



**DECISION MAKING**

**Psychology and Behavioural Economics:**

**WHAT DO BORDER COLLIES AND HIGH PERFORMING TEAMS HAVE IN COMMON?**

**BY PHIL SLADE**

Traditional ways of creating high performance teams rarely work in a sustainable way. In order to learn what makes a team truly thrive, we need to learn some lessons from the humble Border Collie.

**BORDER COLLIES AND HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS?  
BY PHIL SLADE**

**G**rowing up on a wheat and sheep farm in central NSW, I experienced first hand the incredible instinct and grace that working dogs had when herding sheep. It was breath-taking. Hands down our best sheepdogs were Border Collies. One morning we woke to find 200 sheep standing in the fenced front yard of our farmhouse. Turns out Dad had left the gate open on the back paddock and overnight all the sheep got out and were roaming around the farm.

Bindi, our two-month-old border collie puppy, sensing this chaos, and with no other dogs around in her short life to model herding behaviour, had round all the sheep up and calmly put them in the front yard, safe from harm. All done on instinct. Bindi was amazing. A true Wonder Dog. However, she had one big problem, she was so good at what she did she had trouble working with other dogs.

As our farm grew, so did our flock to well over 5000 head of sheep. This was far too much for one dog - Bindi could handle hundreds, but not thousands of sheep. So, we did the most sensible thing we could and purchased two more Border Collies, Tucker and Slip. In the first few months, it was sheer chaos. The dogs were not working together, and while they were doing their own thing they were not much more effective than only having one dog. In some cases, managing the dogs took much more effort than managing the sheep.

Interestingly, simply giving it more time for the dogs to 'get to know each other' didn't seem to help. Tucker would constantly get distracted by a bullish ram, while Slip would dart into the flock to avoid Bindi and send the sheep scattering, and Bindi was constantly running the perimeter, often getting in the way of the other dogs and causing the sheep to freeze in confusion. For months it was a mess, and it wasn't getting any better. It was a significant blocker to our growth.

It wasn't until we specifically trained the dogs to work together that we started to see a difference. This training wasn't just in herding sheep, it was training them how to work together better. At the beginning of this training, we noticed that each of the dogs had very different personalities and very different strengths. Rather than see this as a negative, we leveraged these

strengths. Bindi the wonder dog had amazing peripheral awareness and an uncanny instinct to know where the flock needed to go. Tucker could quickly bring cantankerous sheep into line and could move throughout the flock without them scattering, and Slip was the fastest dog we'd ever seen and was quickly able to move in the background to rein in stragglers. We worked with their instincts, not against them.

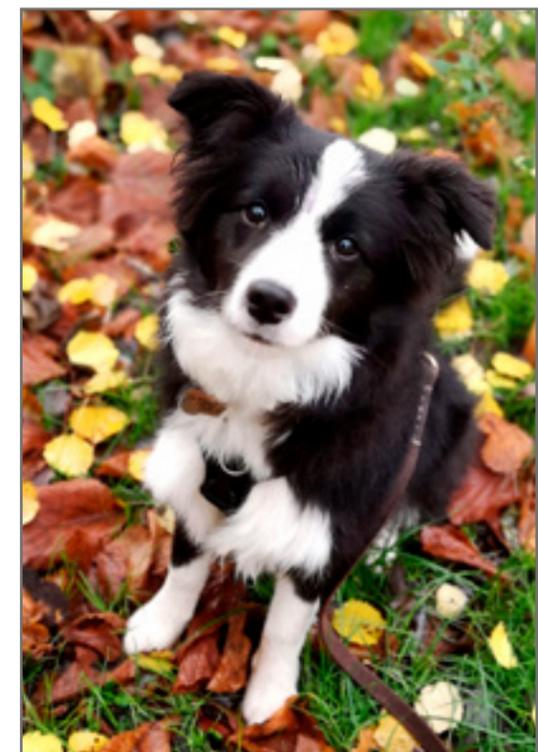
Working independently they could only handle hundreds of sheep, not much more than Bindi could by herself. But as soon as the three dogs started working together they could handle thousands. It was like watching a ballet. It was beautiful.

It's been many years since I worked the farm as a boy in the '80s, but whenever we work to develop high-performance teams, I am often reminded of the sheepdogs. The challenge is that traditionally team coaching has used a deficiency model, focussing on key problem areas and deficiencies assuming that by removing these blockers the team will naturally work better. This is true to a degree, but rarely has a lasting impact, and never actually leads to unlocking the combined genius and potential of the group.

The key is finding out what people look like when they are at their best, and what they need from others when the pressure is on to manage stress and keep moving forward.

In studying the psychology of teams and observing years of behaviour in hundreds of different teams across every industry imaginable, we have seen a pattern emerge. There seem to be four key mindsets, or states, that people tend to thrive in. These seem to be derived from the way we have developed inter-group relatedness and how human 'tribes' have learnt to communicate and survive in a dangerous world. It is hypothesised that the tribes that were best able to get these different mindsets to collaborate had the survival advantage.

