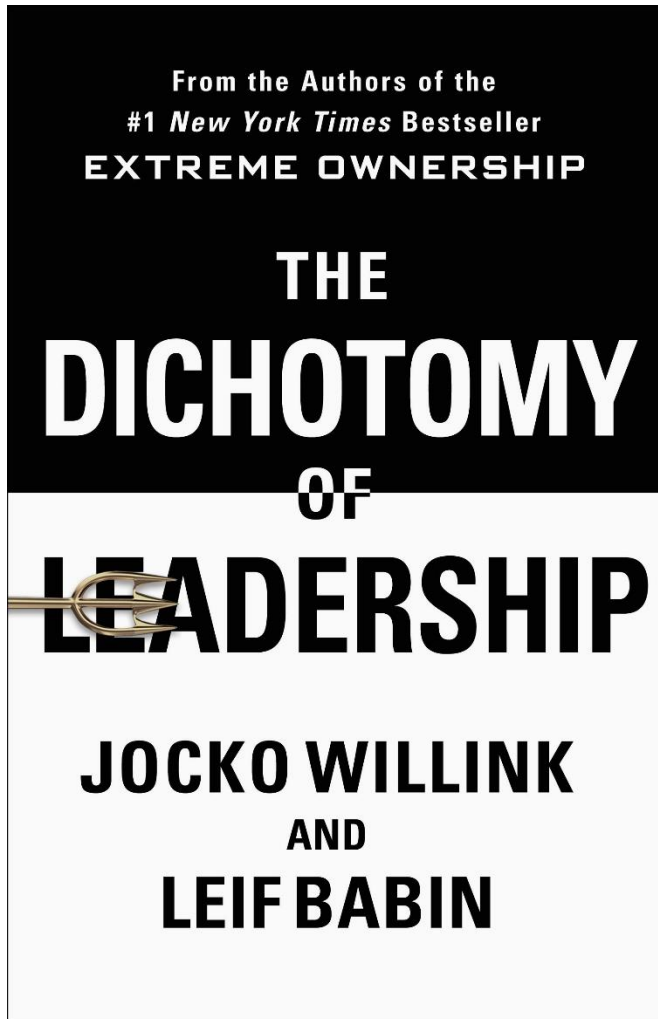


# Jocko Willink and Leif Babin: The Dichotomy of Leadership Book Summary



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## **Part I: Balancing People**

### **Chapter 1: The Ultimate Dichotomy**

There are limitless dichotomies in leadership, but none are as difficult and as central as this one: to care deeply about your people (Part I), and yet, at the same time, accept the risks necessary to accomplish the mission (Part II).

In other words, in addition to building strong relationships with your subordinates, you also need to recognize that you are a leader with a mission, aka you have a job to do.

If you care too much about your objectives, you'll neglect your people; care more about them than is necessary and you'll compromise the success of the mission.

A good leader always finds a way to drive his team to accomplish the mission without pushing them off a cliff.

### **Chapter 2: Own It All, but Empower Others**

If you know your extreme ownership principles well, you should be pretty much aware that this one is the foundation upon all the others are built: effective leaders take ownership of every mistake, and never place blame on anyone else.

But this doesn't mean that you should make every decision for everyone on your team; that's called micromanagement and is awful; however, hands-off leadership also doesn't work, because it usually leads to a cacophony of commands.

Effective leaders always find a balance between these two extremes:

<b>MICROMANAGEMENT</b>	<b>HANDS-OFF LEADERSHIP</b>
Lack of initiative from the team	Lack of vision
The team doesn't seek solutions to problems	Lack of coordination between individuals
A team doesn't mobilize even in an emergency	Actions beyond authorization
Bold and aggressive action becomes rare	Failure to coordinate
No creativity	Focusing on the wrong priorities
The teams stay inside their silos: no cooperation	Too many people are trying to lead
An overall sense of passivity and failure to react	

“With Extreme Ownership,” concludes Willink, “you are responsible for everything in your world. But you can't make every decision. You have to empower your team to lead, to take ownership. So, you have to give them ownership.”

