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# Navigating complexity in warfare: a reading of *Extreme Ownership* and *The Dichotomy of Leadership* through complexity leadership theory

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a nuanced perspective on leadership-related popular literature, suggesting that it warrants attention from critical scholars due to its broad influence across various communities and contexts. Focusing specifically on retired Navy SEAL officers Jocko Willink and Leif Babin's books, *Extreme Ownership* (2017) and its sequel *The Dichotomy of Leadership* (2018), the study employs complexity leadership theory (CLT) to analyze combat leadership principles articulated in these works. Findings reveal a substantial alignment between Willink and Babin's practice-oriented framework and CLT, particularly evident in how CLT's leadership types incorporate these principles. In the context of the armed forces, enabling leadership heavily relies on the operational system, which sets the parameters for adaptive actions that enabling leadership seeks to promote within these constraints (e.g. standard operating procedures, disciplined training, and Commander's Intent). The study also suggests that Willink and Babin's books serve as a counterbalance to the romanticization of complexity and collective command, a phenomenon highlighted in previous research. Ideally, theory and practice converge, as demonstrated in this article. It shows that the practice-oriented insights of Willink and Babin find support in theoretical knowledge. Conversely, these insights derived from practice potentially contribute to the development of CLT in the context of warfare.

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## Introduction

The operational environment of warfare has long been recognized as complex (see Dent and Holt 2001). Recent statements by senior military officers (e.g. Mattis 2017; McChrystal et al. 2015; Mercier 2018) have underscored that this complexity may have further increased. Conversely, research has also highlighted the notion that warfare has always been complex, but that in recent times, this complexity has become more apparent (Raisio, Puustinen, and Jäntti 2020). The complexity of the operational environment has also been acknowledged in popular literature related to military leadership. A prime

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example of this is the well-known work *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (McChrystal et al. 2015), which extensively and explicitly draws upon a worldview rooted in complexity sciences, as evidenced by its relevant citations to academic literature.

Another, somewhat stylistically different example is provided by retired Navy SEAL officers Jocko Willink and Leif Babin's (2017) book *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* and its sequel *The Dichotomy of Leadership: Balancing the Challenges of Extreme Ownership to Lead and Win* (Willink and Babin 2018). In these books, the connection to complexity sciences is more implicit and practical, as leadership is discussed more directly from the authors' own combat experiences perspective, without explicit references to scientific sources. The books, for example, highlight the importance of decentralized command, a concept emphasized also in the complexity science-related research literature on warfare (e.g. Rousseau 2003; Storr 2003). Furthermore, the books bring up the dichotomous nature of leadership and underscore the pursuit of balance between various aspects of leadership.

This balancing act resonates with the complexity leadership theory (CLT) derived from complexity sciences. The theory seeks to provide answers to how organizations should operate to survive and thrive in today's complex world (Arena and Uhl-Bien 2016). It acknowledges various tensions, emphasizing their role in enhancing adaptability. In particular, the theory highlights the tension between two systems within an organization: the operational system and the entrepreneurial system. The operational system is perceived to produce formality, standardization, and performance within the organization, while the entrepreneurial system strives for innovation, learning, and development (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2018).

In this article, we examine the books *Extreme Ownership* and *The Dichotomy of Leadership*, utilizing CLT as a theoretical framework. As Ferry (2018) points out, leadership-related popular literature is not devoid of intellectual significance; rather, it merits attention from critical scholars. The widespread appeal of these texts reflects what many people value in leadership. Consequently, they hold significant influence across various communities and contexts, often serving as valuable resources for professional development and as catalysts for new leadership initiatives within organizations. This line of reasoning, as articulated by Ferry, is equally applicable to the analysis of Willink and Babin's books presented in this article, given their substantial market success and endorsements for reading in various spheres (e.g. Degeneffe 2023, 2024; Jackson 2021; Schulte et al. 2023).

The overarching research question guiding this article is how the combat leadership principles articulated by Willink and Babin manifest when analyzed through the framework of CLT. These principles have previously been analyzed from the perspectives of more conventional leadership theories (transactional and transformational leadership) (Hagemann 2022a, 2022b), thus, this article employs a leadership theory that explicitly considers the complexity of the operating environment, in this context, warfare. Ideally, CLT would provide depth to the practical lessons learned from the battlefield, and conversely, these practical lessons would make complexity leadership theory more practical and accessible for leaders across different sectors.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with an exploration of literature relevant to CLT. Following this, attention is directed towards literature that examines CLT within

the context of the armed forces. Subsequently, a contextual overview is provided for the two books under analysis. In the next section, the analysis methodology and findings are presented. Finally, a discussion section integrates these results with the theoretical framework of the article, while the conclusion section outlines potential avenues for further research.

