

Extreme Ownership by Jocko Willink | Book Summary by Paul Minors

INTRODUCTION

Who is this summary for?

If you are a leader in any area of your life then this is a great read for you. Extreme Ownership is written by Jocko Willink, a SEAL leader who explains how the lessons he learned in combat are relevant to leaders in any role. The importance of team is emphasised, you are only as good as the men or woman behind you. This book provides fundamental leadership lessons through Willink's insightful combat experiences and stories. Willink examines a number of leadership concepts that have been proven as effective in both combat and business scenarios.

About the author

American Jocko Willink served 20 years in the United States Navy SEALs, after multiple deployments in Asia, Middle East, and Europe, Willink retired in 2010. He has since written Extreme Ownership with some help from fellow SEAL Leif Babin and launches the Echelon Front where they teach leadership principles. Willink now hosts the [Jocko Podcast](#) weekly with Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu expert Echo Charles.

In this summary

Willink's book is dedicated to leadership and we'll begin the summary with a brief description of what Willink considers to be an effective leader. We'll move on to a discussion around under-performers, teams, leaders, and ego before diving into the second part of the book, where Willink outlines the 'laws of combat' and ultimately the laws of leadership. The final section in Willink's book is dedicated to maintaining the victory of leadership, what a leaders checklist should look like and what some common things leaders need to be aware of are. We'll talk about missions a lot in this summary, but keep in mind that a mission doesn't have to be combat related, consider any big task or project you find yourself facing your 'mission'.

BOOK SUMMARY

LEADERSHIP

The first point that Willink makes in his book is that a leader is only as good as their team. A leader can not lead alone, they need a team behind them with a common goal. And Willink explains that the only true test for a successful leader is whether or not his team finds success.

"For all the definitions, descriptions, and characterizations of leaders, there are only two that matter: effective and ineffective. Effective leaders lead successful teams that accomplish their mission and win. Ineffective leaders do not."

Willink explains that a leader needs to be humble and understand when they were wrong. Owning up to mistakes and establishing a way to right any errors is fundamental to being an effective leader. Leaders need to leave the ego at the door, and their agenda is entirely devoted to their team, they need to forget about themselves as an individual. Willink's perception of an effective leader is someone who is able to focus purely on their team and the task at hand.

LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

Something that all leaders need to keep in mind is that you are entirely responsible. It all comes down to you. Willink explains that this responsibility is at the core of being an effective leader, that's why he calls it extreme ownership - you really have to own the actions and outcomes of the team behind you.

This responsibility goes for any successes, and any failures, it's not all about the good outcomes, you have to own it when things go wrong. Willink explains that in any organisation, the leader must face up and take all of the blame. The ability to acknowledge any failures, and own up to mistakes is a fundamental part of being an effective leader. You then need to establish a plan on how to fix any mistakes made. It's all down to the leader.

But what about when the team members aren't doing as instructed, or their actions have led to the problems? Regardless, Willink stresses the importance that an effective leader will never blame their team. Part of extreme ownership is understanding that your team member's actions are a reflection of your leadership. Leaders are required to ensure that their team is well informed, well practiced and able to perform as expected. Any issues from team members reflect on the leader, not on the member themselves.

When you have an underperformer

As a leader, it's inevitable that you will at some point, come across a team member that is under-performing and essentially letting the team down. In this situation, Willink explains that it is the leader's responsibility to dedicate time to mentoring and training them with the aim of getting them up to scratch. In cases where this works, then you can consider this a success. However, Willink explains that there will be circumstances where someone continues to underperform. When this happens, it's important that the leader makes the tough decision to let them go, opening up a spot for someone else who is able to do what is required of them.

"A leader who exercises Extreme Ownership must be loyal to the team and the mission above any individual. It is all on the leader."

Willink acknowledges that it's no easy task to be a leader and take on complete responsibility, especially when facing a failure. An effective leader has to have qualities of humility and courage. Being able to let go of your own ego, and

consistently work on weaknesses and solving problems is the only way to build an effective team and have successes. And although the leader must take full responsibility for any failures, Willink explains that this is not the case for successes. Instead, the leader will credit their team and the members for successes and positive outcomes.

A bad leader = a bad team

It's important to remember that a bad team is credited to bad leadership. If they are not given the proper guidance and training then you cannot expect them to be effective. Willink emphasises the importance of a leader who establishes their expectations from the beginning. Make it known what is expected of every team member and be constantly striving for improvement. This is how a leader should lead. The team should be able to continue on their own without further instruction, even in the absence of their leader.

