



# STUDY GUIDE

DISCIPLINE = FREEDOM

**KEY TERMS:** challenges  
humility

success  
ownership

discipline  
freedom

**NOTE-TAKING COLUMN:** Complete this section during the video. Include definitions and key terms.

**CUE COLUMN:** Complete this section after the video.

In what capacity did Lt. Commander Willink serve his country?

How did Lt. Commander Willink earn his success?

What was Lt. Commander Willink's first SEAL assignment?

How can others earn success as well?

Where can a person implement the 'extreme ownership' attitude?

## DISCUSSION & REVIEW QUESTIONS:

- At the beginning of the video, Lt. Commander Willink contends that, “There are no shortcuts. There are no hacks. If you want to take the easy road, I promise you: it’s longer and more painful than the hard road. I know. I’ve lived it. I’ve ventured down the easy road at times in my life and it never led to anywhere good. The positive things in my life always came when I faced the biggest challenges.” What do you think Lt. Commander Willink means by stating ‘no shortcuts’ and ‘no hacks?’ Why do you think that the easy road is ultimately more difficult than the hard road? Why do you think that positive things come when facing big challenges? Explain.
- After presenting the first principle of success, Lt. Commander Willink points out that, “... discipline is the path to freedom... Discipline defeats the infinite excuses that hold you back. Some people think motivation is what will compel them to get things done. But motivation is just an emotion, a feeling, and like all feelings, it’s fickle: it comes and goes. You can’t count on motivation to be there when you need to get through truly challenging times. But you can count on discipline. Discipline is something you dictate. Motivation won’t make you exercise every day: Discipline will. Motivation won’t stay up late and finish a project for you: Discipline will. Motivation isn’t going to get you out of bed in the morning. Discipline will. Impose discipline on yourself. Make discipline part of your daily life and your daily life will get better.” Do you agree that discipline is better than motivation, in terms of positive outcomes and making progress? Why or why not? In what ways might your life get better if you make discipline part of your daily life? Explain.
- Lt. Commander Willink shares with us that when assigned toilet cleaning duty, “I did it. I did it to the best of my ability and took pride in doing it well. And that attitude got noticed: if I cared that much about how clean the toilets were, people knew I would do a good job with even more important assignments. After a short period of time, I got those more important assignments. But it was humility that opened the door for me. Now: being humble does not mean that you shouldn’t be confident. You certainly have to believe that you are a capable person. But don’t let confidence turn into arrogance. If your ego gets too big, it will lead to your downfall.” In what ways can humility serve you and your future prospects? Explain. In what ways can ego ‘lead to your downfall?’ Explain.
- Later in the video, Lt. Commander Willink explains that, “They [successful military persons] cast no blame, they made no excuses. They took ownership of the problem and fixed it. You can implement this attitude as well, not only in your job, but in your life. Let other people blame their parents, their boss, or the system. Let weaker people complain that the world isn’t fair. You are the leader of your life: take ownership of everything in it.” Why do you think that weaker people focus on excuses and a victim mentality rather than being proactive about problems and addressing those problems on their own? What exactly does Lt. Commander Willink mean by saying to take ownership of your life? Explain.
- At the end of the video, Lt. Commander Willink challenges viewers to, “Be disciplined in all that you do. Don’t subject yourself to the whims of motivation. Stay humble and be willing to do what needs to be done. And: take extreme ownership of your life and everything in it. Then: choose the hard path: the path of responsibility, hard work, and sacrifice. The Path of discipline, humility, and ownership, that ultimately, leads to freedom. What do you think Lt. Commander Willink means by ‘freedom’ in this context? Explain. Do you value and wish for this type of freedom in your own life? Why or why not?”

## EXTEND THE LEARNING:

### CASE STUDY: Wholegrain Digital

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the article “Extreme ownership is the bedrock of success for digital projects,” then answer the questions that follow.

