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Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual

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Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual, by Jocko Willink, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2020, 320 pp., US\$ 28.99 (Hardcover), US\$ 14.99 (Ebook), ISBN 978-1-250-22684-6 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-1-25-022685-3 (Ebook).

A product of over two decades of service in the United States Navy SEALs, *Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual* is the brainchild of the now retired Lieutenant commander of SEAL Team 3, Jocko Willink. Author of *Discipline Equals Freedom (Field Manual)* (2017), and co-author the books *Extreme Ownership* (2015) and *The Dichotomy of Leadership* (2018), this is the fourth volume in his opus dedicated to the subject of leadership. Since retired from the Navy, Willink's co-founded management consulting firm, Echelon Front, LLC., as well as his weekly podcast called the *Jocko Podcast* (currently with 1.08 million subscribers on YouTube), disseminates much of the knowledge and experience that the interested reader would find in his literary work.

Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual can be described as nothing other than a distillation of pointed experiences and imperatives. Divided into two parts: (1) leadership strategies and (2) leadership tactics, Willink thus explores two levels of abstraction with regards to leadership, the higher-order and more abstract organizational principles and foundations of leadership as a concept, but also *in situ*, as well as the direct, immanent necessities for understanding the abstract concept in practice. It's not uncommon to see the imperatives that he lays forth in his use of 'don't' throughout, such as 'don't dig in', 'don't take things personally' and subsequently how to guide readers into navigating ultimatums. The clarity and forcefulness of Willink's presentation is astounding and has resonance to that of Nietzsche's philosophy, that is, philosophizing with a hammer!

What we have to showcase here is literally a field manual per se. As Willink discusses in his introduction, much of what is said in this volume is illustrated through story and narrative like that of his previous two works. Yet, the difficulty in embodying good leadership practices in the real world are difficult for a myriad of reasons. The motivations for this volume then is to provide an accessible resource for individuals to reference in particular situations. Structured accordingly, each of the two parts, divided into three and four chapters, respectively, are likewise subdivided into smaller subsections with easy-to-navigate titles that can be quickly referred to. Those who are overwhelmed with the feelings of inadequacy despite their high position or responsibility might refer to the section titled "Imposter Syndrome" whereas those who are dealing with a narcissistic boss might refer to the sections "The Boss Wants All the Credit" and/or "The Nearly Indefensible Leader". The ease of navigation is further demonstrated by a quick glance at the extremely detailed index. Here one can look at the index for 'communication' and quickly find the object of reference, for example 'with bosses' or 'forms of', whereas those dealing with 'egos' will find a quick guide to 'big', 'fragile', and 'hurt' egos.

Much of what is recounted is Willink's own experience, not only in the field, but in dealing with the other people around him. His experience with both good and bad leaders is a good example of leadership via modeling, or more precisely, a practical means of implementing virtue ethics. In order to embody the ideal leader, if such a thing is even possible, one follows in the footsteps of those individuals who embody admirable leadership traits. As a consequence, such modelling allows the aspiring leader to also lead by their own example. Seemingly menial tasks like taking

out the trash may be beneath the duties of a high-ranking officer, but as Willink explicitly states, when a junior man sees such a duty carried out by one who is not obligated to, it is an embodied act of humility, one that remains with you. The duty then becomes a means to cultivating personal virtue, and results in a desire to undertake it to the best of one's abilities.

This is just one of the many anecdotes that the field manual uses to demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of leadership virtues. Often times, these anecdotes are distilled into more practical, rather than purely narrative illustrations. In order to cultivate balanced detachment from a plan, for example, one can literally take a step back as a cognitive signal to remove oneself from the situation and resist becoming overly emotionally invested. Similarly, noticing if you are gritting your teeth, clenching your fist, or focused on a narrow area or task are all signs that tunnel vision has kicked in. Making an active attempt at noticing these markers is the first step to initiating healthy detachment and thus more sober reflection.

What is going on here then? Willink is putting his preaching into practice. More precisely, his desire to create a culture of leadership and discipline requires a revisioning of culture. How is this done? It is accomplished by what stories are told and how those stories are communicated. Investing in telling these stories is foundational to building an environment and thus culture in which leadership can flourish. His historical narratives of experiences in the military is directly translatable into the business world and other domains of life. This is primarily the consequence of Willink's appropriation of archetypes as a means of structuring historical narratives. Rather than doting on the banalities of strict rule-based imperatives of leadership, as if leadership were reducible to a checklist, Willink instead focuses more on the dynamics of interpersonal and internal tensions and decision making structures, a strategy closely resembling that of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (161 - 180 AD) which was a practice of learned virtues via reflection of daily experiences and decisions.

Following a long tradition of warrior-poets recounting their tales in literary form such as the likes of Xenophon in his *Anabasis* (370 BC) and Julius Caesar in his *Bellum Gallicum* (58-49 BC), Willink's *Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual* distills a history and practice of leadership by situating it within the dynamic milieu of personalities, character traits, and changing contexts. As such, the volume is fundamentally a *praxis* of ethics, cultivating the virtues of ethical leadership through personal growth predicated on lived experience. Despite offering salient reference points for particular situations, what is offered here is beyond a checklist to satisfy the conditions of good leadership. Instead, what is offered is a humble – and sometimes humbling – guide for aspiring leaders to navigate the changing and challenging landscape of relations and postures that forge good leaders that both command respect as well as sought to be emulated.

Steven Umbrello
Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies; University of Turin
Via Sant'Ottavio, 20, 10124 Torino TO, Italia
steven.umbrello@unito.it