



If You Are a **Dog Lover**,  
You Already Know How to  
**MANAGE PEOPLE**

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John O. Burdett



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# If You Are a Dog Lover, You Already Know How to **MANAGE PEOPLE**

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*“A dog who feels uncared for, before too long, gets aggressive.”*

A while ago a new puppy arrived in my home. In working with the cute little guy it struck me that having a happy dog wasn't far removed from being a successful manager.

If it seems whimsical to compare dogs with humans – think again. Both follow patterns of behaviour common to all mammals; both have a strong emotional component to their makeup; both have brains that are skewed towards making sense of vocal sounds; and both are very sensitive to their environment.

We might only share 82% of our DNA with our furry friends but there are profound lessons to be drawn from how you interact with your dog – lessons that have implications for managing







people. Keeping your dog engaged – a bored dog (employee) is not a happy dog – socialising your pal with other dogs and other people – and building positive habits – are all essential. Less obvious but every bit as important are the following:

## 1. “Fit” isn’t important, it’s everything

A big dog in a small apartment is not a good idea. Some breeds need a great deal of exercise. Other animals are compelled to chase things (e.g., a Border Collie). A dog that displays a certain grace and sleek beauty might be unreliable around children. If you live in a townhouse you don’t want a “barker.” And, of course, there are those breeds that shed a lot of hair. Critical issues that, all too often, new owners find out about only after bringing four new paws into their life.

Have you ever uncovered the “perfect candidate” only to discover that the person who turned up on day one was less than a perfect fit to the role? If not, you are almost certainly new to management.

Hiring managers make a “bad choice” for one of, or a combination of, the following:

- *Shortchanging the work needed to determine “fit.”* There are six **essential** dimensions of fit: (1) attracting the right candidates; (2) understanding (measuring)





the current and emerging culture; (3) an exacting performance scorecard; (4) **role-specific** leadership competencies; (5) a deep dive into the team the candidate will lead or join;<sup>1</sup> and (6) a successful integration process.

You can't hire talent you don't attract. At a senior level, all talent acquisition is strategic. Lack of genuine understanding of the culture you need to create is, thus, to make the hiring decision a "best guess." Yesterday's successful leadership is, more-often-than-not, misaligned with the emerging, turbulent environment.<sup>2</sup> A meaningful scorecard must: orchestrate financial results; reflect the emerging business model; ensure that the organization is change ready; and respond to the organization's social responsibility. Meanwhile, tomorrow's organization will be a team of teams.

- *The assumption that the hiring manager actually knows how to interview.* All-too-often, the selection decision is based on "dumb questions;"<sup>3</sup> superficial, interpersonal chemistry; and taking the performance "evidence" in the résumé at face value. Doing something often doesn't, on its own, make you good at it. Ask someone who plays the lottery. Mastery demands laser-like focus, a robust process, discipline, practice, time out for reflection and up-to-date training. Hiring "the résumé" is just another version of Russian roulette – spin the chamber and you have no idea who will turn up on Monday. An empty suit?

- *Mismanaging the landing.* If they don't land, they won't stay! Count on it. Just like a new puppy, how you integrate talent into their new "home" is the difference that makes a difference. Develop good habits early and reinforce them **often**. Short change the integration process and you get the performance shortfalls you deserve.

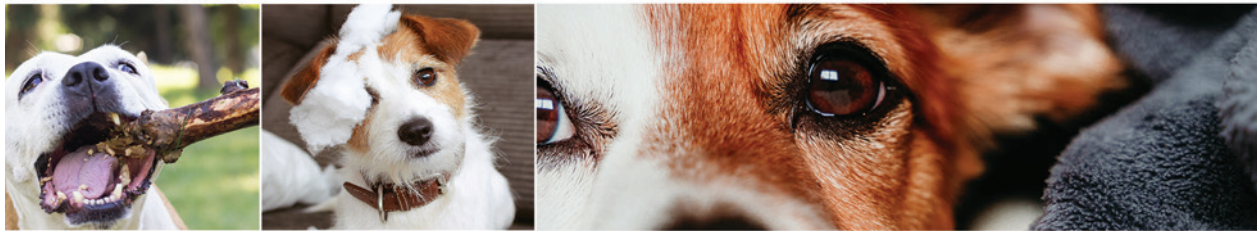
AFFIRMATION
<b>SPECIFIC:</b> "Great job" is well meant but can be confusing. The more detail, the greater the relevance.
<b>SOON:</b> Wait too long and the meaning is lost.
<b>SINCERE:</b> You have got to mean it. If it isn't authentic it isn't worth much.
<b>SURPRISE:</b> Vary the form and timing of affirmation. A surprise creates greater impact.
<b>SENSITIVE:</b> Know your audience. Not everyone wants to be affirmed in the same way.