- How does the author of the article characterize ‘extreme ownership?’ What is the leader’s job? How many projects operate in ideal conditions? What do you get with extreme ownership? Where does extreme ownership start? What is the motivation mechanism in conventional leadership, and why doesn’t that technique work? Why are team members in an ‘extreme ownership’ environment intrinsically motivated to perform well? What do most people want to be good at? What does the lens of ‘extreme ownership’ shift focus away from? What does the ‘extreme ownership’ approach allow the team at Wholegrain Digital to do? What does the team at Wholegrain Digital need to do in order to practice ‘extreme ownership?’ What provides the true bedrock of a team’s success? What is one of the reasons that extreme ownership is so rare? What happens when you start practicing extreme ownership, in terms of your team?
- Do you think that the skeptical author of the article found value in the concepts presented by Lt. Commander Willink? Why or why not? How did the author of the article integrate the concepts into his own environment? Why do you think that the fundamental concepts presented by Lt. Commander Willink work so well across such a broad spectrum of people and across such a broad spectrum of group types? Explain.
- How do you think that you could incorporate some of the concepts presented in the video and in the article into your own life? Explain.



# QUIZ

## DISCIPLINE = FREEDOM

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1. \_\_\_\_\_ is the driver of daily execution.
  - a. Motivation
  - b. Fear
  - c. Discipline
  - d. Greed
  
2. You can't count on motivation to be there when you need to get through truly challenging times.
  - a. True
  - b. False
  
3. Motivation won't help you \_\_\_\_\_ .
  - a. stay up late and finish a project
  - b. exercise every day
  - c. get out of bed in the morning
  - d. All of the above.
  
4. Being humble does not mean that you shouldn't be \_\_\_\_\_ .
  - a. confident
  - b. arrogant
  - c. cowardly
  - d. egotistical
  
5. Why can you count on discipline to get you through challenging times?
  - a. Because discipline is easy.
  - b. Because others will help you.
  - c. Because discipline is something YOU dictate.
  - d. None of the above.



# QUIZ - ANSWER KEY

DISCIPLINE = FREEDOM

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<https://www.wholegraindigital.com/blog/extreme-ownership-for-digital-projects/>

# Extreme ownership is the bedrock of success for digital projects

28th January 2019 Written by Tom

I've been running Wholegrain Digital with my wife Vineeta for nearly 12 years now. One of the biggest challenges for both of us has been learning to cope with the huge responsibility that comes with running a company, especially as our team and projects have grown in size.

When there are issues to deal with, it's easy to get stressed about things, to lose sleep, or simply to bury your head in the sand rather than facing things head on. In the past couple of years I have learned a lot about my own relationship with responsibility and at the end of last year I read the book *Extreme Ownership: How Navy Seals Lead and Win* by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin.

This is a book that was recommended to me by Pagely co-founder Joshua Strelbel after his 2017 WordCamp Europe talk and which I had then avoided on the basis that frankly, it seemed way too macho and *American* for my taste. When I did finally read it, my fears about gung-ho US war stories were confirmed – but I also learned a lot from the very important message at the core of this book.

In this post I'm going to introduce the concept of extreme ownership, talk about how it relates to web projects and how we can become comfortable with the weight of responsibility that it brings.

Best of all, unlike the book, I won't be telling any war stories about killing "the bad guys".

## What is "extreme ownership"?

You might think that *extreme ownership* sounds like yet another buzzword, and you would be right! It is, however, a buzzword with a very important message.

Extreme ownership is something more than what we would typically think of as "responsibility" or "accountability" in our jobs. It is a more holistic approach to leadership in which responsibility is not defined by job descriptions, but by the mission to be achieved.

**In extreme ownership, a leader has total responsibility for success or failure, with no excuses, no blame, and with open admission of mistakes.**

Contrast that with a conventional approach to leadership in which it's easy for the leader to do everything right in theory, following best practices and sticking to an agreed plan, but yet fail to achieve the actual mission. In the standard approach, it's often accepted for the leader to feel that they did everything right and to blame the failure on external factors such as other people, the economy, the plan, processes, the environment, tools, resources or any unforeseen circumstance.

In an extreme ownership context, external factors are not valid excuses: you can't hold a retrospective and conclude that all of the issues were due to outside factors. Instead, you have to put your hand up and own it as the leader. The leader's job is not to go through the motions of textbook leadership, but to ensure that the

team succeeds in its mission *despite* any external factors. After all, no project ever operates in ideal conditions.