"When leaders who epitomize Extreme Ownership drive their teams to achieve a higher standard of performance, they must recognize that when it comes to standards, as a leader, it's not what you preach, it's what you tolerate."

Willink talks about the battlefield a lot, both literally and figuratively. And he explains that in both situations, there are never bad teams. Only bad leaders who fail their teams. And this is possibly the most important thing any leader needs to remember.

Leaders need to believe

Willink stresses the importance of a leader truly believing in the mission or task at hand. If the leader does not believe in the work they are doing, how can they be expected to inspire their team members too?

"If a leader does not believe, he or she will not take the risks required to overcome the inevitable challenges necessary to win. And they will not be able to convince others."

A leader needs to carefully consider their mission and ensure that their beliefs, thoughts, and vision can align with the actions and outcome of the mission. Willink explains that it becomes pretty clear when a leader believes in the work they are doing. It becomes clear to all the team members and it is easier for them to follow suit.

Ego

As we've previously discussed, a leader really has to ignore their own ego and any personal aspirations. Willink explains that having an ego can be dangerous as it clouds your judgment. Things like constructive criticism and advice can be ignored due to an overactive ego. And Willink points out that there is a big difference between confidence and being cocky. A leader should always be confident, but never cocky.

LAWS OF COMBAT AND LAWS OF LEADERSHIP

When discussing the Navy SEALs, Willink discusses what he considers to be one of the most important tactics: cover and move. This pretty much translates to teamwork. Teamwork requires every single member working collectively towards the same mission. So we know that teamwork is essential, but it's the leader's job to keep everyone on task, leaders need to remind each team member that they are not an individual, but part of a larger whole. A successful team works together seamlessly, but each member has to do their part and support each other. And Willink explains that when a team reacts success, every individual team member gets to share the responsibility for the success.

Simplification

Willink stresses that as a leader, you need to ensure that your plans, orders, and tactics are simple and straightforward. When things get complicated, people misunderstand, wires get crossed and inevitably things go wrong. As a leader, you need to communicate the plans and tactics as simply as possible, make sure that everyone understands every step and be sure to not over-complicate any stage. Consider whoever on the team has the least knowledge or ability, and address your whole team as if they all had the same understanding. Ensure that everyone is on the same page when approaching a mission.

Prioritisation and execution

Willink points out that at all times, a leader needs to be aware of their top priorities. When facing a problem, a leader needs to know exactly what needs to be addressed first and what can be dealt with later. You don't want to be overwhelmed with numerous issues, unable to identify which one is the most important.

The key principle that Willink wants leaders to remember is that you need to prioritise and execute. Especially when under pressure. This requires leaders to be able to predict possible outcomes, anticipate problems and ideally always be thinking one or two steps ahead. If a leader can stay ahead of the game, they should be able to consider solutions to their problems before they even arise.

How Leaders should prioritise and execute in business, teams, and organisations:

- Be able to identify the problem with the highest priority.

- Relay the priorities to your team in a straightforward manner.
- Establish the best solution, asking top teammates for assistance when possible.
- Execute the solution, re-direct all efforts until the highest-priority issue is solved.
- Repeat these steps with the remaining problems.
- Acknowledge that priorities can change based on circumstances. Ensure that everyone is aware when this happens.
- Don't let tunnel vision on one priority mean that you fail to see other problems arising.

Decentralising

Willink explains that it is a fact that leaders are not able to be in complete control of and effectively manage more than 10 people. This becomes particularly clear in times of stress. This is why Willink believes that being able to decentralise all of the power is a fundamental part of successful leadership. When you are faced with a team of more than 10 people, you need to separate the team out into groups of 4 or 5. Within the smaller groups, identify 1 person as their leader. This selected leader needs to work closely with the other leaders and the overall leader in order to ensure they are all working towards the same goals with the same tactics.

Willink calls these people junior leaders and he explains that it is critical that they have decision-making ability and the power to do so. If you don't grant them any power, then consider them useless. When a large team is organised in this way, you can effectively lead a large group of people and reach success.

VICTORIOUS LEADERS AND PLANNING

The first step in any planning progress is a thorough analysis of the mission at hand. Willink stresses the importance that the leader understands the ins and outs of the entire mission, and is able to relay the necessary information to their team. It's important that the leader identifies different possible outcomes and problems that may arise in the early stages.

"A broad and ambiguous mission results in lack of focus, ineffective execution, and mission creep. To prevent this, the 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. The mission must explain the overall purpose and desired result, or "end state," of the operation.

Willink explains that further to having a thorough understanding of the entire mission, a team that constantly revisits their strategies and measures their success will be more effective long-term. This will give teams the ability to adapt the strategy when required and learn valuable lessons that can take to further missions.

