

# **The Dichotomy Of Leadership by Jocko Willink & Leif Babin | Book Summary by Paul Minors**

# INTRODUCTION

## Who is this book for?

This book was written for leaders of large and small teams, for men and women, for any person who aspires to better themselves. It serves as a useful guide to people who want to build, train, and lead high-performance winning teams. Narrating exciting accounts of SEAL combat operations, the enclosed lessons learned will help leaders achieve victory.

## About the authors

John Gretton "Jocko" Willink is an American podcaster, author, and retired US Navy SEAL. He received the Silver Star and Bronze Star for his service in the Iraq War. He is the author of 5 best-selling books, known mostly for the book Extreme Ownership. He is also the co-founder of the consulting firm Echelon Front.

Leif Babin is a former US Navy SEAL officer, co-author of #1 New York Times bestseller Extreme Ownership, and co-founder of Echelon Front, where he serves as President/COO, leadership instructor, speaker, and strategic advisor.

## In this summary

The Dichotomy Of Leadership, written by the #1 New York Times bestselling authors of Extreme Ownership, reveals a stellar approach to help leaders recognise and attain the leadership balance crucial to victory. With examples from the authors' combat and training experiences in the SEAL teams, and then a demonstration of how each lesson applies to the business world, Willink and Babin clearly explain the dichotomy of leadership. Let's find out what these lessons are!

# BOOK SUMMARY

## FINDING THE BALANCE

In their previous best-selling book, *Extreme Ownership*, Jocko Willink and Leif Rabin laid out the four Laws of Combat:

1. Cover and Move
2. Simple
3. Prioritise and Execute
4. Decentralised Command

Most importantly, they talked about how effective leaders react if mistakes happen: they don't place the blame on others, they take ownership of the mistakes, determine what went wrong, develop solutions to correct those mistakes, and prevent them from happening again as they move forward, enhancing their team's effectiveness with each iteration.

However, unlike what its title suggested, true leadership seldom requires extreme ideas or attitudes: leadership requires balance. Achieving the proper balance in each of the many dichotomies is actually the most difficult aspect of leadership.

This book will help leaders recognise these dichotomies and find the equilibrium between opposing forces: being aggressive but cautious, disciplined but not rigid, being a leader but also a follower.

Let's discover how to balance people, the mission, and yourself.

# BALANCING PEOPLE

## The Ultimate Dichotomy

The most difficult dichotomy in leadership is this: to care deeply for each individual in the team, while at the same time accepting the risks necessary to accomplish the mission.

The true leader must find the balance between building powerful, strong relationships with his or her subordinates, and recognising that there is “a job to do” that might put the very same people the leader cares about at risk.

In a warzone, this ultimate dichotomy might even cost people’s lives. In modern business, this scenario brutally pans out in case you face the dilemma of firing good subordinates you love, in order to keep the business alive, make it profitable, or make the rest of the team more productive.

## Own It All, But Empower Others

Another dichotomy in leadership: to find the right balance where people have enough guidance to execute, but at the same time the freedom to make decisions and take ownership.

A leader must explain the broad goal and the why of the mission (allowing subordinates to take ownership and plan the execution), while setting boundaries with simple, clear, and concise directions (taking ownership and micromanaging when the team gets off course).

In modern business, leaders often micromanage every aspect of a launch, turning themselves into the bottlenecks of the operation and their subordinates into robots who just sit around and wait to be told what to do. If leaders explain the why and the goal of the mission, the team will answer the questions and find solutions themselves, instead of constantly replying on the instructions of the leader.

## Resolute, but Not Overbearing

It is critical for leaders to find the balance between standing firm and enforcing rules, and giving ground and allowing the rules to bend. Leaders shouldn’t be too lenient, setting high standards for the team to achieve greatness, but also they cannot

become overbearing, domineering or inflexible on matters of little strategic importance.

As a leader, you need to prioritise the areas where standards cannot be bend, explaining the why, the benefits, and the negative consequences of not following them (“because I said so” is off). Meanwhile, it is crucial to allow some slack in less critical areas for subordinate leaders to take ownership.