1 This also implies measurement.

2 As we move further into, what has been described as, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) this is ever more the case.

3 "Tell me about yourself." "Why do you want to work here?" "Describe your strengths and weaknesses." An inappropriate question is one that is either hypothetical or can't be validated through the reference check.





Leadership imperative: If you don't know what you're looking for, don't be surprised if you don't find it. Do your homework, remember that experience alone doesn't make you an expert, recognize that fit is everything and put time and effort into the first several months.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Positive reinforcement shapes behaviour far more than threats, criticism and/or punishment.

A few years ago I was lucky enough to spend time with the dolphin trainers at EPCOT (Disney World, Florida). What was fascinating was that they only rewarded the behaviour they were looking for. Behaviour they didn't want was totally ignored.

At a different time I sat in a class of preschoolers with a wonderful young teacher. And guess what? The teacher only reinforced appropriate behaviour. Anything else, was overlooked.

What of our four-legged buddies? Professional handlers working with dogs for the blind, search and rescue, and/or training for police work have long given up barking out commands. They use positive reinforcement," "operant conditioning," "catching Fido doing it right," "managing consequences," "recognition" – it has many descriptors. Conversely, criticism/punishment encourages aggression. Human or dog, the harder you push, the harder the subject pushes back. A dog who feels uncared for, before too long, gets aggressive." Caring isn't just the nice thing to do, it's the right thing to do.

That same "barking voice" is found in a leadership agenda that assumes delivering short-term results is all that matters. It is a constant echo in the performance management approach that tells 60% or more of the employees covered by the process that they are "competent," "meet expectations" or some other phrase where the subtext spells out "mediocrity." And it is expressed in the misplaced assumption that the team works for the team leader – rather than the other way around.



<sup>4</sup> The evidence is that it takes six to nine months for a new executive to "land."



