prioritizing and executing can help when people find themselves overwhelmed.

The last law of combat they describe is that of decentralized command. Willink explains how he expects his subordinate officers to lead when they are in the field, and he expects them to lead aggressively. This is an important concept because if subordinate leaders lead well where they are with their teams, that leaves Willink and other more senior leaders to focus on the bigger picture. He explains that there is no one to look at this bigger picture when he, himself, becomes tangled up in problems his subordinate leaders can and should handle. To enable this, frontline leaders must trust their senior leaders, and they also must understand their mission. It also requires senior leaders to trust their subordinate leaders. Willink explains how military leaders throughout the centuries have learned this task, and he observed the principle in MOUNT training undergone by Task Unit Bruiser. During this training, the SEAL leaders attempted to control everything. At times, this meant one person was overseeing over thirty soldiers. People simply cannot control that many people. To correct this problem, they broke the soldiers up into smaller groups containing between four and six SEALs. This allowed for multiple levels of leadership, and each leader had a manageable number of soldiers to lead. Willink and Babin maintain that “Human beings are generally not capable of managing more than six to ten people, particularly when things go sideways and inevitable contingencies arise.” When teams are broken down into multiple levels, it becomes important that leaders at all levels understand what it is their teams must do and why. In addition, junior leaders must understand which decisions they do and do not have the authority to make, and they must communicate this with their more senior leaders.

Sustaining Victory

The first principle relating to sustaining victory is to plan. In this section, Babin discusses a hostage rescue. The SEALs worked with an Iraqi security force to complete this rescue. They were able to successfully complete this mission because they planned well and executed the plan. He describes mission planning as “never taking anything for granted, preparing for likely contingencies, and maximizing the chance of mission success while minimizing the risk to the troops executing the operation.” He explains that SEALs can never be sure there is no danger in what they are setting out to accomplish. When performing the hostage

rescue, his team learned that there were deadly threats, but this did not hinder them because they had already taken these threats into account during their planning process.

Willink and Babin assert that “planning begins with mission analysis.” A clear understanding of the mission is key if leaders are to have a strong focus and solid execution. A solid mission “must be carefully refined and simplified so that it is explicitly clear and specifically focused to achieve the greater strategic vision for which that mission is a part.” This mission then must be explained to leaders down the line. Leaders at different levels must understand both the purpose and the desired result of the mission if planning is to be effective. That means the mission must be clearly articulated and then clearly communicated to the leaders at various levels. Willink and Babin maintain that if a brief is to be successful, “all members participating in an operation will understand the strategic mission, the Commander’s Intent, the specific mission of the team, and their individual roles within the mission.” They will also understand various contingencies and what they should do when faced with those contingencies. It is important that even the busiest of groups takes the time to analyze its plans continuously in order to improve future missions or projects. This planning process should be standardized across an organization. Babin explains that he took this principle to a business he was aiding. He helped them standardize their processes using some of the tools that SEALs use.

Willink and Babin then move on to discuss both leading up the chain of command and leading down the chain of command. Babin first discusses leading down the chain of command. To explain this, Babin discusses his thought processes when his time in Iraq was coming to an end. He and Willink discussed all they were able to accomplish with their team in Iraq. Despite the crushing loss of fellow combat warriors, they understood that they had successfully taken control of important neighborhoods from insurgents and that populations were now more safe from insurgents. Despite this, when he returned to the States, Babin heard pundits discussing those lost in ways that made them seem like they were just numbers. SEALs themselves would at times criticize the work of those on the front lines. Babin was sure that if anybody truly understood what they accomplished in Iraq, they would see the tremendous benefit of the work they did. When Willink put together a presentation of their accomplishments in Iraq, Babin realized that even as second in command, he did not fully understand the work they did. This made him realize that if even he did not understand the full implication of what they did, then surely his frontline troops who were not privy to such information would struggle to understand it. Willink and Babin both learned that they needed to lead better down the chain of command by asking

more questions of those above them and giving more plan ownership to those down the chain of command on the front lines. It is imperative that senior leaders communicate to junior leaders everything it is they need to know to be successful. This is what they mean by leading down the chain of command.

When discussing leading up the chain of command, Willink and Babin state that a person should take direct responsibility if their boss “isn’t making a decision in a timely manner or providing necessary support for you and your team.” This means that a leader must look to his or her superior for the information or resources needed and ask for them clearly. They acknowledge that leading up the chain of command takes more tact than leading down because a person does not have the authority that comes from rank when dealing with those of a higher rank. Leading up also requires the humility to understand that a person may not have all the information their leader has and that a person’s team or objective might not be the highest priority at the moment to the leader. People need to ask questions of those above them in order to understand more while still understanding that one of their most important jobs is to support their own leader.

The two last principles discussed are decisiveness and uncertainty and discipline equals freedom. Regarding uncertainty, they maintain that a leader very frequently does not have all the information they need to be sure of their path. Despite this, they must avoid letting fear paralyze them and must act with decisiveness. They must make this decision with the information that is available. In regards to discipline, Willink discusses the searches his people were tasked with completing in Iraq. These searches could take considerable time and at times resulted in missed details because they were not carried out with discipline. Once this problem was realized, they worked to create a structured process for these searches. While his people were at first reluctant to carry out searches in this manner, fearing they would take too long, they learned that they shortened the time it took to perform the searches and made them more effective. Discipline ultimately gives people freedom, Willink and Babin maintain. Discipline makes it easier for teams to adapt and be flexible.

The principles Willink and Babin discuss in their book were learned through their time in combat and while training the SEALs. The principles helped them lead in the most dangerous parts of Iraq during critical periods in the war. The principles do not just apply to warfare, however. They apply to leaders at all ranks. They share these principles both in their book and with the companies they consult for, taking wartime principles to companies and organizations of all sizes. Because of this, Willink and Babin are able to demonstrate that great leadership is great leadership wherever it is found, especially when it is centered around the concept of extreme ownership.