

Rugby captain tips from a Navy SEAL

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- Tim Howard

“...leadership requires belief in the mission and unyielding perseverance to achieve victory, particularly when doubters question whether victory is even possible” – Jocko Willink, *Extreme Ownership*

Background on Extreme Ownership

[Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win](#) is a book that chronicles the leadership lessons learned by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin while on deployment with the NAVY SEALs in Iraq.

It uses real-world combat events to illustrate key leadership principles and shows the application of these principles to the business environment.

This blog post is an attempt to apply those same leadership principles to the game of rugby and in particular, the role of captaining a rugby team.

Leadership in rugby

“Leadership is the single greatest factor in any team’s performance... One of the most fundamental and important truths at the heart of Extreme Ownership: there are no bad teams, only bad leaders.” – JW, EO

It’s virtually impossible for a rugby team to win without effective leadership. But we don’t just mean the senior players telling everyone else what to do; we’re talking about the leadership of individuals at all levels of the organization. Leadership, according to Willink and Babin isn’t top down. It’s universal. For a rugby team to succeed, every player must be a leader. It’s not good enough for junior players to leave leadership up to the old boys. Younger guys are equally responsible for driving the team forward towards its objectives.

How to measure a top-level rugby captain

“The only meaningful measure of a leader is whether the team succeeds or fails. Effective leaders lead successful teams that accomplish their mission and win. Ineffective leaders do not.” – JW, EO

The best top-level rugby captains are the ones who win the most critical games. Richie McCaw of the All Blacks being the ultimate example having won two consecutive World

Cups. But there are others. Some names that spring to mind include Jon Schmidt, John Eels, and Martin Johnson. Consummate professionals who took their teams to the very top of the sport. To achieve that kind of success, those captains implemented many of the strategies outlined in this article. But unlike an amateur rugby team, the primary measure of achievement for those captains was a victory on the field. There are dozens of factors that contribute to success in rugby, but the pro or semi-pro rugby Captain is graded only on their ability to win rugby games.

How to measure an amateur rugby captain

The amateur game, which we're all familiar with has some different priorities. Amateur rugby is played by a wide range of people for an equally wide range of reasons. Camaraderie, physical and mental health, socializing, travel, drinking and on-field success being just a few of them. An amateur rugby captain is still responsible for their team's success. But success in amateur rugby isn't binary.

Before you decide how to measure an amateur rugby captain, it's important to define what success looks like in amateur rugby. The options here are endless. But here are the three things we think warrant consideration when determining what success looks like:

- **Are the players having fun?** – Are players excited to be at training and games? Would they recommend rugby to their friends and relatives based on their experiences with the team?
- **Are the players getting better?** – Is there a fundamental improvement in their ability to play rugby? Are core skills including physical and mental fitness improving?
- **Are the players safe?** – Are the playing and training environments setup to prevent as many injuries as possible?

If an amateur rugby captain can answer 'Yes' to all these questions, we would consider them successful.

Disclaimers

1. For the duration of this article, when we use the terms "success" or "successful" please consider whether you're a pro or semi-pro rugby captain whose key performance indicator is winning rugby games OR an amateur rugby captain whose measure of success is keeping players safe, having fun and improving.
2. I've captained a few different rugby teams. I don't think I was great. I don't think I was awful. But I wish I had read 'Extreme Ownership' before I took on the role. The lessons apply to many different aspects of life. It's not super-long, and it's pretty entertaining the whole way through. [You can buy it here on Amazon](#). But if

you haven't got time for that, the rest of this article is a good crack at breaking it down into a rugby context. Here goes...

Take complete ownership

“Leaders must own everything in their world. There is no one else to blame. The leader is truly and ultimately responsible for everything. That is Extreme Ownership, the fundamental core of what constitutes any leadership endeavor.”

There are lots of people involved in rugby clubs. The board, the coaches, the players and the supporters all have their own interests and motivations. But the captain is solely responsible for the success of the team. It is the captain's role to define success and find the resources necessary to achieve it. That might mean adjusting training times to maximize participation. That might mean firing a coach who is putting players at risk of unnecessary injury. That might mean begging the old boys to kick-in to the travel fund.