### **Chapter 3: Resolute, Not Overbearing**

Leaders should be neither lenient nor overbearing' to find the balance, they must learn when it is important for them to hold the line and when they should allow some slack; and then carefully evaluate each situation.

Two things should help you do this: understanding the concept of “leadership capital” and the power of “why.”

The former refers to the “finite amount of power that any leader possesses.” Now, you can expend it foolishly on strategically unimportant matters, or you can smartly allow your people to blow off some steam in some of these less critical areas.

Because you'll need to exert that power when push comes to shove. And so that you can be sure that others will listen when it really matters – give them a reason to.

The *why*.

#### **Chapter 4: When to Mentor, When to Fire**

Another lesson from *Extreme Ownership*: there are no bad teams, only bad leaders. And also – the team always comes before the individual.

When an individual thinks otherwise, then you need to react: underperformers usually just need to be led properly.

However, “when a leader has done everything possible to get an individual up to speed without seeing results, the time has come to let that individual go. Don’t be too quick to fire – but don’t wait too long. Find the balance and hold the line.”

### **Part II: Balancing the Mission**

#### **Chapter 5: Train Hard, but Train Smart**

Hard training is critical to the performance of any team; after all, there’s no growth in the comfort zone.

Consequently, training must be hard. It should push the team beyond the limits of their day-to-day easy (because learned by heart) tasks and prepare them for greater challenges; all good training focuses on three critical aspects: realism, fundamentals, and repetition.

Training must be realistic. It should push the team – and the leaders, especially – into realistic, uncomfortable situations where they aren’t sure what to do. So, role-play scenarios in which hard decisions must be made immediately.

Training must focus on the fundamentals; often people think they know them and want to skip through them, but the truth is our brain and memory don’t work that way; never skip the fundamentals lest you want to forget them.

And that brings us to the final point: training must be repetitive. Repetition is the mother of learning: one of the ultimate brain rules.

#### **Chapter 6: Aggressive, Not Reckless**

“An aggressive mindset should be the default setting of any leader,” writes Willink in Chapter 6 of *The Dichotomy of Leadership*.

And that’s because an aggressive mind is a proactive mind: it doesn’t mean an angry one or one that loses its temper easily. It merely means one who is trained to react in the best possible way in the worst possible scenario.

Forget your *Full Metal Jackets*: the only aggression which wins – and every single member of the military knows this – is the one directed towards the problem, not towards the people.

However, aggression can devolve into recklessness, especially if you get a case of that strange “disease of victory.”

Never get complacent, no matter how many victories your decisions earn.

Overconfidence is your enemy.

### **Chapter 7: Disciplined, Not Rigid**

Alexander Pope once wrote:

*True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,  
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.*

In other words, when you learn by heart the rules that should guide your steps in a dance, you’ll suddenly feel the full freedom of movement, and walking would feel as easy as flying.

Rules give freedom; however, too much of them, stifle it.

So, never forget: leading a team is about procedures and processes because discipline gives more freedom; however when it stops doing that – then the procedures probably don’t work.

### **Chapter 8: Hold People Accountable, but Don’t Hold Their Hands**

Accountability is an important tool, but should never be the primary one:

*Instead of holding people accountable, the leader has to lead. The leader must make sure the team understands why. Make sure its members have ownership of their tasks and the ability to make adjustments as needed. Make sure they know how their task supports the overall strategic success of the mission. Make sure they know how important their specific task is to the team and what the consequences are for failure.*

“A reliance on heavy accountability,” concludes the chapter, “consumes the time and focus of the leader and inhibits the trust, growth, and development of subordinates.”

Balance accountability, on the other hand, results in empowerment and educated subordinates. And that’s the goal!

## **Part III: Balancing Yourself**

### **Chapter 9: A Leader and a Follower**

There’s a reason why you should never allow your subordinates to feel as subordinates: it stifles their creativity and incapacitates them to make a decision when they are expected to; they’d expect that from you.

