

Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win is a 2015 book by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. The book describes several leadership and team management strategies from former Navy SEALs.

A 3 Minute Summary of the 15 Core Lessons

#1 All Good Leaders Embrace Ownership

This initial concept describes the idea that all excellent leaders should embrace ownership of their actions and those of their team. True leaders own any outcome regardless of success or failure. This means you can't avoid other environmental conditions or products or even the actions of your team members. The buck stops with you.

#2 Bad Teams Don't Exist – Only Bad Leaders

Similarly, both men claim that only bad leaders exist rather than inherently bad teams. Bad leaders will draw out the worst in their team members, leading to subpar results in failure. On the flip side, this means that great leaders will be able to make a successful team out of just about anybody.

#3 Leadership is the Biggest Factor in Performance

Both former Navy SEALs claim that leadership is the single biggest factor in whether a team or endeavor will succeed or fail. They believe that other conditions are negligible compared to the performance and attitude of the leader. Attitude, in particular, sets the tone for the work at hand and can often stop or guarantee the success of an effort before it even begins.

#4 Mission Clarity is Critical

The book advocates for total mission clarity at all levels of the decision-making process. Your team members must know exactly what they are doing and why to work at their best effort levels and perform to their maximum capabilities. This often involves letting your team members ask questions and actively communicating the strategic picture to every member of your team.

#5 Keep Your Ego in Check

The book likewise suggests that you must keep your ego in check if you want your mission to be a success. A leader with a big ego will end up being a hazard not only to him or herself but to the other members of their team. Having a big ego can also blind you to excellent ideas from your team members, and it prevents you from taking ownership of your mistakes and changing direction when needed.

#6 Act Decisively

The book recommends that all leaders should act decisively even without 100% certainty. In fact, they claim that 100% certainty is impossible. You can't waste time waiting and seeing what happens next. There's always a risk, but you should always make the best decision possible based on available information.

#7 Simplicity and Clarity

While describing your mission to your team members or organizing information for your own purposes, you should always try to distill factors down to their simplest form. Complexity introduces too many variables to account for and brings too many unknowns for comfort. Always try to solve simple problems and make your plans as simple as possible to facilitate understanding.

#8 Prioritize Well

Good leaders will learn how to prioritize their decisions and actions, then execute those actions as soon as possible. You need to learn how to identify the highest priorities on your tactical list and take care of necessary objectives before they become issues. This involves developing some foresight so you can stay a step or two ahead of most problems.

#9 Decentralize Your Command

Good leaders don't leave everything to their own decision-making skills or plans. Instead, they delegate tasks that they don't have time for or they don't need to do. This involves assigning several lieutenants who can carry out your orders with full clarity in your mission or objective and clear boundaries of command.

#10 Commander's Intent

The book describes this concept, which is the idea that a leader communicates what needs to be accomplished but leaves the details of how that is accomplished to their team. This means that you can't micromanage your team members, particularly as you delegate different objectives or tasks to lieutenants. Your team needs the freedom to innovate and adapt as necessary.

#11 Manage Up and Down

Great leaders will manage the people both above them and below. This means you'll need to ask questions of your superiors so you can better provide clear information to your own underlings and build confidence. Ultimately, managing both people above and below you is key to being a leader who isn't at the top of the chain.

#12 Discipline is Freedom

To the Navy SEALs, discipline is the same thing as freedom. Discipline is a matter of personal will and it makes up the difference between being merely good at something and being the best. Discipline also helps you become more flexible by forcing habits into you and your team so you can take care of basic tasks or conditions without having to think too hard about simpler objectives.

#13 Be Calm, Not Robotic

Great team leaders will be calm without becoming devoid of emotions. Your team members need to know that you care about them and the objective at hand. At the same time, you cannot ever lose control or lose your temper as this will cause your team members to lose respect for you.

#14 Be Close but Not Too Close

All great leaders should attempt to become close with their subordinates without making things too close. You need to know your people and their motivations but not become so close that one member becomes more important to you than other team members or the objective at hand.

#15 Recognize Limitations

Above all, a good leader should be competitive and competent but also lose or fail with grace. This means accepting and recognizing your limitations and taking ownership of any mistakes you or your team make. Victory is not a guarantee in even the best of situations, and it is not something you will always experience no matter how well you prepare. Therefore, you'll need to prepare for the inevitable failure you'll face as a leader and not let this bring you down.

Top 10 Quotes from Extreme Ownership

1. "Discipline equals freedom."
2. "It's not what you preach, it's what you tolerate."
3. "Implementing Extreme Ownership requires checking your ego and operating with a high degree of humility. Admitting mistakes, taking ownership, and developing a plan to overcome challenges are integral to any successful team."
4. "The most fundamental and important truths at the heart of Extreme Ownership: there are no bad teams, only bad leaders."
5. "When setting expectations, no matter what has been said or written, if substandard performance is accepted and no one is held accountable—if there are no consequences—that poor performance becomes the new standard."
6. "Our freedom to operate and maneuver had increased substantially through disciplined procedures."
7. "Relax. Look around. Make a call."
8. "After all, there can be no leadership where there is no team."
9. "Leaders must always operate with the understanding that they are part of something greater than themselves and their own personal interests."
10. "We learned that leadership requires belief in the mission and unyielding perseverance to achieve victory, particularly when doubters question whether victory is even possible."