As individuals, we often attribute the success of others to luck or circumstances and make excuses for our own failures and the failures of our team. An effective rugby captain must take total responsibility both during success and failure. Taking responsibility when things go wrong requires extraordinary humility. But it's also part of learning to be a leader. Taking extreme ownership requires a captain to remove ego from the equation. All that matters is the success of the team.

Enforce performance standards

“When it comes to performance standards, It's not what you preach; it's what you tolerate.”

A poor leader accepts zero responsibility for mistakes, makes excuses, and blames everyone else for their failings (and those of their team). Have you ever played rugby with one of these people? When presented with their own shortcomings, they make excuses and shift the blame to other members of the team. Think if you've ever heard one of these statements from a teammate:

- “it was a shit pass...”
- “the forwards are lazy...”
- “he can't catch...”
- “the ref had a shocker...” – this is the most egregious excuse

A good leader makes it clear what the standard is and enforces this uniformly. What standards your rugby club and rugby team decide upon will vary widely. Some teams require a night of sobriety before rugby games; others will demand you arrive early for training. Whatever your team decides upon, the captain is responsible for enforcing these standards. Note that enforcement and discussion are not the same things. Yelling at everyone in the huddle is not enforcing performance standards. Allowing a player to

turn up late and still take the field is not enforcing the team's standards. If you tolerate a player who doesn't meet the performance standards, you'll alienate the rest of the team.

Create belief in the system

"If frontline leaders and troops understand why, they can move forward, fully believing in what they are doing."

Being a worldwide sport, people grow up playing different styles of rugby. The Kiwis, the French and the Japanese all play the same game with a unique flavor driven by various cultural, training and coaching philosophies. The variation in rugby is one of the things we all love about it. But when those styles mix, they can also clash. At almost any club you can find, there will be players and coaches who think they grew up playing the best kind of rugby.

One of the challenges for rugby coaches is to develop a system that players with different backgrounds can execute. Then it becomes the responsibility of the captain to explain that system in such a way that the entire team buys into it.

All players must understand why the system exists as it does for them to believe it in. This "buy-in" can be seriously difficult to achieve, especially when you have guys on the team with much more experience than others. Often it requires explaining to these more experienced players that they need to play within a system BELOW their natural or trained ability for the team to be successful.

If the team's most experienced and talented players can be made to understand why systems are in place, it helps them become true believers. Even if they don't agree with the system, if it's explained to them, they will have an easier time supporting it.

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Check your ego

“Ego clouds and disrupts everything: the planning process, the ability to take good advice, and the ability to accept constructive criticism. Many of the disruptive issues that arise within any team can be attributed directly to a problem with ego.”

Within any rugby club, you’re going to find plenty of egos. The challenge as a captain is for you to remove your ego from your thought process. Ego disrupts clear judgment and prevents you from seeing the world as it is. Ego can prevent a captain from conducting an honest, realistic assessment of his or her performance and the performance of their rugby team.

Our egos do not like to accept or embrace blame. As a result, blaming other players can become an unfortunately easy thing to do when things go wrong. Overshoot a lineout throw, drop a pass, miss a tackle and it’s all too easy to blame the guys around you. As a rugby captain, you can’t do this. When determining what went wrong and how to fix it, a captain must look at the circumstances completely impartially. Free of personal bias.

Cover and move

“Team members, departments, and supporting assets must always Cover and Move—help each other, work together, and support each other to win. This principle is integral for any team to achieve victory.”

In rugby, the two key groups of players are Forwards and Backs. For the team to be successful, both groups must support one another. The Forwards must provide a solid set-piece platform for the Backs. The Backs must use a strategic kicking game to give the forwards rest and territory. Cover and move is a philosophy of teamwork. If these two groups of players start operating independently, the team will fail.