## Complexity leadership theory in military context

### Overview of complexity leadership theory

Following Ashby's *Law of Requisite Variety* (Ashby 1962) and its tailored version, the *Law of Requisite Complexity* (Boisot and McKelvey 2011), it is asserted that confronting complexity should not involve its reduction but rather its augmentation. In other words, for organizations to function effectively, they should possess internal complexity commensurate with the complexity of their external environment (Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey 2007). This principle of requisite complexity constitutes a fundamental tenet of CLT. The theory particularly emphasizes the establishment of what is termed as *adaptive space*. This dynamic and relational construction is delineated as "the network and organizational context that allows people, ideas, information, and resources to flow across the organization and spur successful emergent innovation" (Arena et al. 2017, 40). Ideally, adaptive space engenders self-organization within bureaucratic structures and assists organizations in becoming more adaptable and positively disruptive in the face of complexity (Arena 2018; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017).

Uhl-Bien (2021a, 158) posits CLT as a "meta-framework of leadership for adaptability." As a theoretical framework, it remains still in its evolving stages, having been under development since the early 2000s (e.g. Lichtenstein et al. 2006; Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001; Uhl-Bien and Marion 2009; Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey 2007). However, it is arguable that it has evolved beyond a mere theoretical statement to an actual working theory. This progression can be attributed to three key factors. Firstly, empirical investigations into CLT have gathered momentum (e.g. Arena 2018; Bäcklander 2019; Callens 2023; Paananen et al. 2022; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). Secondly, while research on CLT initially centered predominantly on business environments, attention has broadened, particularly to include the public sector (e.g. Boylan 2018; Murphy et al. 2017; Nooteboom and Termeer 2013). Thirdly, recognizing the significance of critique in theory development, CLT has undergone thorough critical evaluations (see, in particular, Tourish 2019).

CLT presents an ambidextrous perspective of organizations, addressing both operational and entrepreneurial systems and the dynamic tensions between them. The operational system pertains to formality, rules, standardization, and administrative efficiency, driving exploitation (Arena and Uhl-Bien 2016; see also March 1991). *Operational leadership* involves thus establishing clear lines of authority, employing standard operating procedures in decision-making, adeptly managing routine challenges, resource allocation, and integrating innovation into formal systems (Murphy et al. 2017; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017).

Conversely, the entrepreneurial system embodies innovation, learning, flexibility, and growth, fostering exploration (Arena and Uhl-Bien 2016; see also March 1991). Uhl-Bien

and Arena (2017, 16) define *entrepreneurial leadership* (formerly known as adaptive leadership) as the “creation and development of novelty (e.g. ideas, innovative solutions, new products or services) in ways that help an organization adapt to pressures or capitalize on opportunities.” This form of leadership transcends hierarchy and positional authority, although it can also originate from upper management (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2018). Nooteboom and Termeer (2013) associate with this leadership function such action strategies as organizing minimal structures, connecting, improvising, keying (i.e. adapting existing routines), and sensemaking.

According to CLT, organizational adaptability is enhanced when both systems are considered and interwoven (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). While the entrepreneurial system aims to foster experimentation and adaptation, the operational system imposes constraints that facilitate emergent changes aligning with the organization’s requirements. Additionally, the operational system may inject necessary pragmatism into idealistic and ambitious entrepreneurial endeavors. The organization’s condition at the edge of chaos thus necessitates a both/and rather than an either/or mindset – the ability to be ambidextrous in ensuring both stability and transformation (see Murphy et al. 2017; Nooteboom and Termeer 2013).

However, finding an optimal balance between the two systems is not easy and often the operational system becomes emphasized (see Uhl-Bien 2021a, 2021b; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). In such situations, CLT stresses the role of *enabling leadership*. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017, 14, 18), “enabling leadership helps organizations to be agile in the face of complexity,” which is done specifically by “opening up and nurturing” the aforementioned adaptive space. Adaptive space has a bridging function that helps emergence flow from the entrepreneurial system to operational system, where it is finally formalized as a new order (Arena and Uhl-Bien 2016). Nooteboom and Termeer (2013) link enabling leadership with various action strategies, including reflecting on cross-organizational relationships, investing in trust-based relationships, resource sharing, promoting transparency, and integration.