So long as a mission is physically possible, the leader must ensure that the team succeeds, and even if the mission is not physically possible, then it's the leader's responsibility to identify this and call it out so that the team can be refocused on a plan that can succeed (I'm pleased to report we've yet to take on a web project at Wholegrain which isn't physically possible). With extreme ownership, you get real solutions and forward progress – while excuses maintain the status quo and deepen issues.

## **Extreme Ownership starts at the top (i.e. with me)**

In the context of a business, it's the Managing Director or CEO who is ultimately responsible for *everything*. At Wholegrain Digital that's me, and it means that far from the modern culture of outsourcing responsibilities, I need to take ownership of ensuring the success of everything that we do as a company.

This means everything from our core mission to “*create the best websites in the world, use business as a force for good and help accelerate the shift to an internet that's good for people and planet*”, to ensuring that our team are happy, that our clients are happy, that we have a glowing reputation, and that we're financially healthy.

If anything at all is below the high standards that we set for ourselves as a company, I need to take ownership of that and find a way to put it right.

## **Is nobody else responsible for their work?**

One of the things that can seem really confusing about extreme ownership at first, is the implication that if the leader takes total responsibility for everything, then nobody else need take any responsibility. The leader is responsible for everything, so the rest of the team can wash their hands of anything that doesn't go smoothly. That doesn't sound right.

If that was the case, it would surely be a recipe for disaster. But this is *not* the case.

How would the leader motivate anybody to do their jobs? In conventional leadership, the solution would be to impose carrots and sticks to incentivise performance, but as Jocko Willink rightly explained in an interview for [London Real](#), humans are not robots and they don't do things just because you tell them to, because the rules say they have to or because you are dangling bait in front of them.

Rather, humans do things because they want to. Extreme ownership does away with the illusion of people as obedient, rational followers and helps to create a culture in which everyone takes responsibility for their actions and contributes to the success of their team. They are intrinsically motivated because they respect the leaders, believe in the mission and care about their team. They are intrinsically motivated because they want to learn from their mistakes and constantly get better at what they do.

The result is that it will gradually create a culture in which the team work as a unit to achieve their goals and want to help each other fix their problems.

It might not work for everyone, but the truth is that very few people actually want to shun responsibility and hide behind excuses. Most people want to be good at what they do and contribute to being part of a successful team. If they don't, then they simply shouldn't be on the team.

## How does this apply to a web project team?

In an agency environment it's the company leader who needs to take ownership of everything that goes on in the agency and ensure that the agency delivers on its mission.

In the case of Wholegrain Digital, I need to ensure that we have a clear mission, that we have a skilled team, that we have the resources to get the job done, and that everyone in the team believes in what we're doing. If anything isn't working, then I need to ask myself what I can do to make it better.

As our work is largely project-based, project managers must also practise extreme ownership *over their areas of responsibility*, taking true leadership of their project team to ensure that every project is a success by both the agency's and the clients' standards, that there are no excuses, and that any struggles or shortcomings are discussed openly and honestly to aid the learning and improvement of the whole team.

We also want to make sure our clients are on board. We'll make sure that the client shares the same vision of success and is committed to achieving it together as a team. Positive leadership and an open, honest approach throughout will, in most cases, build a strong team where all stakeholders take ownership for helping to ensure the success of the project.

Ultimately, it should permeate the entire team, with everyone in the organisation doing their honest best to help their team succeed.

## Extreme ownership in practice: dealing with feature creep

I'd like to take a simple example to illustrate how extreme ownership works in practice within an agency.

A common issue in web projects is feature creep. You know the score: the client has requested extra features or changed requirements after the spec has been agreed, resulting in extra work and potential delays in launching the project. Let's say *hypothetically* that this happened without the client being told that it would cost them extra or that it would delay the launch, putting stress on the team to reach a tougher deadline and creating an awkward dilemma over whether to spring the unexpected costs on the client after the event or to take the loss as an agency.

As Managing Director, I would need to ask myself where I'd gone wrong.