This concept can also be extended beyond the field to the administrative side of rugby. The Board, the Coaching Staff, the Players and the Supporters must work together to achieve success for the rugby club. If any of these groups starts acting in their own interests, the team will suffer. It’s sad to say that this is a common problem in amateur rugby organizations. Particularly when it comes to communication between the playing core and the board members. The Captain has a unique role in facilitating conversation between these two groups. In order for them to cover each other, the captain must move information between them constantly. A huge challenge, but you asked for it!

Make everything simpler

As a leader, it doesn’t matter how well you feel you have presented the information or communicated an order, plan, tactic, or strategy. If your team doesn’t get it, you have not kept things simple and you have failed.”

Simple but not easy. The All Blacks are the personification of this principle. Nothing fancy. The All Blacks don’t throw miss passes. They don’t throw flick passes. They don’t

go for the hero play. They make solid, sound decisions and execute aggressively and passionately. They believe in the mission.

If you're a rugby captain who is struggling to get your teammates to understand the system, there's a good chance that the system is too complicated. Any system must be simple enough that absolutely everyone on the team can understand and explain it to others.

Prioritize and execute

"... leaders must determine the highest priority task first. When overwhelmed, fall back upon this principle: Prioritize and Execute. Teams must be careful to avoid target fixation on a single issue. They cannot fail to recognize when the highest priority task shifts to something else."

"Prioritize and execute" can be a difficult concept to apply to rugby. With so many moving pieces, it's tough to determine what the highest priority task is at any given time. But there are some things that are more obvious than others. For example; if you're losing your own scrum ball, the forwards and half back need to figure out a way to get the ball out quickly. If the opposition is making yards next to the ruck, everyone needs to focus on their "Pillar-Post" or "A-B" defense.

The captain is responsible for communicating the highest priority task to their teammates. It's their responsibility to make the fly half kick for territory. It's their responsibility to tell the forwards to pick n go when there's nothing on out wide. The captain must be able to take a step back, look at the situation of the game and get their players to execute the highest priority task first.

To implement Prioritize and Execute on the rugby field, the captain must:

- **evaluate the highest priority problem** – what is the most critical thing that needs to be done? Do you have a deficiency that is going to cost you points? HINT: That's probably your highest priority
- **lay out in simple, clear, and concise terms the highest priority effort for your team** – communicate the priority to the correct sub-ordinate leaders
- **develop and determine a solution, seek input from key leaders and from the team where possible** – gather feedback in real-time from other senior players to determine the best solution to the problem
- **direct the execution of that solution, focusing all efforts and resources toward this priority task** – put your best players on the task and give them the responsibility for seeing it through
- **move on to the next highest priority problem. Repeat.**

- **when priorities shift within the team, pass situational awareness both up and down the chain** – if you go from defense to attack, ensure that you communicate the new priority, e.g. winning set piece ball
- **don't let the focus on one priority cause target fixation. Maintain the ability to see other problems developing and rapidly shift as needed** – understand that the priority now might not be the priority in 10 minutes. Plan for the change in advance.

Decentralized command

“...senior leaders must constantly communicate and push information—what we call in the military “situational awareness”—to their subordinate leaders... junior leaders must push situational awareness up the chain to their senior leaders to keep them informed, particularly of crucial information that affects strategic decision-making.”

To make the correct strategic decisions, a rugby captain must constantly be receiving and sending information to the other senior players on the team. This process of making information accessible allows players to understand and believe in decisions and gives the captain the correct information with which to operate. A captain cannot possibly see everything or understand the capacity of their players to perform without talking to them regularly.

Making the right decision at the right time differentiates a good rugby team from a great rugby team. Players are constantly making decisions. Should I go to that ruck? Should I kick, pass or run? Should I attack the ball or re-align for the next phase? ‘Decentralized Command’ in rugby involves giving players the tools and information so that they can make the right decision on the fly. If players understand that the team’s best chance of scoring is with a lineout in the opposition’s 22, they’ll be more inclined to kick for territory. If players understand that the opposition is likely to commit a handling error within 4 phases, they will be less inclined to go for a low-risk poach at a tackle situation.