### **Adaptation of complexity leadership theory in military settings**

Although academic research related to the military extensively utilizes the framework of complexity sciences (e.g. Bousquet 2008; Dent and Holt 2001; Maher 2014; Paparone, Anderson, and McDaniel 2008; Raisio, Puustinen, and Jäntti 2020; Rousseau 2003; Ryan 2009; Say and Pronk 2012; Zweibelson 2016), there remains limited adoption of CLT as a theoretical framework in military studies. One exception can be found in the empirical study by Paananen et al. (2022), where they investigate how military leaders engaged in peacekeeping operations navigate complexity and adapt to it, employing CLT as their theoretical framework. The study sheds light on complexity leadership in the context of the military, for example, by delineating the contents within both the operational and entrepreneurial systems. Investigating military leaders’ engagement in peacekeeping operations, it was found that operational aspects encompass rules of engagement, standard operating procedures, risk assessment, contingency planning, and training protocols for preparedness. Entrepreneurial facets, on the other hand, involve socializing with local populations and other stakeholders to gain insight into their motivations and networks; learning, which entails acquiring socio-cultural knowledge of the local context

to facilitate adaptation to the environment; and innovativeness, encompassing the development of novel strategies to address unforeseen challenges.

In a similar vein, Trainor (2017) discusses leadership within the realm of defense acquisition, linking it to the CLT framework. Within the context of defense acquisition, the operational system is characterized by efficiency, quality, and alignment, encompassing boundaries, processes, and constraints aimed at achieving organizational goals and national security interests. Conversely, the entrepreneurial system involves “agile mechanisms to respond to evolving challenges across a time dimension of many years” (Trainor 2017, 3). However, the research highlights a challenge in instances such as defense acquisition, where the powerful operational system tends to dominate, resulting in hierarchy and bureaucracy overshadowing the entrepreneurial system.

Additionally, Geerts and Houtman (2014) and Surace (2019) have conducted academic research that explicitly incorporates CLT within the military context, albeit not as the primary theoretical framework. Geerts and Houtman (2014, 28) discuss the *administrative-adaptive paradox* in their conceptual research, describing it as “a tension of being in control while not being in control.” They argue that fundamental attributes of military organizations, such as order, efficiency, uniformity, and control, contribute to clearly defined responsibilities, rapid decision-making, and prompt action. However, these same characteristics also impede innovation and limit the organization’s ability to adapt by constraining freedom within the social dynamic. In his case study of a military organization, Surace (2019) links CLT to the broader framework of complexity theory. The study argues that leadership grounded in the principles of complexity theory, specifically an adaptive leadership model, challenges the traditional paradigm of rigid, hierarchical organizational structures. Given the highly dynamic and uncertain operating environment of military organizations, the imperative for adaptability becomes paramount. As Surace (2019, 1527) contends, an organization capable of adaptation is “alive and healthy.”

When conducting literature reviews, an interesting observation emerged regarding the large number of theses focusing explicitly on analyzing armed forces from the perspective of CLT. These theses were predominantly produced at the United States Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth (e.g. Gallagher 2017; Keith 2018; Kim 2020; Miller 2018; Prestella 2019; Reed 2022; Smith 2016), as well as during the General Staff Officer Course at the National Defence University in Finland (e.g. Ågrén 2019; Karlsson 2021; Räsänen 2021). The authors were mainly officers at the rank of captain or major. These theses collectively form a rather uniform narrative, which strongly resonates with the academic research described above. The operational environment of warfare is depicted through the lens of (growing) complexity, suggesting that rigid and top-down armed forces, as they currently stand, would not be able to effectively respond to this complexity. In this context, CLT is viewed as a framework to reconcile the operational and entrepreneurial systems of the armed forces, thereby enabling a better response to the challenges posed by complexity.

### ***Extreme Ownership and The Dichotomy of Leadership: a contextual overview***

The two books under analysis are written by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, both highly decorated retired Navy SEAL officers. After their military careers, they founded

a consulting firm, where they provide leadership training based on their military experiences to different sectors of civilian society. In addition, Willink is known for his popular podcast centering on leadership themes. The books, *Extreme Ownership* (first edition published in 2015, followed by a second edition in 2017, 322 pages) and *The Dichotomy of Leadership* (published in 2018, 300 pages), primarily draw from Willink's and Babin's military experiences in Iraq, particularly the Battle of Ramadi, as well as their post-deployment SEAL leadership training and subsequent consulting experiences, particularly within the private sector.

In *Extreme Ownership*, Willink and Babin outline 12 interconnected combat leadership principles, which are detailed concisely in Table 1. In the book, each principle is allocated a chapter, divided into three sections. The first section describes the principle through experiences related to SEAL training or combat. The second section presents the principle itself. The third section illustrates, through examples, how the principle has been applied in consulting within the business sector. The second edition of the book, chosen as the subject of analysis in this article, also includes excerpts from the Jocko Podcast, further enriching the content of the book.

