



**Herding Cats: Unconventional  
Team Leadership  
with  
David Kesby**



**By Mark Bidwell**

David Kesby is an organisational coach who develops leaders and teams within complex organisations. His original thinking on Extra-Dependent Teams allows him to work systemically within and across organisations, providing interventions and provocations in service of the work that organisations need to do. David combines military, academic, corporate and experiences as a volunteer to provide a fresh perspective on teams, leadership and organisational systems. His book "Extra-Dependent Teams: Realising the Power of Similarity" draws on critical reflection, research and lots of testing.



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**Dave, very nice to see you.**

Thank you very much Mark, nice to be here.

**I've been looking forward to this conversation. I finished your book "extra-dependent Teams," which I want to talk to you about today. Let's start with your background, when you left education and started in the army, where you were part of a team. Let's talk a little bit about your experience in a team in the British Army.**

In 1990 I joined the British Army fully. I'd been committed to join for five years before that, nearly from the age of 16 to 21, so I went to Sandhurst in 1990 at the age of 21. By March of 1992, I found myself leading a platoon in Northern Ireland, in some of the troubled times over there. It was being thrown into the deep end and trying to understand things, trying to deal with new people, as I've been in post for three months. Prior to that, my first real time with my platoon of 28 men, the first thing I did was fly 22 hours to Kenya and jump out of an aircraft into a four day exercise. So, teaming was a key part of why I got into the army, why I was spotted at the age of 16 to join. I had lots of experience in scouts and things like that, being a good, solid, reliable leader of a team, understanding what it was required, and then did reasonably well during Sandhurst, and then joined the Paras and spent seven years being a platoon commander. That was what I wanted to do in the army and that's what I did in the army in various different platoons. I didn't want to get into a job where I wasn't a line manager. The team and teamness was really important to me.

**What does team mean in the British Army?**

I think the team in the British Army means what people think team means in lots of different places, like on sports field and other places. Everyone is there, and they were all supporting each other to deliver a common goal, and especially an army is a fantastic metaphor and analogy for teams, because the goal was everything. So everyone worked flat out, if there was anything that wasn't working as well, other people searched out that support, they did double the effort to deal with people who weren't working hard enough, or couldn't do the thing that was required in order to achieve that goal.

**Okay, and that's the conventional definition of a team, which, as you refer to in the book, is a kind of the Explorer, the Shackleton, the Apollo, the football team - the standard, common goal, and that's the definition as often applied in the corporate world or in organizations. But according to you, this conventional wisdom doesn't help and you've written a book to challenge it.**

Yes. So I really believe in this conventional wisdom, I've used it, I recognize it, and I also developed other teams using it. I've read loads of books about it, and I've written a book about it, but I've also noticed that it doesn't always work. Many years ago that started to intrigue me. I also have experience with other techniques, which were really helpful in groups, but were not teams, and that was the embryo, the starting point for the journey that led to this book.

**Right. You often refer to people's experience leading teams as of herding cats.**

Yes, the first chapter of the book is called Herding Cats. People use this term as a metaphor to explain that they can't control things, people are going off and doing their own things, they're working independently. The notion of herd seems to be like... you know, I was in a team over there, they work really well together, and now I'm in a team over here, and nobody wants to work with each other. There's something wrong with the team. The fundamental part of that book is saying "not necessarily." There is a type of team, that if we use a different mechanism, a different understanding of a group, and we apply it to this team, we can better understand the dynamics of it, better understand why people are going off and being cats rather than herding, and fundamentally come to the conclusion that it's okay. It's not wrong, it's not problematic, it doesn't reflect me as a leader, control isn't the answer. The answer that was over there in my old team is not necessarily the answer here. And that's the core message in the book, there are two types of teams.