‘Decentralized Command’ is about giving the team parameters and objectives to work towards and allowing them to make the decision that best allows the team to meet its objective. Rugby captains are responsible for helping all players understand the strategic vision and informing them when priorities change that vision.

Lead down the chain of command

“Giving the frontline troops ownership of even a small piece of the plan gives them buy-in, helps them understand the reasons behind the plan, and better enables them to believe in the mission.”

Leading down the chain of command sounds a lot like most notions of “standard leadership”. Thus, leaders must ask questions of their troops, encourage interaction,

and ensure their teams understand the plan. The test for a successful brief is simple: Do the team and the supporting elements understand it?

The best teams employ constant analysis of their tactics and measure their effectiveness so that they can adapt their methods and implement lessons learned for future missions. What went right? What went wrong? How can we adapt our tactics to make us even more effective and increase our advantage over the enemy?

That is leading down the chain of command. It requires regularly stepping out of the office and personally engaging in face-to-face conversations with direct reports and observing the frontline troops in action to understand their particular challenges and read them into the Commander's Intent.

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Support the coach

“One of the most important jobs of any leader is to support your own boss—your immediate leadership. In any chain of command, the leadership must always present a united front to the troops. A public display of discontent or disagreement with the chain of command undermines the authority of leaders at all levels. This is catastrophic to the performance of any organization.”

Make no mistake, within a rugby team, the Head Coach is the boss. They develop the strategy; they instruct players and they are ultimately responsible to the board when things go wrong. It's the role of the captain to ensure the team carries out the coach's strategy on the field.

The captain is also the key link between the players and the coach. The captain and coach must work in unison. If the captain publicly undermines the authority of the coach or contradicts the coach's strategy, the team will lose respect for the leadership team as a whole. At all times, the captain must support the coach's decisions. At all times, the captain must give the coach the confidence to make tough choices. At all times, the captain must be a champion of the coach with the players. Only then will the entire leadership team be taken seriously.

Act Decisively

“It is critical for leaders to act decisively amid uncertainty; to make the best decisions they can based on only the immediate information available.”

It's virtually impossible to make the right call every time. Rugby is such a fast paced sport that captains must regularly make important decisions on the fly. Implementing a culture of Decentralized Command can significantly help with this process. The more information you have to work with as a captain, the better you can assess the strategic situation. But only to a point. Eventually, you need to decide; go for points or take a scrum?

Whatever you decide, it's important to view that decision as what it is; the best call you could make at the time. You can't stop all bad things from happening. If you take the scrum, there is a chance you'll lose it. If you take the points, there is a chance your kicker will shank it. Whatever the outcome of the next play, don't let it affect your decision-making process for the rest of the game. Acting decisively means moving past a decision once it's made. Prioritize and execute. Something else is coming down the pipe. Don't get caught up thinking about how a different decision could have created a different outcome. Learn from it and adapt, quickly.

Remove Bad Apples Immediately

“I'll tell you something else,” I added. “These guys are cancers. Their destructive attitudes will metastasize within the team and spread to others. The quicker you cut them out, the less damage they will do, the less negativity they will spread, and, most important, the fewer people they will pull away with them.”

Building upon the idea of acting decisively. Sometimes a rugby captain needs to act to remove bad apples from the team or the club. This isn't easy. In amateur rugby it's about the hardest thing there is to do. Nobody wants to tell another player they're not welcome at the organization. But sometimes it needs to be done. What are those times?

In professional rugby, it's pretty simple. If your teammate isn't meeting their performance standards, they need to be let go. Yes, they should be given a chance to change their ways if they're underperforming. But if a player is not inclined to meet performance standards, or if they're deliberately undermining a coach, or haven't bought into the strategy, it's better to get rid of them quickly in favor of someone who will passionately work towards common goals.