**Table 1.** Combat leadership principles (Willink and Babin 2017).

Principle	Description
Extreme Ownership	The leader, unequivocally responsible for both success and failure, must acknowledge errors, admit failures, and take full ownership of them without recourse to blame.
No Bad Teams, Only Bad Leaders	The pivotal factor determining any team's performance is leadership, where success or failure hinges entirely on the leader, whose attitude establishes the team's overall tone.
Believe	Often, the leader must align their thoughts and vision with the mission, and when they truly believe in it, this conviction resonates throughout the entire chain of command.
Check the Ego	Ego has the potential to disrupt everything, including the planning process, the ability to take good advice, and the ability to accept constructive criticism.
Cover and Move Simple	All teams collaborating in mutual support, exemplifying teamwork. Complexity necessitates simplification for success; overly intricate plans and orders risk misunderstanding, exacerbating issues when problems arise, potentially leading to catastrophe.
Prioritize and Execute	Leaders risk being overwhelmed by attempting to tackle multiple problems or tasks simultaneously, often leading to failure across the board, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing and executing the highest priority tasks.
Decentralized Command	Junior leaders must grasp the extent of their decision-making authority and be empowered to make key decisions essential for mission success, ensuring tasks are accomplished in the most effective and efficient manner possible.
Plan	The planning process and briefing should foster an environment that promotes discussion, questions, and clarification from all levels of personnel, including the most junior. Active team participation, regardless of rank, is paramount for generating bold, innovative solutions to problem sets.
Leading Up and Down the Chain of Command	Leaders should consistently engage in communication with their team members to ensure a clear understanding of their roles within the broader mission, representing leadership in the downward direction of the chain of command. Conversely, in the upward direction of the chain of command, junior leaders, for instance, disseminate situational awareness.
Decisiveness and Uncertainty	Leaders must act decisively amid uncertainty, making the best decisions based on immediate information, recognizing the absence of a perfect solution and the ever-evolving nature of the situation, requiring prompt decision-making and agile adjustments in response to changing circumstances and new data.
Discipline Equals Freedom	The implementation of disciplined standard operating procedures within a team correlates positively with their capacity to exercise Decentralized Command, facilitating swifter, more precise, and efficient execution.



*The Dichotomy of Leadership* follows the same structure as *Extreme Ownership*, aiming to clarify the previously presented leadership principles to prevent misinterpretation, emphasizing the need for balance between opposing forces in leadership. These balancing acts include, for example, being disciplined but not rigid, taking ownership but empowering others, and planning without overplanning. According to Willink and Babin (2018), the book builds upon *Extreme Ownership* but can be read independently. However, Degeneffe (2024, 4), in his book review, suggests that readers “will gain a deeper understanding of leadership by reading the books in tandem.” In this article, *Extreme Ownership* and its combat leadership principles are the primary focus, with *The Dichotomy of Leadership* providing additional depth to the analysis on relevant aspects.

Both books have garnered widespread attention and sales, with *Extreme Ownership* reaching the #1 spot on the New York Times bestseller list. Additionally, they have been widely recommended as reading material within military and other circles (e.g. Degeneffe 2023, 2024; Jackson 2021; Schulte et al. 2023) further highlighting their relevance as the subject of analysis in this article. For example, *Extreme Ownership* has been in the reading list of Naval Information Forces (2022) and *The Dichotomy of Leadership* on the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program (Jackson 2021). As the latter program has the motto of “[r]ead well to lead well” (Jackson 2022, 182), it underscores the importance of critically evaluating the content of these works and the insights they offer.

It is noteworthy that military-related popular works can sometimes evoke controversy among their readership. For instance, Degeneffe (2023) suggests that while he may not align with Willink’s views expressed outside the *Extreme Ownership*, he perceives the book itself as apolitical and not, for instance, a defense of the Iraq War. The diverse reactions to the first author of the books, Jocko Willink, are intriguing. While Christensen and Kyed (2022, 2) argue that Willink has “converted his embodied ‘war capital’ and military masculinity into a prospering business,” thereby contributing “to reproducing the symbolic relationship between military masculinity and hegemonic masculinity,” Guerin (2022, 140) regards Willink as “[o]ne example of a modern stoic.” This diversity of perspectives adds to the interest in analyzing these books.

