

Insights from Extreme Ownership by Jocko Willink & Leif Babin

“There are only two types of leaders: effective and ineffective. Effective leaders that lead successful, high-performance teams exhibit Extreme Ownership. Anything else is simply ineffective. Anything else is bad leadership.” - Leif Babin

Jocko and Leif create high performing Navy Seal teams and corporate business teams by teaching ‘decentralized command’ – allowing a smaller team (4-6) to make decisions within a larger team without being told explicitly what to do. To allow independent decision making, leaders must issue a **Commander’s Intent**:

“My leaders learned they must rely on their subordinate leaders to take charge of their smaller teams within the team and allow them to execute based on a good understanding of the broader mission (known as Commander’s Intent), and standard operating procedures. That was effective Decentralized Command.” – Jocko Willink

If Jocko instructed a group of Navy Seals snipers to go to the rooftop of a building, they might get to the rooftop and discover there is little cover. At that point, they might set up on the rooftop anyways (because they were ordered to) and risk being killed, or simply disobey orders. However, if Jocko issues a Commander’s Intent: “We need covering fire on this street to help these ground troops advance to position bravo. Find the best position to apply this cover. I would suggest starting with that rooftop.” At this point, the Navy Seals would get to the rooftop, notice that it has poor cover, and quickly decide to go to the 3rd floor to provide covering fire.

“Those leaders must understand the overall mission, and the ultimate goal of that mission—the Commander’s Intent. Junior leaders must be empowered to make decisions on key tasks necessary to accomplish that mission in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Teams (of 4-6) within (larger) teams are organized for maximum effectiveness for a particular mission, with leaders who have clearly delineated responsibilities. Every tactical-level team leader must understand not just what to do but why they are doing it. If frontline leaders do not understand why, they must ask their boss to clarify the why. Decentralized Command does not mean junior leaders or team members operate on their own program; that results in chaos. Instead, junior leaders must fully understand what is within their decision-making authority—the “left and right limits” of their responsibility.” - Jocko Willink

→ **Issue intents**, not commands. The next time you need help, explain the mission’s intent and the desired outcome. Provide suggestions, but let them decide ‘how’ they will meet the intent within clear “left and right limits” of the mission’s intent. If something changes, they can make decisions without having to rely on you.

Letting other people make decisions in situations you’re ultimately responsible for seems to contradict the concept of ‘Extreme Ownership’. How can you have extreme ownership if you are not in direct control?

“Every leader must walk a fine line. That’s what makes leadership so challenging. Leadership requires finding the equilibrium in the dichotomy of many seemingly contradictory qualities, between one extreme and another. The simple recognition of this is one of the most powerful tools a leader has. With this in mind, a leader can more easily balance the opposing forces and lead with maximum effectiveness.” - Jocko Willink

Taking extreme ownership but giving away control is just one of the many contradictions leaders must live moment to moment:

The Dichotomy of Great Leadership

- quiet not silent;
- humble not passive;
- a leader and follower;
- confident not cocky;
- aggressive not overbearing;
- courageous not foolhardy;
- competitive not a gracious loser;
- attentive to details not obsessed by them;
- calm not robotic, logical not devoid of emotions