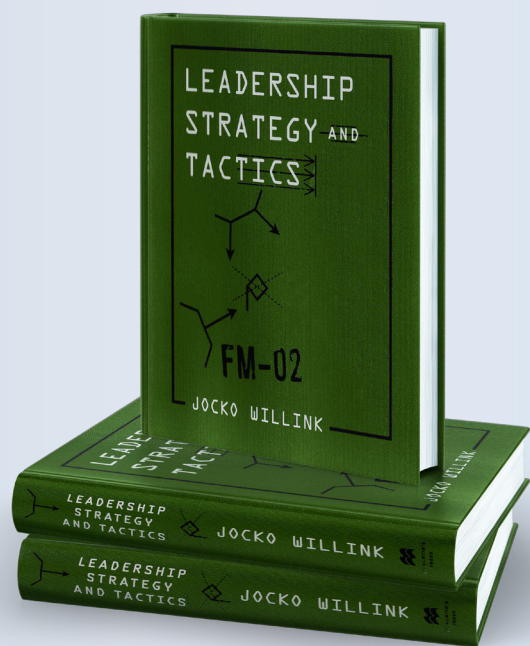


# BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



## Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual

by Jocko Willink

Jocko Willink was a U.S. Navy SEAL for twenty years, rising through the ranks to become the commander of Tank Unit Bruiser, the most decorated special operations unit of the Iraq War. After retiring, Jocko continued on the disciplined path of success, co-founding Echelon Front, a multimillion-dollar leadership and management consulting company, writing the New York Times bestsellers *Extreme Ownership*, *Discipline Equals Freedom*, and *The Dichotomy of Leadership*, along with the *Way of the Warrior Kid* children's book series, and creating one of the top-ranking podcasts, *Jocko Podcast*.

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## Leadership Is Hard Because 'People Are Crazy'

If you aspire to a leadership role in your organization, there are probably two primary paths ahead of you: an academic path, where you examine leadership theory based on historical models and case studies, or a real-life path where you learn from those around you and/or receive mentoring from your boss. This less-structured and often very serendipitous path is known as OJT—on the job training.

In his new book, *Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual*, decorated U.S. Navy SEAL team commander and management consultant Jocko Willink takes the same prescriptive approach to educating his readers as he did in his earlier bestsellers *Extreme Ownership* and *The Dichotomy of Leadership*. Leadership is hard because “people are crazy.” You may be able to identify general patterns of behavior, but when you're dealing with small teams of individuals, whether on the battlefield or in the corporate world, those individual identities will supersede any leadership theory you may have read about in college.

Willink's perspective is inevitably grounded in the military paradigm, but he manages to remain cognizant of his corporate audience, balancing the tough-mindedness of a command leader of men and women who are expected to follow orders, with the fair-mindedness of a leader who is expected to develop the strengths and skills of his direct reports.

### Leadership Strategies

As the book's title implies, Willink approaches the topic in two parts, setting the groundwork in part one with a detailed look at “Leadership Strategies: Foundations, Core Tenets, and Principles.” In the second part, he drills down to more specific recommendations by addressing “Leadership Tactics: Becoming a Leader, Leadership Skills, Maneuvers, and Communication.”

### Foundations

If you're a listener of the *Jocko Podcast*, you will find the direct tone of this book to be very familiar, but Willink isn't above



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## . . . Subordination of your own ego can be even more challenging than understanding the needs of the individual personalities on your team.

sharing stories of his own lack of experience in his first platoon, and his naiveté as a leader. In describing a combat training exercise on a commercial oil rig, he tells a story where his platoon was presented with an unexpected layout, causing everyone to freeze in anticipation of further instructions that never came. Willink was able to detach himself from the intense focus on mission parameters to make a quick decision that allowed the platoon to move forward. That detachment from a singular focus served him well as he rose up the ranks. As leader, you don't need to burden yourself with the expectation of knowing everything about the mission (or project) and every possible outcome. Instead, develop the ability to remain objective so that you can better respond to unanticipated events.

The more you burden yourself with knowing every single detail about the mission, the greater the likelihood that you will fall victim to your own arrogance, not listen to your experienced team, and make the wrong call when a deviation from the mission parameters is clearly needed.

### Core Tenets

Awareness of and control over your own arrogance and ego is a prevailing theme through part one of the book. Transparency, communicating everything to your team (both positive and negative), being humble enough to ask for help when it's clearly needed, and having the humility to never stop learning as a leader, are critical tenets for future success. Having an assigned rank in a chain of command (or an organizational chart) is not an automatic entitlement to influence and respect—they both have to be earned. You do that by demonstrating extreme ownership (of the good outcomes and the bad) and investing the time and effort to build trust and relationships with each of your team members.

Willink reminds us that subordination of your own ego can be even more challenging than understanding the needs of the individual personalities on your team. The more experienced and skilled you become as a leader, the greater the temptation will be to show them which direction to take or decision to make. That not only deprives them of a valuable learning opportunity, it also sends the message that you don't have confidence in them to make the decision on their own.

### Principles

The author runs the risk of alienating his audience with the statement that “Discipline is the best way to take care of your people.” Coming from an experienced military leader, that perspective should not be a surprise, but the fact that he subscribes

to the same approach in a corporate environment is surprising. The ‘tough love’ approach has an underlying message, however. It's your job as leader to make sure your people are as well prepared to succeed as they can be—that's your job—and if you elect to “coddle them” to avoid being unpopular, you fail at that job. Willink isn't advocating that you drive them to burnout, he is arguing that you should know your people well enough as individuals to be able to maintain a balance and push only when needed with the objective of each person achieving their individual goals as part of the goals for the team as a whole.