## Interpreting *Extreme Ownership* through complexity leadership theory

### *Methodology*

The research material, comprising two popular works on leadership, was subjected to abductive content analysis. This approach encourages a dialectical movement between inductive and deductive methods throughout the analysis process (e.g. Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). Initially, an inductive approach was employed, allowing the researchers to engage with the material without a theoretical lens, aiming to form a preliminary understanding of the research subject. Subsequently, theoretical framework was developed, based on CLT’s three leadership types: operational, entrepreneurial, and enabling leadership. Following this, the material was coded in a strongly theory-driven manner, aligning it with these categories, which formed the first-level categories. These categories were further subdivided into more detailed action strategies (combat leadership principles) emerging from the data, representing second-level categories. Third-level subcategories provided additional depth to these classifications.



While the first author primarily undertook the initial coding process, the second author assumed the role of a critical friend (Sparkes and Smith 2014), fostering reflection on alternative perspectives and interpretations. This collaborative approach aimed to enhance research reliability through researcher triangulation, mitigating the risk of undue emphasis on individual perspectives or the occurrence of obvious interpretation errors.

### **Enabling leadership**

Enabling leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing organizational adaptability by cultivating adaptive space through facilitating communication ease actions, overseeing the administrative-adaptive interface, and establishing favorable conditions for adaptive functioning, thereby orchestrating the flow of outputs across organizational hierarchies and fostering an environment conducive to achieving the organization's objectives and vision (Curral et al. 2017; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). The analysis suggests that this type of leadership is more or less explicitly at the core of many leadership principles described by Willink and Babin in their books. The initial impression may be different, but a detailed analysis reveals the nuances of the principles. This is most evident in the principle of Extreme Ownership, with Willink and Babin (2017) positing it as the foundational principle upon which the remaining eleven are built.

The principle of Extreme Ownership is defined as follows: “*The leader must own everything in his or her world. There is no one else to blame*” (Willink and Babin 2017, 30, emphasis in original). Consequently, the leader assumes accountability for errors and setbacks, while bearing the ultimate responsibility for both triumphs and failures. Extreme Ownership is described in the books as a *mindset* that ideally permeates throughout the organization via the example set by formally positioned leaders. When leaders take ownership in this manner and refrain from claiming credit for success but rather bestowing that honor upon subordinate leaders and team members, Extreme Ownership becomes an organizational attitude or culture. Consequently, if teams embrace Extreme Ownership, they can function effectively even in the temporary absence of a strong leader. In the words of Willink and Babin (2017, 286), “[t]he goal of all leaders should be to work themselves out of job.” In such instances, subordinates can rely on the assurance that, while operating autonomously to varying degrees, the leader not only assumes ultimate responsibility but also facilitates adequate training and resources essential for the team's successful operations.

The principle of Check the Ego is intricately linked to the implementation of Extreme Ownership. Willink and Babin (2017, 100) underscore how the ego can be both destructive and constructive. A destructive ego occurs when it, for instance, inhibits the reception of valuable advice or constructive criticism. It thus “clouds our judgment and prevents us from seeing the world as it is.” On the other hand, a constructive ego is humble, signifying that the leader's personal agendas do not take precedence over the importance of the team or organizational mission. Moreover, the leader demonstrates the capability to admit mistakes and assess their own actions honestly.

The initial impression of the Simple principle might suggest that it contradicts Boisot and McKelvey's (2011) Law of Requisite Complexity. The books highlight how overly complex plans and orders can lead to problems when they are not understood. However,

a deeper analysis reveals that Willink and Babin implicitly refer to the Simple Rules principle within the CLT (see Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017), rather than advocating for the mere reduction of complexity. In this context, Simple Rules pertain to plans and orders that are communicated in a manner characterized by simplicity, clarity, and conciseness. It can also be observed that principles such as Cover and Move, and Prioritize and Execute, serve as simple rules themselves. Willink and Babin (2017, 145) elucidate how such communication facilitates the formulation of adaptive responses:

When something goes wrong—and it eventually does—complex plans add to confusion, which can compound into disaster. Almost no mission ever goes according to plan. There are simply too many variables to deal with. This is where simplicity is key. If the plan is simple enough, everyone understands it, which means each person can rapidly adjust and modify what he or she is doing. If the plan is too complex, the team can't make rapid adjustments to it, because there is no baseline understanding of it. [...] With all this simplicity embedded in the way we worked, our troops clearly understood what they were doing and how that tied in to the mission. That core understanding allowed us to adapt quickly without stumbling over ourselves.