So, in other words, you should train your subordinates to be latent leaders, because sometimes your job will be to *follow*.

“Leaders must be willing to listen and follow others,” writes Babin, “regardless of whether they are junior or less experienced. If someone else has a great idea or specific knowledge that puts them in the best position to lead a particular project, a good leader recognizes that it doesn’t matter who gets the credit, only that the mission is accomplished in the most effective manner possible.”

Oftentimes, the best leader is the one who creates leaders.

### **Chapter 10: Plan, but Don’t Overplan**

Usually, the team who wins is the team who is capable of seeing a little step further into the future. And, obviously, being able to plan ahead is a trait of great leaders.

However, there’s a limit beyond which planning becomes a burden; it’s, more or less, a physical limit. Unless you’re a chess player, you can’t remember a million scenarios; and even if you are, you may forget the one you need when you need it the most, and, thus, lose due to over-preparedness.

The trick is to choose three or four most probable contingencies for each phase and a worst-case scenario and prepare for them.

Everything else is probably just an iteration, and you’ll do just fine when – or even if – that happens.

### **Chapter 11: Humble, Not Passive**

There’s a difference between being humble and being passive: the latter is one of the worst traits a leader might have and the former – one of the best ones.

In fact, Leif Babin says that is “the most important quality in a leader.” Case in point: SEAL leaders are usually fired not because of unfitness, unsoundness or incompetence – but because of arrogance.

However, the point is not to become humble to a fault, because being *too* humble usually leads to passivity and leaders should be *all but* passive.

Once again, it’s all about the balance.

“Leaders must be humble enough to listen to new ideas, willing to learn strategic insights, and open to implementing new and better tactics and strategies,” writes Babin.

“But a leader must also be ready to stand firm when there are clearly unintended consequences that negatively impact the mission and risk harm to the team. “

### **Chapter 12: Focused, but Detached**

Naturally, it’s always good to be attentive to details; however, once again, there’s a point after which this attentiveness becomes a liability.

Just like you should never allow yourself to not see the trees because of the wood, you can't risk not seeing the wood from the trees.

This is what "focused, but detached" means: you must find a way to analyze the details of every situation, while still not losing the sight of the big picture.

For that's the only context in which the details really matter.

## **Afterword**

Willink and Babin conclude their exploration of the dichotomies of leadership thus:

*The list of dichotomies is infinite. For every positive behavior a leader should have, it is possible to take that behavior to the extreme, where it becomes a negative. Often a leader's greatest strength can also be his or her greatest weakness. But knowing and understanding that these dichotomies exist is the first part of keeping them from becoming a problem.*

Key Lessons from "The Dichotomy of Leadership"

1. How to Balance Your People
2. How to Balance Your Mission
3. How to Balance Yourself

## **How to Balance Your People**

In order to be a good leader, you need to find a great balance between some of the dichotomies of leadership.

The ultimate one concerns the two most important aspects of it: you need to both care about your people and still be willing to put them in risky situations because of your mission.

So as to do this, you need to own your mistakes, but also empower others to make theirs; you need to be resolute, but not overbearing; and you need to know when to mentor and when to fire.

## **How to Balance Your Mission**

Balancing the mission starts before the mission itself – with training. Training must be hard, but also smart; the former is self-explanatory, the latter is based on three vital aspects: realistic situations, foundations, and repetitiveness.

To balance your mission, you need to be aggressive, not reckless, and disciplined, but not rigid. You also need to hold your people accountable but never hold their hands as well.

You're a leader, and they expect to be led by you.

## **How to Balance Yourself**

Balancing yourself as a leader is all about staying humbled; humbled doesn't mean staying passive – it means staying open to suggestions and ideas. In other words, humble leaders also know when it's best for the team to be followers as well.

Humble leaders are also focused, but never detached; and they know when planning becomes overplanning.

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