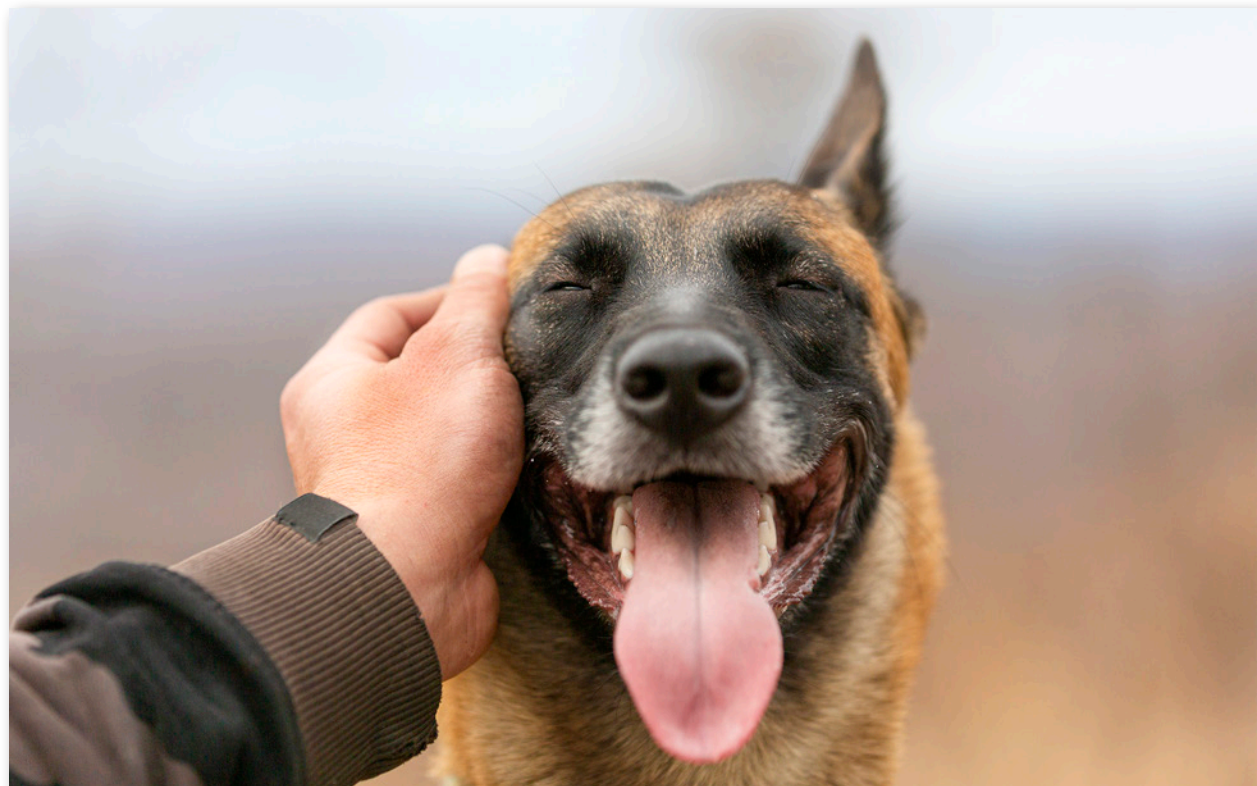
Leadership imperative. Language is self-fulfilling. Cheering works! If you tell people they are a champion, don't be surprised if they become a champion. Tell members of your team, often enough, that they are mediocre and – right or wrong – they will prove you right.

### **3. A happy dog, is far more about training the owner than it is the dog.**

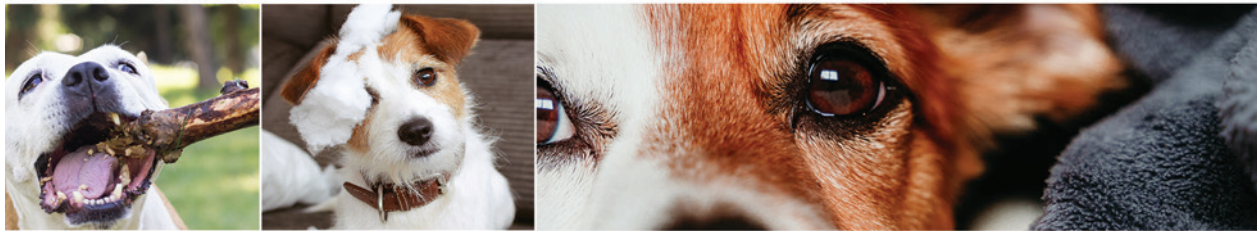
Ask an expert what the most difficult aspect of training a dog is and they will all tell you the same thing. “Training the dog is both easy and pleasurable. It's correcting the behaviour of the owner that's hard.” As an aside, I have a colleague who is a turnaround specialist with family businesses. He says something similar. “Getting the numbers right is relatively easy. It's fixing the owners that represents the biggest barrier.”

I have lost count of the number of times, when conducting a workshop, where a participant has said, “This is great, but my boss should be here!”

The higher the role in the organization, the greater the discretion – the further the strategic reach – the more the need to look at the business from the outside-in – and the bigger the shadow they throw. And yet, the more senior the role, the less time is, invariably, invested in ongoing learning.







This shortfall is writ large in the half-day, “executive” version of the three-day program served up to the rest of the organization. My advice: give the top team three days of training and the rest of the organization the half-day version. Not only will it save time and money, but if it’s working at the top, the rest of the organization will figure it out. And if the intervention doesn’t warrant that investment of time at the top, you probably shouldn’t be doing it anyway.