Had I not communicated clearly to the client from the outset and set boundaries during the sales process? Have I not given our team a clear framework of what is and isn't included in the project? Did I fail to check that we had identified the client's full requirements accurately at the outset? Have I not communicated effectively how feature creep affects the whole team in terms of added time and financial pressures? Had I known that this was happening and failed to intervene early enough?

Notice how the lens of extreme ownership has shifted the focus *away* from excuses about the client being pushy or team members not doing their jobs properly, and on to the real root causes.

Everyone should want to do great work, and this approach allows the team to work together in solving problems and constantly improving. It's easier said than done.

The example above is a relatively simple one, but it highlights the wide variety of things that I as Managing Director might need to do better. That can be a hard thing to do, especially when battling with thoughts such as, "They should have known better", "This is what I pay them for" or simply, "Why do things have to



be so complicated?” Regardless of what I may feel in the heat of the moment, these types of thoughts are not constructive. The objective should not be to seek justice or miracles, but to seek real progress towards making things better one step at a time.

Admitting what we could or should have done better is not a sign of weakness, but in fact a sign of strength! It helps us to continually self-improve, and in taking true ownership of our mission, project or role, we earn the respect and support of our peers. In order to practise extreme ownership we need to keep reminding ourselves why we should not take what appears to be the easier path of excuses or blame, and remind ourselves of how our team will benefit when we ask ourselves the hard questions and own our actions.

I certainly have a long way to go in mastering this, but gradually, one day at a time, I’m trying to get better and better.

## **Extreme Ownership needs to be balanced with self-compassion**

Anyone who works in the agency world knows that it can be a high pressure environment, with work coming in sometimes unpredictable waves from many directions. Many of us thrive on the energy and challenge of this environment, but there’s no denying that it can at times be stressful, so it’s important that we take good care of ourselves and those around us, and make sure that we take enough rest to retain our balance through those challenging patches.

It would seem that despite its positive intentions, extreme ownership could be an unnecessary source of additional stress. Some of us can be pretty hard on ourselves anyway, and it feels like extreme ownership could significantly amplify this burden. It’s therefore essential that we don’t go down the dark hole of self-deprecation. To do so would be to completely miss the point. In extreme ownership we eliminate blame, and this elimination of blame must also extend to ourselves.

Taking ownership of something is not the same as blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong, just as it’s not the same as taking credit for everything that goes right. We must extend the compassion that we show to others, to ourselves, and look positively at any opportunities to learn and get better.

As I wrote about last year, curiosity is the key to solving problems, and a commitment to extreme ownership should be underpinned by deep curiosity about everything that we do and how it can be better. When we’re angry, it’s hard to forgive ourselves for our mistakes and shortcomings, but when we practise curiosity it’s easier to see what happened, forgive ourselves, and get excited about making things better.

## **Extreme ownership is a powerful tool for teams pursuing goals**

The idea of extreme ownership may sound simple, but it’s surprisingly uncommon. More than skill, talent or passion, it is ownership that provides the true bedrock of a team’s success, whether that be in a project, a sport or in business.

One of the reasons that extreme ownership is so rare is that it can be hard to face tough truths and acknowledge your own part when things don’t go to plan, but that’s never an excuse to bury your head in the sand. Whatever your role in a team, when you start practising extreme ownership, you make your team stronger and influence others to take more ownership.

When coupled with self-compassion, it's one of the most powerful tools available to any team in pursuit of their goals. Here are some of the key points again:

- Extreme ownership is a holistic approach to leadership in which responsibility is not defined by job descriptions, but by the mission to be achieved.
- A leader has total responsibility for success or failure, with no excuses, no blame, and with open admission of mistakes.
- Extreme ownership understands that people are motivated because they respect the leaders, believe in the mission and care about their team.
- Extreme ownership starts with the top, but must also be embraced by the whole team, and clients.
- Admitting what we could or should have done better is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength: it helps us to continually self-improve.
- Extreme ownership must be combined with self-compassion: don't blame yourself for everything that goes wrong, but extend the compassion that we show to others, to ourselves.

Thank you again to Joshua for the book recommendation; whilst this article is based on the book, I will of course take *extreme ownership* over any errors ☐

Author



Tom

Managing Director