In modern business, leaders focus too much on enforcing trivial policies, such as ‘no phone’ meetings, instead of prioritising stricter standards in crucial areas, such as the company-wide implementation of a new, unfamiliar software that will boost overall productivity in the long run, by helping their subordinates understand the why and the benefits behind this change.

## **When to Mentor, When to Fire**

Another uncomfortable dichotomy leaders often face: they must do everything possible to help develop and improve the performance of individuals on the team, but they must also let people go when they do not have what it takes to get the job done.

*“Most underperformers don’t need to be fired, they need to be led.”*

However, once all efforts made to help an underperformer improve have failed, then a leader has to make the tough call to let that person go, so that their presence doesn’t have a negative consequence on everyone’s performance.

In modern business, a leader must remember that the performance of the team trumps the performance of a single individual. Investing too many resources in an individual that doesn’t improve means others are being ignored, impacting the whole mission. If the individual can’t be successfully transferred into another area of the business, then they have to be fired.

# BALANCING THE MISSION

## Train Hard, but Train Smart

Leaders can't avoid the dichotomy of training: too easy training that doesn't stretch the capabilities of the participants minimises their improvement, while too overwhelming training diminishes the lessons they could learn from it.

Yet, we shouldn't forget the authors' quotes:

*"There is no growth in the comfort zone." & "Every combat leader must be humble or get humbled."*

Leaders must train their team very hard, simulating the immense challenges of real life and applying pressure to decision-makers, so that they don't "get humbled" when things spin out of control, but not too hard, getting trainees demoralised. For this to happen, training must:

1. Be realistic - based upon scenarios likely to occur in real life, with takeaways immediately applicable to the team's mission.
2. Focus on the fundamentals - battle-tested tactics that do not change.
3. Be repetitive - where each person gets better with iterations.

In the business world, although there's nothing better than real-world experience, the only way to prepare junior leaders is to train them, placing them in tough scenarios that will prepare them for real-world challenges.

## Aggressive, Not Reckless

A common dichotomy that perplexes energetic leaders: being "aggressive" on execution is not always the answer - it must be balanced with logic and detailed analysis of risk versus reward.

Being passive makes problems escalate out of control. Problems aren't going to solve themselves - a leader must be aggressive on implementing solutions. However,

this attitude still must be balanced with caution and careful consideration to mitigate excessive risk and maximise rewards.

For modern entrepreneurs, Default: Aggressive attitude pushes teams to test, solve problems, and capitalise on opportunities, but failing to plan for contingencies - detached and unemotional - might lead to a failed business.

## **Disciplined, Not Rigid**

Leaders love discipline, but they often forget the following dichotomy: While disciplined following of operating procedures is a powerful tool for development, excessive discipline can kill free thinking and creativity.

Standard operating procedures (SOP) are powerful, proven, repeatable processes and methodologies, helping organisations adjust and improve existing SOPs instead of crafting new plans from scratch.

However, disciplined SOPs are not fixed, inflexible laws. They are guidelines to deviate from, when acting with adaptability and common sense. Such freedom allows SOPs to best support teams and their mission.

In real-world business, following too closely highly-converting, proven sales scripts might hinder the chance to form a real, long-term relationship with the customer or partner, making teams sound like soulless, 'perfect' robots.

## **Hold People Accountable, but Don't Hold Their Hands**

Accountability is a powerful tool for leaders, but it creates a dichotomy:

Intrusive accountability can be used as a helpful tool, but only when paired with education about the why of the mission, for the team to perform led by their own intrinsic drive, without direct oversight.

Yes, with enough oversight leaders can achieve 100% success in execution, but they will fail tremendously in developing trustworthy subordinate leaders and, as operations grow more complicated, they will be physically unable to personally inspect everything, leading the team towards certain failure.

In modern business, for example, if leaders help employees understand why certain seemingly trivial actions (like logging a simple entry) helps the company's long-term growth and, eventually, their own personal success (and paycheck!), occasional

inspection will be merely a tool in the leader's arsenal, not the norm. The employees will log the entries because they will hold themselves accountable.



# BALANCING YOURSELF

## A Leader and a Follower

One of the toughest dichotomies for a leader: in order to be a good leader, ready to take charge and make crucial calls for the good of the team and mission, you must also be a good follower.