Empirically we can see this playing out in the modern organisation—or any social group in fact. When you get people working together in their natural thrive state, growth, productivity and engagement go through the roof. In this way, you're unlocking the team's potential by working



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with their instincts and then helping them strengthen other aspects of their working together that don't come as naturally.

The four key mindsets we are referring to here follow the APSI model. Activist, Partner, Strategist and Implementor.

While many people can work in multiple states, there seems to always be one in which you thrive, the mirror of which helps pull you out of stress. Let's step through each of these states at a high level, while we do, ask yourself which one resonates with you the most.

**Activist**

Activists have a unique ability to set the light on the hill, articulate the 'why' and agitate for the value and need for change. Activists can be decisive with small amounts of information, and can quickly make trade-offs and prioritise work in complex and political environments because they constantly and easily refer back to the real reason we're here and the global goals needing to be achieved. Under stress, they search for the broader strategy to gain confidence and keep moving forward (the mirror being the strategist) but don't like to stay in 'strategy land' for too long. Their decisiveness can sometimes be interpreted by others as arrogance, argumentative or controlling, and often you can unintentionally offend people or shut-down other ideas. Once the activist has a target or goal in mind, they can be an unstoppable force in achieving that goal, usually by motivating others to work together toward a single vision. Activists have little trouble changing the plan or priorities as circumstances change, which can be frustrating for others helping you achieve your goals.

**Partner**

Partners are great at building relationships and connecting with others to achieve success. Partners, often almost

by accident, find themselves in positions of great trust and confidence, and therefore 'trip' over opportunities without much of a plan. When they are stressed they tend to randomly dive into the detail or the specifics of a part of a project to see if it's on track (the mirror being the implementor), which gives them the confidence to move forward. Under stress, it's best to leave partners alone to kick through enough of a task list to make them feel like they are on top of things. To a Partner, relationship building IS strategy, and sometimes maintaining these relationships can undermine the broader business strategy and success. Partners have an acute awareness of people and are often called on to fix other people's political 'mess' and negotiate a way forward. A natural opportunity mindset, giving away intellectual property and financial rights to preserve long term relationships is common, which can be seen by others as a weakness.

**Strategist**

Strategists have a unique gift for 'connecting the dots' and helping define the bigger picture. While an Activist will articulate where we are going, it is the strategist that will find the best path between where we are now, and where we need to be. Natural opportunity seekers, Strategists help people shift their thinking from seeing a project or goal as an insurmountable task to something achievable. They tend not to enjoy getting into detail, so managing projects and people remain at a high level with particulars of projects often going unnoticed, resulting in a lot of 'fire-fighting'. Under significant stress or overwhelm they are likely to seek out people who can 'tell them like it is' and give decisive advice regardless of whether it is good or not (their mirror being the activist). Strategists get frustrated with others who get bogged down in detail (can't see the forest for the trees) or value relationships over outcomes.

**Implementor**

For implementors ideas are cheap—implementation is the real game-changer! The ultimate doers, implementors make it real. Even though they might not think of themselves as enjoying the detail, they tend to be the ones with the next steps and the action plan. Often implementors gravitate to roles as project managers or event organisers. People who skim over simple details or make simple mistakes are seen as careless. Implementors are often the ones making others look good. When under significant stress, implementors need to feel like they will have a strong support network that will support them irrespective of whether what they are trying to do will be a success or not (the mirror being the Partner). Implementors like working hard, and see others who are not getting tasks done on-time as 'dropping the ball', letting the team down or simply incompetent. Changing plans mid-project can be frustrating, and can be more susceptible to the sunk cost bias, sticking to the plan based on how much time and effort has been invested.

Knowing what natural thrive mindsets you have in your team helps you recruit for cognitive diversity, encourage people in the path that they will naturally excel at, and support each other effectively when under high stress, to create a high-performance team that works more harmoniously. A team of border collies working together will beat any collective of individual wonder dogs by a significant factor.



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Behavioural economist, psychologist, award-winning musician, author and co-founder of Decida, Phil has a driving belief that to change the world, we must first improve our individual choices. His humour, casual approach and unique background has made him a sought-after speaker, helping people to master their own choices and design their own destiny. Phil makes neuroscience simple, interesting and fun, highlighting irrational 'blind-spots', increasing awareness of cognitive biases that influence perception and behaviour, and inspiring people to become less reactive, and more responsive.

Behavioural Science Advisor and regular columnist for Money Magazine, Phil regularly provides expert commentary in the media, including in national press, online and television. In 2020, Phil Authored the best selling book 'Going Ape\$#!t—Managing your reactivity in a highly reactive world'. Phil regularly speaks to diverse audiences, from workshops, university lectures and large conferences, to individually coaching executives, politicians and leaders in a range of topics including strategic decision-making, critical thinking, effective communications, negotiation, culture, decision architecture, ethics and behavioural change.





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