As a species, what we are better at than anything else is the ability to copy other people’s behaviour. It’s largely why we out-competed our cousins on the hominid tree. Let’s look at one example of “copying” in practice. With justification, many organizations want to build “a coaching culture.” And in pursuit of that worthy goal they hire expensive consultants, invest in training for the middle kingdom (middle managers) and then seek to knit everything together by making “coaching” a generic leadership competency.

Unfortunately, eighteen months later coaching thrives in pockets but, for the most part, amounts to a powerful engine that has simply run out of gas. Why? Ask, “How much time was spent training the top team?” Explore, “How many of those at the top of the house know how to coach?” Check to see, “How many at the top actually do coach?” For coaching read: “managing the grapevine,” “attraction and retention,” “culture change,” “managing a cross-cultural team,” “integrating new executives,” etc.

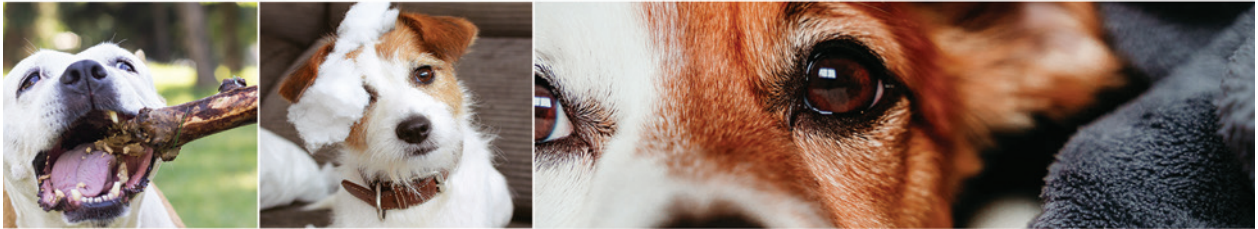
Our mirror gene doesn’t distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. We copy it anyway. We are copying machines. As organizations attempt to deal with disruption, increased ambiguity and uncertainty; as we seek to create new organization forms and with it the need to redefine what it means to be a leader; the behaviour we need is strongly influenced by the messaging that emanates from the top. If your dog regularly pees on your best carpet – it’s not the dog’s fault.

Leadership imperative: If it isn’t happening up there – it won’t happen down here!

## Conclusion

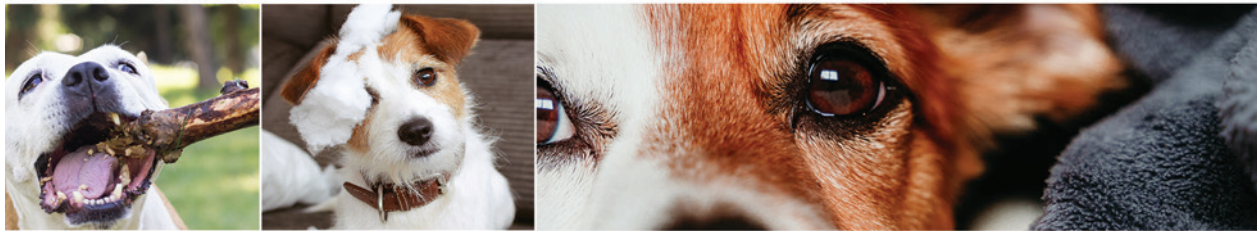
The world is getting faster, more complex and certainly more uncertain. To survive, let alone thrive, organizations are going to have to reinvent what it means to be an organization; teams are going to have rethink what it means to be a team; and leaders are going to have to revisit what it means to be a leader.

At the heart of reinvention is how people learn and, indeed, how quickly they learn. Getting it right but being late is still to fail. The good news? If you are a dog lover, you already know how to build partnerships; you already know how to accelerate your recent hire through the learning curve. Catch ‘em doing it right. The difference that makes a difference!



