SUMMARY

EXTREME OWNERSHIP

JOCKO WILLINK AND LEIF BABIN

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Summary of “Extreme Ownership” by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin

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Learn about the principles that drive American Navy SEALs to succeed.

Introduction

How do you decide who lives and dies? How do you make extreme tactical decisions that determine the fate of thousands of lives? These are the incredible pressures that dominate the daily lives of Navy SEALs. Most of us will never face these pressures or be required to succeed under the same conditions, so you might find yourself wondering why you need a Navy SEAL's top tips in your life. But the authors argue that their success strategies are relevant because, just like you and me, Navy SEALs are average human beings too. The circumstances we face might be different but we can use their training methods to unlock the best versions of ourselves and achieve extreme success, no matter what our futures hold.

Extreme Leadership

As a businessman or a sales executive, you're unlikely to encounter life or death leadership situations. But whether you're a Navy SEAL or not, you're still under a great deal of pressure to lead your team to success. That's why the authors believe that we can apply the leadership secrets of Navy SEALs to our daily lives. And extreme ownership and extreme leadership go hand in hand. For example, one of the authors, Jocko Willink, learned this firsthand in 2012 when he was serving in Ramadi, Iraq. Faced with an unexpected attack that cost the life of one of his men, Willink knew there was only one thing he could do: admit that he was responsible for everything that went wrong.

At first glance, that might sound counter-intuitive, and it certainly sounds contradictory to the business models of today. Because we're often encouraged to let go of the things we can't control, to surrender our worries, and accept our limitations, saying, "I'm responsible for all the bad things that happened" sounds like the worst thing you could do! But Willink learned that that isn't the case. Here's why: accepting responsibility is the first step to practicing extreme ownership. So, even though Willink didn't personally attack his soldier or cause him to lose his life, as the leader of the unit, he did fail to plan for all eventualities. As a result, he had to accept that, as the leader of the unit, he was responsible for the lives of his men. Accepting this responsibility gave him the freedom to be honest with his commanders and admit his fallibility by owning up to his mistakes. And although you might expect that he would have gotten fired, nothing could be farther from the truth! In fact, he not only kept his job-- he earned the respect of his superior officers.

That's because Willink and his commanders understood that being wrong isn't the worst thing that can happen to you. We lose sight of this sometimes because nobody wants to be the fall guy. Nobody wants to admit they screwed up, whether it's because we're afraid of being wrong or because we're afraid of how people will see us. This often prevents us from

taking responsibility when we should and as a result, we fail to learn from--or correct-- our mistakes. But when we take ownership, especially in difficult situations, we're forced to confront our behavior and initiate change. That's why Willink's commanding officers respected him more and why they continued to trust him with the command of his unit. Because by taking ownership, he proved that he was willing to own up to his mistakes and work towards self-improvement.

Willink's experience also taught him another lesson that is integral to the core ethos of Navy SEALs. He learned that when you fail to take responsibility, you also fail the mission (the worst possible outcome for a Navy SEAL). That's because responsibility starts at the top. If Willink, as a leader, passes the buck and blames the subordinates he was responsible for leading, then his example sets a standard for cowardice and blame. And in so doing, he becomes responsible for the failures of his men, because the culture he created taught them to shirk responsibility and avoid becoming better soldiers. The strongest units, by contrast, are those guided by SEALs who lead with extreme responsibility and set an example of extreme ownership that motivates their subordinates to follow their example and become better people.

Cover and Move

In this chapter, we'll examine the experience of this book's second author, Leif Babin. Babin faced a very different set of circumstances that taught him an equally important lesson. He was also stationed in Ramadi, Iraq, and tensions in the city were high; if he and his team were seen, there was no question that they would be shot on sight. But when his unit wound up alone under enemy lines, without backup, and with no resources for protection, Babin was faced with an impossible choice. He had to lead his team back to base camp and to safety, but how? There appeared to be no course of action that would allow them to escape unseen. Desperate to stay true to his unit's goal ("evacuation without injury"), Babin finally made the risky decision to lead his team straight through the city in the blind hope that they would somehow evade detection.

In this example, of course, it's not hard to identify Babin's mistake--especially when he later learned that he could have avoided this course of action altogether. Although he didn't know it at the time, there was another SEAL unit nearby that could have helped them get out. But because he was so close to the problem and so desperate to find a solution, he never even thought to radio for help! Babin realized that in this respect, he had failed to uphold one of the most basic training principles learned by any Navy SEAL: the value of "cover and move." Put simply, "cover and move" means that, because they are all Navy SEALs, every unit must unite under that commonality and work together as a team to protect each other. Operating under the principle of "cover and move" means recognizing that in-fighting has no place in the life of any Navy SEAL because the real enemy is external, not internal. Banding together over a common enemy provides a powerful motivation to work together, resolve your differences, and have each other's back. And this applies whether you're a Navy SEAL or an executive!