Additionally, the Decentralized Command principle serves a distinct function in enabling leadership. This principle involves striving to facilitate autonomous action among junior leaders or team members, under specific conditions. These conditions include, notably, the presence of standard operating procedures and a comprehensive understanding among subordinates of the overall mission and its objectives. In particular, Willink and Babin (2017, 2018) emphasize the significance of Commander's Intent in this regard. The essence of Decentralized Command is encapsulated in the following quote: "I trusted them to make adjustments and adapt the plan to unforeseen circumstances while staying within the parameters of the guidance I had given them and our standard operating procedures. It trusted them to *lead*" (Willink and Babin 2017, 176, emphasis in original).

The principles of Leading Down the Chain of Command and Believe serve to facilitate Decentralized Command. While the former involves granting greater ownership of plans to the troops, thereby enhancing their comprehension of the mission as well as their role within the larger strategic framework, the latter emphasizes the necessity for leaders to not only instruct subordinates on what to do, but also why. In order to effectively convey this information in a compelling and inspirational manner, leaders must themselves have a genuine *belief* in the mission. Leading Down the Chain of Command is in turn linked to the Plan principle, wherein it is emphasized that the planning process and briefing should be "a forum that encourages discussion, questions, and clarification from even the most junior personnel" and that this is "critical in developing bold, innovative solutions to problem sets" (Willink and Babin 2017, 204–205).

### **Entrepreneurial leadership**

Entrepreneurial leadership, characterized by innovation, adaptability, and learning, facilitates organizational adaptation and opportunity exploitation beyond hierarchical constraints (Arena and Uhl-Bien 2016; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). This aspect of leadership emerged prominently from the material, particularly in association with enabling leadership. Beginning with the introductory chapter of their book *Extreme Ownership*, Willink

and Babin (2017, 11–12) articulate their stance on leadership, stressing its applicability not only to senior commanders but also to leaders at every echelon, including the junior petty officers who “stepped up, took charge, and led.” Furthermore, they aim to dispel the myth of soldiers as robotic actors who simply obey orders. Instead, soldiers are portrayed as “smart, creative, freethinking individuals – human beings.” Willink and Babin (2017, 12) further emphasize that this especially applies in the context of their own special operations background in SEAL Teams, where “innovation and input from everyone (including the most junior personnel) are encouraged.”

As depicted above, Decentralized Command, as a form of enabling leadership, ideally fosters the emergence of adaptive actions, essentially giving rise to entrepreneurial leadership. In *The Dichotomy of Leadership* (Willink and Babin 2018, 43, emphasis in original), the outcomes of Decentralized Command are delineated as follows: “They took ownership. Not only did they come with a solid, tactically sound plans, they also got creative and developed new and innovative ideas to make our execution of those plans more effective. Most important, *they* took full ownership of the operations and worked with all the confidence and aggressive leadership we need to be successful in combat.” This was seen to necessitate that subordinates understand they can consistently depend on the support of their leader (i.e. his or her Extreme Leadership) when they take initiative, even if the task does not proceed as smoothly as anticipated.

However, it was emphasized that decentralized command must be balanced; it should not lead to chaos, but it should also not be stifled by micromanagement. Under micromanagement, “[i]nitiative fades and eventually dies. Creativity and bold thought and action soon die as well. The team becomes a bunch of simple and thoughtless automatons, following orders without understanding, moving forward only when told to do so” (Willink and Babin 2018, 49). Similarly, excessive laissez-faire leadership may lead to overly independent actors failing to grasp the extent of their decision-making authority, which Willink and Babin (2017, 184) describe as “‘the left and right limits’ of their responsibility.” Excessive independence can also result in actions no longer aligned with the greater vision and goals of the organization.

The principles of Cover and Move, Prioritize and Execute, Decisiveness Amid Uncertainty, Leading Up the Chain of Command, and Plan all have connections to entrepreneurial leadership. When Cover and Move is applied, silos are broken down, and teams work together, relying on each other. In CLT, this is known as connecting, where novel linkages are organized among people, domains, and organizational levels (Nooteboom and Termeer 2013). The principle of Prioritize and Execute addresses the intricacies of the battlefield, where leaders often encounter overwhelming complexities. Consequently, the prioritization of tasks becomes paramount, especially in a dynamic operational environment characterized by constantly shifting priorities. In such contexts, “[t]he team must maintain the ability to quickly reprioritize efforts and rapidly adapt to constantly changing battlefield” (Willink and Babin 2017, 162). Instead of being paralyzed by complexity or resorting to harmful attempts to tame it, the approach resembles an incremental small-wins framework (see Termeer and Dewulf 2019).