Being a good follower strengthens your leadership in the eyes of the team, demonstrating that not having all the answers and leaning on the expertise & ideas of others is a part of good leadership: it helps accomplish the mission!

Failing to follow lawful orders also creates antagonistic relationships, which negatively impact the willingness of the boss to take input and suggestions from the subordinate leader.

Practically, in the business world many junior leaders hinder their relationship with their senior boss with the way they speak and act, failing as followers. A great follower takes ownership of their own mistakes, builds trust with their boss, and demonstrates through actions how they plan to improve.

## Plan, but Don't Overplan

Another tricky dichotomy for strategic leaders: you cannot plan for every contingency, however you shouldn't dismiss likely threats or problems that could arise.

Planning is critical; failing to mitigate risk and not preparing for likely contingencies is to set the team up for failure. Overplanning, on the other hand, creates even more challenges, detracting the team and slowing them down on their way to accomplish a mission.

The most effective teams build flexible plans. Prepare at most for the 3 or 4 most probable contingencies, along with the worst-case scenario.

In the contemporary business world, many rapid expansion companies embrace risk in order to grow, but they get caught up with their ambitious plans and fail to mitigate the risks they can control, putting jobs, careers, capital, strategic initiatives, and long-term success at stake.

## **Humble, Not Passive**

A great lesson for every leader comes from the following dichotomy: leaders must be humble enough to be open to new ideas and better tactics and strategies, but also ready to stand firm when facing issues that negatively impact the mission and the team.

Humility is the most important quality in a leader. It means checking your ego, accepting constructive criticism, and taking ownership for your mistakes. It also means understanding the importance of strategic direction from your boss, and accepting that you don't have it all figured out.

Being too humble or passive, however, can be disastrous, especially when a strategy coming from the superiors will almost certainly endanger the team or harm the strategic mission.

In the business world, a subordinate leader must carefully prioritise when to push back, or their concerns might not be taken seriously when they truly matter, ultimately putting the team at risk. Likewise, CEOs need to seek feedback and address the concerns of their key leaders, encouraging department heads to voice their opinions and express their disagreements.

## **Focused, but Detached**

The final dichotomy of leadership: to become overwhelmed by the minor details begets failure, but to be too detached from the details is to lose control and fail the mission.

Effective leaders are detached, in a position where they can see strategically the bigger picture. And, while all leaders must be attentive to details, getting sucked into the myriad details of the planning and approval process means struggling to lead and support their teams.

In the world of business, we often see leaders losing track of the bigger picture when stuck between making phone calls, dealing with urgencies, and responding to emails. It is important that they block time and (head)space to detach and recognise what the mission's priorities are.

# CONCLUSION

## Key Takeaways

Leadership requires balance between the many dichotomies.

Above all, leaders must prioritise the success of their mission and the security of their team, by mitigating risk and taking extreme ownership.

Successful leaders care about their team, but also recognise the risks involved in order to accomplish a mission.

A great leader accepts all responsibilities, but they also give space for subordinate leaders to shine and take ownership, too.

Being 'aggressive' when executing doesn't mean being reckless.

In order to be a good leader, you must also be a good follower.

## Further Reading

*Extreme Ownership* by Jocko Willink & Leif Babin. The #1 New York Times bestseller explains the four principles of leadership, revolutionising business management and challenging leaders everywhere to win.

*Dare To Lead* By Brené Brown. This book is about own your fears, choosing courage over comfort and whole hearts over armour, and building an organisational culture based on bravery & vulnerability.

*Guidelines* is my eBook that summarises the main lessons from 33 of the best-selling self-help books in one place. It is the ultimate book summary; Available as a 80-page ebook and 115-minute audio book. Guidelines lists 31 rules (or guidelines) that you should follow to improve your productivity, become a better leader, do better in business, improve your health, succeed in life and become a happier person.

## Action Steps

1. Identify the 12 leadership dichotomies in your own business.

2. Monitor your reactions to understand where you keep a balanced approach and where you need to re-balance.

3. Read Extreme Ownership by Willink and Babin to fully understand the power of effective leadership.