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# Extreme Ownership

By Jocko Willink, Leif Babin

Transporting military leadership lessons to the business world is not new, as demonstrated by the continuing popularity with managers of *The Art of War*, a 2000-year-old Chinese treatise on warfare. However, it may be difficult to find a more compelling, tension-filled yet clearly applicable business text than Jocko Willink and Leif Babin's book, *Extreme Ownership*.

Former Navy SEAL officers

Willink and Babin, who now run a leadership consultancy called Echelon Front, built on the lessons of their battlefield experiences, base *Extreme Ownership* on the battle of Ramadi, a major 2006 offensive by allied forces to purge the Al-Qaeda presence in this large Iraqi city. Ramadi is a city of 400,000 people, and the battle was therefore a difficult and deadly street-by-street, building-by-building conquest in which “every piece of trash [was] a potential IED [improvised exploding device], every window, door, balcony and rooftop a potential enemy firing position,” the authors write.

Each chapter in the book begins with a scene from the battle (the authors note that they have taken extra precautions to prevent any specific tactics, techniques and procedures from being revealed in the book, and in fact, the book was cleared by military authorities). After the narrative of the battlefield event is completed, the authors then provide the core principle to be learned from the event. The authors then, in what is one of the most valuable sections of each chapter, demonstrate how the lesson learned is applied to a real-world business case.

For example, the title of the book is *Extreme Ownership*, and this refers to one of the authors' key leadership principles: leaders must take complete — even “extreme” — ownership for anything and everything that happens in the unit or organization that they lead. The chapter begins with a nearly disastrous friendly fire incident, what the military calls “blue-on-blue.” In the confusion of the battle, American and Iraqi forces were launching an attack on a building they believed was being held by a stubborn unit of Al Qaeda fighters. Inside the building, an isolated

Navy SEALs unit fought back against an attack they believed was being led by Al Qaeda forces. Acting on a hunch, Willink and another soldier entered the building and discovered the blue-on-blue situation — just minutes before the building was to be bombed into rubble. A series of mistakes by various parties had created a situation where allied forces were fighting each other to the death. When his superiors demanded an explanation, Willink declared that all mistakes were his. His superiors decided not to “relieve” him.

In the business application section, Willink describes working with a manufacturing VP whose board-approved plan to bring down manufacturing costs was consistently failing. The VP continuously blamed others for a “failure to execute.” Willink finally convinced the VP to take the blame — which did not mean simply to shoulder the responsibility but to truly believe that he was the cause of the failure and therefore the plan would continue to fail until he changed what he was doing. It was the first step, Willink writes, to resolving what seemed to be an intractable problem.

## Written by Soldiers, Not Consultants

*Extreme Ownership* is divided into three parts. The first, “Winning the War Within,” covers four fundamental building blocks for leadership: extreme ownership; no bad teams, only bad leaders; believe; and check the ego. The second section, entitled “The Laws of Combat,” describes four critical concepts for dominant team performance: cover and move, simple, prioritize and execute, and decentralized command. The book closes with a section on sustaining victory.

The business bookshelves sag with the weight of “lessons of” books, including military lessons, many written by professional authors or consultants who simply adapt military events to the business arena. The leadership skills of Willink and Babin were forged in battle. In addition, they developed their leadership lessons for other soldiers first — Willink was commander of all West Coast SEALs training, and Babin was in command of junior officer leadership training — before ever considering any business world applications. The result is an unambiguous authenticity to the lessons in the book that is unmatched in other titles. *Extreme Ownership* is one of the very best books in the “lessons of” genre.