**And you use the analogy by using a different mental model, by looking at group activities through a different lens. Firstly, it's okay to feel your team isn't working, that's all right. And secondly, more specifically, you propose a different language to explain this different type of team, which many of our listeners will be very familiar with when they hear about it. I had first hand experience with it probably in the 1990s. And having read the book, a lot of things suddenly became very clear in terms of why things worked the way they did, and why trying to use the traditional model of teaming just didn't work. Can we talk about what is this alternative model of a team? You call it extra-dependent team, maybe you can explain what's different.**

The key to it is my understanding of communities of practice. This is a phenomenological approach that was developed in the early 1990s, that I first engaged with in the late 1990s. I thought it was fantastic. I learned it when I was doing a Master's degree in Management and Organizational Learning at Lancaster University, which was a fantastic, a really life changing type of program. I recognized that we weren't teaming, we were a community who had a consistent practice, we had a common practice, we were students learning together. I was fascinated by this. I found myself in a team of consultants where we were all working independently with our clients. And it dawned on me, as my new manager was trying to get us to work together better and focusing on herding, trying to get us into different roles to utilize our strengths, which was a classic, conventional viewpoint on teams, this mental model. And I said "hold on a second, what if we thought of ourselves as a community of practice?" I know it, I trust it. I trust it as much as I trust what I've learned in the army. And when I started to go down that route, it answered lots of questions. So communities of practice are what I now call extra-dependent teams, because communities of practice wasn't favorable to leaders, team is what people want to lead, so team has to be here. Then the question is, if an interdependent team is a conventional team, what do I call the other type of team? I've played around with different answers to that question, all the odds and evens, horizontal and vertical, even blues and reds and stuff like that. But at the end of the day, the term extra-dependent was the dependency with people outside the team. When you start to look around organizations, you can see these teams very clearly. They are teams where everyone does very similar work. They might be regional managers, of one region or two regions, but they are all regional managers, and have a responsibility and a role profile which is really similar. It might be risk managers, it might be vicars whom I have worked with, it might be matrons. They're all doing really similar jobs. The application of that job might be different, there might be a certain element of difference in it, but the fundamentals of it is very similar. The key to it is that with similarity, they apply the thing they're proficient in, their practice, with people who need that specialism outside the team, so risk managers working with the people who are taking the risk, the reward managers in a division of a bank where rewards need to be in that division, with vicars, with parishioners, with lay clergy and things like that. They identify as a team, they are managed as if it's a team, but they do not need to work together to perform.

**It's a group of similar people as a traditional team, like a football team made out of different skill sets, then they have a common practice versus working towards common goals (which is a traditional team), and the third piece is that the focus is more on learning together versus working together.**

*"Let's stop chasing after the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow with this promise of teams that everybody's talking about, and just look at your team for what it really is, not what you think, or anybody else thinks it ought to be."*

There are two parts of this. One is, if they don't need each other to perform, why would they get together? And there's too many managers out there who think they don't need them to come together. But there's a huge benefit. Who else in this organization knows the job of doing a regional manager's job, or a country manager's job, more than all the other country managers in the same team? So the benefit of coming together is to exchange their learning, what is it like to be it, and there's a mutual benefit in the work of community of practice, connected learning with identity, so its identity forming. So the bond in this team is not the goal, which is the bond in the conventional team. The bond in the team is a common identity, the common practice through that learning together. That's a really important glue. We hear about brands and associations and things like that in our world today. And this is in effect that common identity, and if managers harness that learning together, and identifying as a practice together, they don't need the common goal for that. They've got that common practice, and they can apply it out in the places they need to, with the people that depend on them.