The principle of Decisiveness Amid Uncertainty also alludes to adaptability. In the context of warfare, it is acknowledged that there is no single, unequivocally correct solution, and outcomes are inherently uncertain, with the full picture never fully realized. Consequently, “[l]eaders must be comfortable with this and be able to make the decisions

promptly, then be ready to adjust those decisions quickly based on the evolving situations and new information” (Willink and Babin 2017, 254). The principle of Leading Up the Chain of Command emphasizes proactivity over reactivity, where situational awareness is disseminated up the chain of command. This practice contributes to ensuring that senior leaders possess a comprehensive understanding of how strategic plans impact execution on the ground, enabling them to better comprehend the ramifications of their decisions. As the situational awareness of senior leadership develops in this manner, it ideally fosters trust in the actions of the lower echelons, thus promoting Decentralized Command: “The more information we passed, the more our CO and staff understood what we were trying to accomplish. [...]. The CO grew more comfortable with our combat operations. He and his staff developed trust in us. As a result, all the combat mission we submitted received approval [...].” (Willink and Babin 2017, 236–237).

### ***Operational leadership***

Operational leadership pertains to overseeing the formal aspects of organizational functions, emphasizing the establishment of clear lines of authority, the utilization of standard operating procedures in decision-making processes, adept management of routine challenges and resource allocation, and the incorporation of innovation to optimize administrative efficiency and task coordination (Murphy et al. 2017; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). This is evident, for instance, in the emphasis placed in the analyzed books on delineating clear chains of command, establishing effective and repeatable, that is, disciplined planning processes, and in highlighting the imperative for training to concentrate on fundamental principles. As articulated by Willink and Babin (2018, 124), “[w]hile units must adapt and innovate, some basic tactics do not change.”

The principle of No Bad Teams, Only Bad Leaders seems to be associated with operational leadership, highlighting how the leader’s attitude sets the team’s overall tone and emphasizing the need for leaders to uphold performance standards to prevent substandard performance from becoming accepted. However, this also connects to enabling leadership, as ideally, the enforcement of standards for high-level performance would instill “a *culture* of Extreme Ownership, of winning and how to win, in every individual” (Willink and Babin 2017, 59, emphasis in original).

Finally, the principle of Discipline Equals Freedom interconnects all three leadership types included in CLT. According to the principle, disciplined standard operating procedures would not render teams rigid and incapable of improvisation. Instead, they would render them more flexible, adaptable, creative, and efficient. All prior disciplined training and planning, along with the leader’s (and all other team members’) demonstration of Extreme Ownership and the team’s internalization of the Commander’s Intent, would result in standard operating procedures becoming more akin to guidelines than inflexible laws, thereby increasing freedom in practicing Decentralized Command. As described by Willink and Babin (2018, 172, emphasis in original):

Disciplined procedures must be balanced with the ability to apply common sense to an issue, with the power to break with SOPs when necessary, with the *freedom* to think about alternative solutions, apply new ideas, and make adjustments to processes based on the reality of what is actually happening. If discipline is too strict, team members cannot make adjustments, cannot adapt, and cannot use their most precious asset—their brains—to

quickly develop customized solutions to unique problems for which the standard solution might not work.

## Discussion

This article endeavored to analyze how the combat leadership principles articulated by Willink and Babin (2017, 2018) manifested when analyzed through the framework of CLT. Findings indicate a significant degree of alignment between these principles and CLT. This is exemplified by how the three leadership types encompassed within CLT – enabling, entrepreneurial, and operational leadership – incorporated these particular leadership principles. Although the military may be renowned for operational leadership (see e.g. Geerts and Houtman 2014; Trainor 2017), within Willink and Babin (2017, 2018) practice-oriented framework, enabling leadership, which fosters adaptive actions akin to entrepreneurial leadership, appears to be emphasized.

On the other hand, when comparing the results of the analysis to the framework of CLT, the operational model formed by Willink and Babin's (2017, 2018) leadership principles tends to emphasize adaptive action *within* top-down operations, whereas in CLT, the focus is more on the emergence occurring through self-organization from the bottom up (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2018). In the context of the armed forces, enabling leadership would thus heavily rely on the operational system, which sets the parameters for adaptive actions that enabling leadership seeks to promote within these constraints (e.g. standard operating procedures, disciplined training, and Commander's Intent).