Tomorrow's organization will be a team of teams



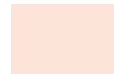


# CHEERING WORKS!

**SCORING:** where your thinking is in line with the positive statement(+) make a checkmark to the right of the central line.

Where you think the negative statement better reflects your feelings (-) check the appropriate number to the left of the central line. **Make your response to each question either positive or negative (not both!).** The scale 1-10 allows you to establish how much you agree with the given statement. “10” means strong agreement. Add up the total of all of your plus (+) responses and then total the minus ones (-). Take the smaller score away from the larger score and divide the overall result by 10. A negative score is cause for concern. Anything above 6+ is cause for celebration.

**SCORE. State positive or negative.**



**1** We rarely celebrate success and when we do it's something of an afterthought

A success isn't truly a success until we have celebrated



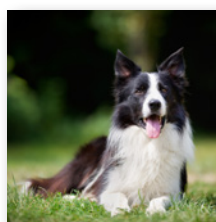
**2** Coaching, when it takes place, tends to focus on problems and/ or behavior that has to be “fixed”

Coaching is alive and well and whenever possible skewed such that the conversation builds on success



**3** The majority of stories that move around the organization focus on problems, issues or mistakes

When people share a story (commonplace) you can, more or less, guarantee that it will highlight the positive





**4** In-the-moment feedback is dominated by a focus on the things that go wrong

In-the-moment feedback is aimed at “catching people doing it right”



**5** A not uncommon comment at workshop and meetings is along the lines of, “we understand the need for change, we want to change, but some things here are written in stone”

The philosophy around here is that we are in charge of our own destiny, and that to lead means confronting, rather than listening to the naysayers, holding courageous conversations and not having to ask for permission to act



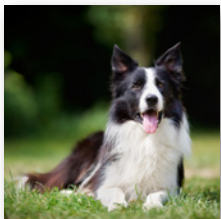
**6** When mistakes happen, the overwhelming theme is ... who is to blame?

When we stumble, the supportive dialogue that follows enables us to get it right the next time

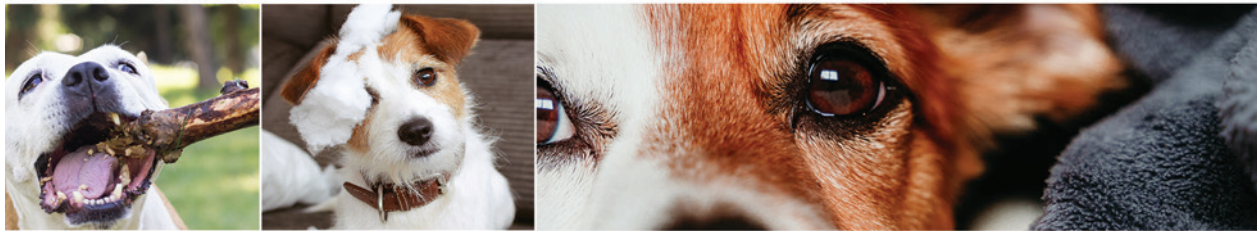


**7** When we innovate it’s because, “the enemy is at the gate”

Innovation, x-organization collaboration, and breakthrough thinking are central to our identity







**8** All-too-often, people use the current rules and established practice to explain why we cannot do something

There is a high comfort level in the organization of pushing back against, reframing and/or changing the rules and practices that “get in the way”



**9** Because the decision-making process is encumbered by over-analysis, an attitude of defensiveness and/or lack of trust of those in the “trenches,” we are often slow to act

Albeit that the decision is based largely on the intuitive feel and experience of those in key roles, when we truly need to be fleet of foot we can, and do, act fast



**10** We have great business practices, but people tend to find out about them either by accident or after the optimum point of need has passed

There is an underlying spirit that drives it, and the business tools are in place to support ... sharing best practice





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– it’s not the dog’s  
fault.”*

*– J. O. Burdett*

**JOHN O. BURDETT** has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations. In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached

numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs. Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award.

John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 15 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His *Leadership Beyond Crisis Series* came out in 2021. In 2022, in addition to a range of leading-edge articles, he brought out a totally revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