Prioritize and Execute

How do you handle yourself under pressure? Do you rise to the occasion and work to find a solution? Or do you crumple in the face of conflict? Reacting appropriately in stressful situations is a struggle every person faces and our responses can define both our character and the outcome of the conflict. The authors learned this firsthand when they were deep in enemy territory and faced with a host of unexpected and urgent problems. One of the men in their unit had fallen into an enemy trap and been injured. But that was the least of their worries; bereft of both backup and protection, any attempt to rescue him would leave the entire unit dangerously vulnerable. And in addition to these pressing concerns, the unit had identified an enemy bomb in one corner of the building.

To say that this situation was stressful would be putting it mildly! Faced with seemingly impossible choices and the potential loss of life, it would be easy to panic and freeze up.

But Babin drew strength from another core SEAL principle he had learned: "prioritize and execute." The imperative of prioritize and execute is pretty much exactly what it sounds like: it calls you to assess the priorities in front of you and use that information to make a sound and rational decision. In basic training, this principle had been drilled into them through the mantra: "relax, look around, make a call." So that's exactly what Babin did. By implementing this practice, Babin was able to determine that the unit's security was his first priority. They were no good to anyone if all of them were dead, so he had to get his entire unit of danger first and foremost. Once he had gotten his men to safety, he could come back for the wounded soldier and execute a rescue mission. And lastly, he would conduct a head count of the unit to confirm that everyone was safe and conclude that they had met their goal of "evacuation without injury." As you can see, following this mantra enabled Babin to distance himself from the problem enough to view it objectively and make a decision.

And although your next boardroom meeting is unlikely to involve bombs, one common denominator remains the same: overwhelming pressure. No matter what line of work they're in, leaders will always be threatened with high stakes, overwhelming pressure, and the temptation to panic and give up. But if you can learn to take a step back, evaluate your highest priority first, and work towards a solution for that problem, you're already halfway to the finish line. From there, the next step is to communicate the objective to your team and work with them to accomplish that mission. You and your team can follow this process throughout any problem you face.

How to be a Real Influencer

Today, we most often hear the word “influencer” used in connection with popular Instagrammers. Instagram influencers aim to impact the culture around them by setting an example for what to wear, what to buy, how to live, and how to look. But where influencer culture can often be vapid and shallow, influencing people as a leader (Navy SEAL style) looks a lot different. Babin and Willink learned this firsthand during their time as commanding officers. Babin would often grow frustrated with emails from their superior officers who appeared to pester them with needless questions about the management of their unit. Their commanders wanted to know why they were doing something this way or that, why they had made this call on that mission, and Babin was fed up. He felt he had many more important things to deal with and that he couldn’t be bothered with such minute details.

But Willink helped him change his perspective by simply asking, “Are you taking responsibility?” This question forced Babin to confront the fact that his superior officers were hounding him about every little detail because they simply didn’t have that information; he hadn’t given it to them! Without that information, he couldn’t sign off on Babin’s action plans and help his unit to achieve their mission. So, in short, Babin was getting in his own way by not writing detailed reports! Babin therefore realized that his attitude was the problem, not his commander’s emails. Because he considered those little details to be unimportant, he wasn’t giving them his best. And in so doing, he was inhibiting the success of his entire unit! So, by following Willink’s positive example, Babin learned to make a complete turnaround. He adjusted his attitude accordingly and concentrated on setting an example that his subordinates would be proud to follow. And he started by cultivating a positive relationship with his commanding officers.

This required a complete shift in perspective for him, however, as it might for most of us. As a general rule, we tend to view our supervisors as necessary evils; we don’t like them, we don’t want to listen to them, but we

have to, so we grudgingly follow their orders. But by altering our perspective and seeking a peaceful and respectful relationship with our commanding officers, we can become influencers for good. When people see an example that challenges the norm, they'll start asking questions. They'll wonder what makes you different. And, just like Babin, that will provide you with an opportunity to point people in the right direction, encourage them to improve their attitudes, and lead with responsibility. After all, if you're not getting along with someone and you assume it's their fault, that's a failure to take responsibility. A better approach would be to start by asking yourself if you've first done everything you can to influence the situation for the better and encourage both of you to do your best.

Final Summary

Navy SEALs lead a bold, dangerous, and determined life. And because they literally save lives every day, we often assume that they are somehow superhuman, possessing success secrets that ordinary people don't know. But as the authors' example illustrates, SEALs are ordinary people just like you and me. What makes them different is the fact that they practice extreme ownership in every aspect of their lives. And no matter what line of work you're in, you can follow the same example. By taking extreme ownership and leading with extreme responsibility, you can give yourself a solid foundation for practicing other SEAL success strategies such as "cover and move," "prioritize and execute," and influencing others for good.