Although the analyzed books emphasize the importance of lower-level actors practicing Extreme Ownership by conveying situational awareness upwards, participating in planning processes, and expressing dissent if necessary, the books still convey the idea that entirely unrestricted, spontaneous self-organization is not desirable. However, this does not directly contradict the principles of CLT, and such actions have their own scientific terms within organizational theory. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), for example, refer to studies by Brown and Eisenhardt (e.g. 1998), which address *semi-structured* organizations. These organizations are neither overly structured nor under-structured, but rather positioned at the edge of chaos, striking a delicate balance. This notion is also evident in the concepts of *guided* (Gershenson 2012), *targeted* (Gros 2014), and *structured* (Simsa et al. 2019) self-organization, which involve “the steering of the self-organizing dynamics of a system toward a desired configuration” (Gershenson 2012, 182).<sup>1</sup> However, even within these more constrained forms of self-organization, there exists the idea that activities should not be overly directed by a specific blueprint, but rather guided implicitly (see Ay, Der, and Prokopenko 2012).

In a military context, *mission command*, also referred to as Decentralized Command by Willink and Babin (2017), can be interpreted as a manifestation of such constrained self-organization. Mission command is a leadership philosophy and military doctrine characterized by “decentralization and local flexibility within the overall intent [of the superior commander]” (Storr 2003, 126). The underlying principle is that when subordinates are not constrained by overly rigid directives, they are empowered to exercise creativity, make autonomous decisions, and adapt to dynamic circumstances. The

superior commander's intent serves as a guiding principle, but with minimal control measures. Supporting these viewpoints, prior research has shown consistency. For instance, participants in a study conducted by Raisio et al. (2020), comprising students enrolled in a general staff officer course, viewed mission command as an approach for navigating the complexities of operational environments. Similarly, Sjögren's (2022) research demonstrated that former and current NATO commanders and senior staff officers acknowledge both the effectiveness and limitations of structured decision-making processes and doctrine, while also emphasizing the significance of surprise, creativity, and risk-taking. It is important to note, however, that although mission command appears as the leading doctrine in many Western military organizations, adaptive actions may be hindered by the notion that "broad deviation from the norm is never an option," as argued by Geerts and Houtman (2014, 25).

Willink and Babin's (2017, 2018) practice-oriented framework appears also to serve as a counterbalance to the romanticization of complexity and collective command, as described by Klitmøller and Obling (2021). Klitmøller Obling's perspective emphasizes that different command regimes, such as individualistic and collective, should not be viewed as overly dichotomous. However, Willink and Babin (2018) themselves employ the term dichotomy, evident even in the title of their book, *The Dichotomy of Leadership*. For example, the principle of Freedom Equals Discipline might be more accurately described thus by terms such as duality or paradox, rather than dichotomy or dualism (see Geerts and Houtman 2014; Murphy et al. 2017), as these terms imply the coexistence of seemingly contradictory attributes, such as freedom and discipline.

## Conclusions

Willink and Babin (2017) assert that they do not consider themselves developers of a new leadership paradigm, but rather custodians of familiar lessons from the history of warfare. However, it cannot be denied what impact these books have had, judging solely by their sales figures and the recommendations for reading them. It can be argued that these books have brought the familiar lessons of warfare to a broader audience, raising awareness among the general public. On the other hand, while CLT has garnered significant attention in academic circles, as evidenced by citation counts, it may appear abstract and challenging to comprehend for non-academic audiences. Ideally, theory and practice converge, as demonstrated in this article. The article shows that the practice-oriented insights of Willink and Babin (2017, 2018) find support in theoretical knowledge. Conversely, these insights derived from practice potentially contribute to the development of CLT in the context of warfare.

An interesting avenue for further research could be to explore the extent to which and under what circumstances freer, spontaneous self-organization could be permitted. Is there a difference in this regard based on whether it is peacetime or wartime (see also Dent and Holt 2001)? Additionally, how does the evolving operational environment influence the interplay between discipline and freedom? For instance, Bollmann and Heltberg (2023) have delved into the ramifications of digitalization and data utilization on military organizations. It is plausible that the allure of digitalization and data-driven approaches could prompt military leaders to assume a more authoritarian stance akin to



*tactical generals*. In this scenario, the focus on the operational system may dominate over the entrepreneurial system and its adaptive behaviors.

It could also be beneficial for understanding the overall picture to examine how the relationship between leaders and a hierarchical organization, such as the military, drives change and influences leadership behaviors. Specifically, does the organization shape the development of leaders who align with the principles of Extreme Ownership, or do individual leaders significantly impact the organization's leadership approach, creating a *culture* of Extreme Ownership (Willink and Babin 2017)?

## Note

1. One peer reviewer proposed an intriguing idea in a similar vein, suggesting that the principle of Extreme Ownership might be more aptly characterized in a hierarchical organization such as the military, especially at lower levels, by the concept of “*Bounded Extreme Ownership*.” This notion would imply that Extreme Ownership is cultivated within a framework of pre-established (formal and informal) parameters, which affects how Extreme Ownership manifests in different situations.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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