In amateur rugby, this is much harder. Since people are paying to play, it can be inherently (and financially) difficult for a captain to ask a player not to come back to the club. But sadly, that is the captain's responsibility.

Remember our three measures of success for an amateur rugby club?

- Are the players having fun?
- Are the players getting better?
- Are the players safe?

If any player is causing other players not to enjoy themselves at training or games and refuses to change this, they need to go. If any player is deliberately undermining the coaches or the strategy and refuses to change this, they need to go. If any player is making other players, supporters, board members or coaches feel unsafe and refuses to change this; they need to go.

Some people will simply not fit into the structure of a rugby team. While that is deeply unfortunate, it's the captain's job to ensure their players (all their players, not just one individual) are having fun, getting better and feel safe playing and training with the team. If one bad apple is causing these kinds of problems, get rid of them before they infect everyone else with their attitude.

Keep your distance

“A leader must be close with subordinates but not too close. The best leaders understand the motivations of their team members and know their people—their lives and their families. But a leader must never grow so close to subordinates that one member of the team becomes more important than another, or more important than the mission itself. Leaders must never get so close that the team forgets who is in charge.”

Keeping your distance from your teammates is perhaps the most difficult thing you need to do as a captain. You're mates. You play rugby together. You're going to be close personally. But captains must be able to keep enough distance from themselves and their teammates that their decisions are respected and they can act decisively when necessary without their ego getting in the way.

Don't get too close to any individual players in a team setting. Don't show favoritism to a specific group. Don't be disparaging of a specific group. In the case of forwards who are captains, don't make blanket statements about the backline or blame their entire group for individual performance errors.

This is equally important for coaches. Nothing is more paralyzing to a team than when a coach shows favoritism to one player over another. As a captain, you need to guard against this and lead UP the chain of command by giving your coach the information they need to make the right decision.

Discipline is Freedom

“The more disciplined standard operating procedures (SOPs) a team employs, the more freedom they have to practice Decentralized Command, and thus they can execute faster, sharper, and more efficiently. Just as an individual excels when he or she exercises self-discipline, a unit that has tighter and more-disciplined procedures and processes will excel and win.”

It's really boring doing basic handling drills at rugby training. Everyone wants to move on to something more complex and challenging almost immediately after picking up a rugby ball. But having the discipline to do the basics at training, at EVERY training, will give your team the ability to execute more complex maneuvers during games.

In that, lies the dichotomy: discipline—strict order, regimen, and control—might appear to be the opposite of total freedom—the power to act, speak, or think without any restrictions. But, in fact, discipline is the pathway to freedom.

Knowing that every player can throw a pass off the ground lets your team continue attacking movements that would otherwise break down. Knowing that every player can catch with just their hands (not their chest and arms) makes every player a potential playmaker. Knowing that every player can be effective at the ruck means the team can attack in waves and maintain possession.

This knowledge is built through the discipline to do the basics at training. This knowledge is built through catching and passing and catching and passing and (you guessed it!) catching and passing. Over and over and over again. Through the discipline to train comes the freedom to play rugby.

The Dichotomy of Leadership

Finally, if you skimmed this entire article in the hopes you'd reach the end quickly, we're sorry. But if you leave with nothing else. Try to take a few of these key lessons from Extreme Ownership regarding what a good rugby captain must be:

- confident but not cocky;
- courageous but not foolhardy;
- competitive but a gracious loser;
- attentive to details but not obsessed by them;
- strong but have endurance;
- a leader and follower;
- humble not passive;
- aggressive not overbearing;
- quiet not silent;
- calm but not robotic, logical but not devoid of emotions;

- close with the troops but not so close that one becomes more important than another or more important than the good of the team; not so close that they forget who is in charge.
- able to execute Extreme Ownership, while exercising Decentralized Command.

“A good rugby captain has nothing to prove, but everything to prove. Captains must earn the respect and right to lead their team.” – me, just now.

REFERENCES

1. [Here are my 8 Lessons and Takeaways from Extreme Ownership...](#) (accessed May 12, 2016)