A leaders planning checklist:

1. Understand and analyse the mission. Be able to identify the end goal.
2. Consider assets, resources, personnel and time restraints.
3. Decentralise the power, find key leaders in your larger team to help plan the best strategy.
4. Identify the best strategy, consider the simplest approach.
5. Ensure key leaders understand the selected plan.
6. Understand the possible outcomes at each stage of your strategy, have backup plans.
7. Eliminate the possibility of as many risks as possible.
8. Delegate to junior leaders where possible.

9. Keep a close eye on the plan and any new information that arises.
10. Clearly brief all personnel and ensure everyone has a complete understanding
11. Allow time for questions and discussions from your team members
12. Once executed, establish a de-brief where you discuss lessons learned and things you could have done better.

Leading Up and Down

"Any good leader is immersed in the planning and execution of tasks, projects, and operations to move the team toward a strategic goal. Such leaders possess insight into the bigger picture and why specific tasks need to be accomplished."

Willink explains that although the main leader will understand the big picture and understand all of the ins and outs of the task at hand, it is not entirely necessary that the junior members have all of the same knowledge. They obviously need as much information as required in order to lead their team through the correct actions and stages. Similarly, the junior leaders will have knowledge about tactical details that the senior leaders do not need to know. It's important that leaders of both levels understand the other's role and what is required of them.

"It is paramount that senior leaders explain to their junior leaders and troops executing the mission how their role contributes to big-picture success."

Decisiveness and Uncertainty

As a leader, it is pretty easy to want to hold off committing or executing a plan until you are 100% certain that you have come up with the best option. However, Willink explains that sometimes waiting for this certainty only delays things, and this can cause more problems. A really great leader will understand that research is important but in many cases, they need to have the ability to make important decisions based on educated guesses. Willink stresses that in these situations, a leader should look on past experiences and consider the possible outcomes in order to make these decisions. Sometimes you have to just get started before you

are 100% certain, but a great leader will be able to lead a team effectively to the right actions.

WILLINK'S FORMULA FOR A TRUE LEADER

- Must be a leader but also capable of following.
- Cannot be intimidated.
- Has a level of aggression that's not overbearing.
- Is calm and centered but still humane, not robotic.
- Is confident always but not cocky.
- Always be brave but not foolish.
- Be competitive but when facing a loss, be gracious and a good sport.
- Is not obsessed by the tiny details but knows when they are important.
- Both physically and mentally strong.
- Is humble.
- Has a good relationship with team members but isn't too close. Remains professional.
- Has nothing to prove but everything to prove.

CONCLUSION

Key Takeaways

- A leader is only as good as the team behind them.
- A leader is entirely responsible for their teams actions.
- When facing failure, a leader must take responsibility.
- If a team member isn't performing, it's up to the leader to try and mentor them. If they continue to under-perform, the leader must consider the whole team and let the member go.
- Leaders need to be confident but not cocky, it's important that they leave their ego at the door and remember the teams goals are their goals. Any personal agenda must be forgotten.
- It's important that a leader truly believes in the work that they are doing.
- Leaders should learn how to decentralise power and responsibility. Have junior leaders leading their own teams within the larger team.
- Communication is key, ensure that everyone understands what is expected of them at all times.
- It's important to keep strategies as simple as possible.
- Leaders need to be able to identify the top priority at any time.
- It's a leaders job to understand the 'big picture' and full scope of any mission. Then relay the necessary information to junior leaders and team members.

Further Reading

A similar book with similar principles is *The Way of the Seal* by Mark Divine. Divine identifies a number of skills that you can build on and develop. These skills align with the Seals way of life and will enable you to think and act like an 'elite warrior'. These lessons in leadership and life are applicable to business, personal life and any

challenges you may face. Mark Divine has a series of exercises and questions that will help you to develop the necessary skills. *The Way of the Seal* is an enjoyable and educational read for anyone looking to develop their leadership skills.

If you enjoyed this then definitely check out *Leaders Eat Last* by Simon Sinek. As a leader, it's important to create a culture that leaves everyone happy and fulfilled, and this is exactly what Simon describes. Simon emphasises that when an environment is built on trust, teams will work together, have each other's backs, survive and thrive.

How to Win Friends & Influence People by Dale Carnegie is a book that aims to help you convince people to share your way of thinking, to avoid arguments and to become more liked.

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

- There are many concepts in this book that can be applied to leaders of any kind, whether it be a leader in battle, of a sports team, of a business or even of a family. See what you can take away from this and apply into your own leadership role.
- Download the complete book on [Amazon](#).

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