

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win

Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, New York: St. Martin's Press (2015)

Review by: Ecatarina M. Garcia, SMSgt, USAF

What do the combat operations of two battle-tested Navy SEALs have to do with leadership best practices? As it turns out, the connection is quite remarkable and relevant to any leadership context. *Extreme Ownership* is a well-organized and thought-provoking piece that applies leadership lessons learned on the battlefield to everyday accounts of leaders in the private sector. The authors take the reader on a journey through intense battle scenes exploring each of their combat-tested leadership principles in extreme scenarios. Those principles are then translated to an industry setting heightening the relevance and drawing clear connections to day-to-day leadership challenges.

Jocko Willink and Leif Babin are former Navy SEAL officers who served together on Task Force (TF) Bruiser in 2006. Their time together on TF Bruiser saw some of the deadliest and harshest rigors of war while conducting sustained urban operations in Iraq, including the infamous battle for Ar Ramadi. Upon leaving the Iraqi battlespace, the authors developed a leadership training course targeting the development of Navy SEAL officers in line to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq. Understanding the transferability of their combat leadership lessons, they now lead Echelon Front teaching leadership principles to businesses across industry.

While *Extreme Ownership* does contain exciting and powerful war stories, it is, in fact, a leadership book. The foundational principle that lies as the groundwork for all the lessons in the book is ownership. The authors conclude that all leaders must own everything in their battlespace, whether their teams are large or small. In this sense, the leader is responsible for all the team's issues, challenges, and mistakes. Regardless of the context, the blame falls squarely on the leader; thus, leaders must take ownership—extreme ownership.

Willink and Babin structure their work into three main parts. Part 1, "Winning the War Within," centers around the necessary mindset to lead winning teams. The foundational principle dictates that "the leader must own everything in his or her world" (p. 30). In this respect, the leader is accountable for the performance and failures of the team. While understanding this basic premise is simple, the authors argue that it is not easy. Another mindset principle explores accountability through the mantra "it's not what you preach, it's what you tolerate."

(p. 54). Perhaps a semi-controversial phrase, Willink and Babin contend that there are no bad teams, only bad leaders. The core of this argument reverts to the idea of extreme ownership. If the unit is failing, then it is a failure of the leader. The leader must develop a culture of ownership from the highest of echelons to the lowest. Moreover, the leader must be a true believer in the mission. To inspire the team, the leaders must align their habits of thoughts and actions to the vision in which they genuinely believe. The final principle, and arguably one of the most salient, is the concept of seeing beyond one's ego. This is the age-old adage of humility in leadership, yet to read the tale from some of the military's most well-trained and effective operators truly puts this concept into context.

Part 2 of the piece moves from mindset to the section titled "Laws of Combat." These simple but often overlooked principles include cover and move, simplicity, prioritize and execute, and decentralized command. These principles are the pseudo recipe for achieving success within teams. When listed out as a string of terms, they appear to be reminiscent of stagnant military doctrine far below the threshold for what one would consider revolutionary. However, in the authors' application, there is something profound and authentic in this simplicity.

Part 3, "Sustaining Victory," does something that other leadership books often fail to address. It acknowledges the dichotomy of leadership and describes the delicate balancing act leaders must perform to sustain success. From detailed planning to executing decisions through ambiguity to balancing when to toe the line, the authors speak the plights of many leaders.

Each principle is first described through a battlefield story. Then the principle itself is explained and dissected. Finally, it is applied to a business setting. This structured breakdown of each principle moves the

reader from feeling, to understanding, to application. These leadership philosophies are rooted in the authors' dissection of their experiences and the trial and error of each principle in combat operations as practitioners. In other words, these lessons are backed by experience and tested in both combat and non-combat environments.

There are very few dull moments in this work. Beyond the intense stories, the logical structure makes this a manual of sorts. Of course, leadership inherently operates in the gray, but the foundational principles in *Extreme Ownership* are, as the authors would argue, applicable to any leader of teams both large and small.