### Leadership Tactics

The transition from strategy to tactics assumes that the reader has now been appointed to a leadership role. Part two offers some general but valuable homilies that underline the accountability of leadership. It's not a time to kick back and let your former peers carry the weight of the mission or project for you. In fact, it's the exact opposite. If you are to earn the trust and respect of your team, you must work harder than them while being humble, respectful, balanced and honest. Several of Willink's examples underline the message that you only have a limited window of opportunity to get this right. The first time that you behave in a manner that demonstrates a lack of confidence or trust in your team, or you simply throw the weight of your new rank or title around, will be the one and only time you get to do that. You will not earn back the trust you just lost. Worse still, if you make a bad decision and don't own up to it, choosing to throw one of your team under the bus to protect your own ego, you will have lost that team for good.

### Becoming a Leader

The comparison between two platoon members—Larry and Brian—being promoted to LPO's (leading petty officers) demonstrates how easy it can be to get off on the wrong foot. Larry is serious and focuses on the checklist of things to get done. He doesn't let the promotion go to his head, respects the experience of his platoon, and wins their trust and respect easily. Brian, by comparison, attempts to diffuse the tension through humor by announcing his promotion as: “Looks like I'm responsible for all the crap now.” Needless to say, it took Brian a little longer to get his “leadership bearings.”

### Leadership Skills

Much of the advice that Willink offers falls under the category of not doing what you think leaders are supposed to do. Remaining objective (as emphasized in part one) allows you to uncouple from the emotional stress, to read the room more



**... Don't respond to rumors, and don't let rumors get started in the first place—they are a red flag that you aren't communicating effectively.**

accurately and to act accordingly. Iterative decision-making is a great example of this. New leaders are extremely sensitive to the fact that they are in charge now. Being in charge means you make the important decisions, and so you feel pressure to make those decisions. Willink believes that there is often an argument for not making a decision at all—"if it ain't broke don't fix it"—choosing instead to detach and allow the situation to develop and to give you a clearer sense of what is really happening before making a more reasoned decision at an appropriate time.

## Maneuvers

A promotion is often seen as the culmination of a job well done. Willink approaches the topic from a broader perspective, often choosing to use a promotion as a corrective tool, deliberately changing the perspective of an employee who is not performing as expected. He offers examples of high-potential platoon members who become either disruptive or too laid back. In both instances, the platoon member is bored and unchallenged and responds accordingly. Traditional leadership policies would consider both to be unsuitable candidates for promotion, but by deliberately changing their perspectives, Willink was able to bring about dramatic changes in performance.

## Communication

Transparent communication of both positive and negative news is reinforced as being critical to leadership effectiveness throughout the book. In this section, Willink is more concerned about how you communicate with your team, in terms of direct and indirect feedback.

Much of it revolves around the control of emotion. Emotional instability when giving instructions or feedback will sabotage the outcome as well as destroy the message delivery. Preparation is key. Don't respond to rumors, and don't let rumors get started in the first place—they are a red flag that you aren't communicating effectively.

One piece of advice that will probably resonate as being too militaristic is Willink's position on praise. If given too often or too effusively, praise can lead to people relaxing under the impression that they have got this leadership thing figured out and can now coast a little. Again, we have a 'tough love' approach rearing its head, but the concern is valid. Praise should aspire to be a reinforcement not a surprise gift. Some may not need it because they are driven internally by other, more personal, motives. Others may depend on it for ongoing behavior adjustment. It's your job as the leader to figure out who needs which in your team. If you elect a blanket approach of effusive praise

for everyone, Willink argues, you will lose respect and devalue the praise that you give by virtue of the ease and frequency with which it is given.

## Setting the Example

As if you weren't already traumatized by the complexity of leadership responsibilities, Willink closes with the reminder that your team will be watching you constantly. They'll be watching your attitude, your behavior, and even your body language from the tiniest raised eyebrow to the quickest eye-roll or stifled yawn. The subsequent mimicry will be both conscious and unconscious. If you're late or unprepared for a meeting, they will take that as permission to do the same. If you show-up "dressed like a slob" for that meeting, the dress standard for the office will start to decline accordingly. The most powerful test of leadership is whether you can live with that constant close attention and be comfortable setting the example that you want them to follow.

## It Is All on You, But Not About You

As Willink's third book on leadership, the basic premise of *Leadership Strategy and Tactics* should come as no surprise. "When you are a leader, there are no excuses, and there is no one else to blame." No sugar-coating, no soft sell. Being in charge is a responsibility that carries clear and often overwhelming expectations. The prescriptive, no-nonsense style may take some getting used to, but the veracity of the message isn't diminished by it.

Leadership books are especially susceptible to 'flavor-of-the-month' theories by equally 'flavor-of-the-month' consultancies promoting new systems or organizational constructs designed to launch your company into the next great corporate paradigm. If that's for you, this book isn't.

Willink's position is that there is no universal panacea for leadership because "people are crazy." Promoting generally applicable solutions in that environment leaves you herding cats. If, instead, you focus on how you need to conduct yourself in a leadership role and what each of the individual members of your platoon or team need from you in that role, your chances of success will be greatly improved.