*“There's two sorts of hunting that goes on. One is conventional teams, one is community of practice by definition.”*

**I think the roots of this go back to the 1940s and 1950s, when this concept of action learning first developed, or as we had a conversation before, this goes all the way back to the Quakers in the 1600s, they had the cleaning committees where you had groups of people, peers, who would come together and help someone learn and address a problem. Now action learning, in the last century, is peers coming together (originally it was the military), to help learn from one another's experience. And fast forward to today, where you have regional managers or country managers, some of them might have been in the role for a long time, others who might be quite new, and in this model of extra-dependent teams, this is a wonderful vehicle for teasing out and sharing those learnings across people with common role characteristics. Is that a fair summary?**

Yeah, I was working with a sales team recently, and there were newcomers in that team, and there were elders. And this is a dynamic that plays into this, it's a fundamentally different way of understanding the dynamic, because we're not talking about who has a particular personality style, or who does this job, or whatever it might be, everybody's doing the same job. The question is where are they relative to each other, with regards to the practice that they collectively hold. Somebody might be strong in something, they might be very experienced, and somebody might be peripheral to the team, a newcomer to the team and need to learn from somebody else in there. In that dynamic, there's a newcomer who comes in with fresh perspectives and things that might challenge the convention of the elders who've been around for years. The challenge of the dynamic is enabling the elders to relate how it is, what that practice is right now, and also then accommodate the new thinking and the challenge from the newcomers that bring outside-in type of thinking. How does the practice change to accommodate that new person with their practice? And how does a new person learn rapidly from the elders and others in the team how it is to be a regional manager, a risk manager here in this place, right now with this organization?

**So what I'm hearing is it serves a great purpose in terms of onboarding people, but also innovation as well, capturing the wisdom of the elders, and also the newcomers, and creating energy to change how work is done by this extra-dependent team.**

The way I describe is three eyes, I reused it from some reading I've done. But in effect, the newcomer needs to implement, they need to get to a place where they are implementing the existing practices, to get to good, and then the practice can improve. So we're combining difference of opinions, or the strength of one is being shared right across. We're not relying on that strength, we're not turning to that person to do what they're really strong at, we'll learn from them, so we're all strong together, and somebody else who's new has got the strength in something else, and that's being applied. That's improving the whole team together. What's great about the potential of that situation, is that collectively they can start to think, act, experience and identify in a new way, and experiment with new equipment that's associated with that practice, new perspectives or new ways of doing things, which when they innovate in that, they then take that out to their different dependencies they have outside of the team. And that innovation then applies, they've done in-teaming, and they have to do out-teaming with their dependencies, and apply that improvement or innovative practice into their teams that depend on them outside, and it has that ripple effect outside the team into the wider organization. So in effect, if you're in charge of an extra-dependent team, you have a strategic capability. You might think it's like herding cats, but actually there's a huge, latent potential. If

you can harness that, share that learning, create that identity, and then take that outside into the wider organization, which is where the performance happens, it has a huge strategic effect.

**David, you mentioned some of these teams, like sales teams and reward people. We're sitting in Basel, surrounded by some of the largest companies in the world, pharmaceutical, agriculture and banking companies. Do you find these extra-dependent teams in organizations as well as traditional teams? Where do you find these teams?**

My experience so far is I found them everywhere. When I first started thinking about it, I thought it was a rarity. I then started to pay attention to it. My best guess was 5% or 10% of an organization. I then started to do some research, I worked with individuals in organizations, working through that organic realm of the organization, saying let's go through each team from the top to the bottom all the way through, and where are the teams of similarity, where are the teams of difference? It was remarkable. They would range between 40% and 60%, extra dependency, teams of similarity. They were all over the place, but not at the top. There's an awful lot of research done at the top of organizations, the executive leadership team and things like that. All of that research focused on the conventional team, and I very much support it, I think anybody that's on top of an organization needs to be an interdependent team, working together very much towards the common goal.

**Like the military analogy you talked about earlier on.**

Yes, exactly that.

**So they exist. Where do the extra-dependent teams exist then?**

Below there all over the place. It's the messy middle very much, which is really complex, you have people above you, people beside you, the flat structure. We used to have lots and lots of hierarchies back in the 70s, it started to whittle away in the 80s, really flat from 90s onwards and increasingly flat. So we've got these complex, networked, matrix organizations, where people are left on own devices to connect with people. I still work on a daily basis with people talking about "my relationship with this person is a dotted line, and with this one's a solid line." And nobody is any wiser to what that really means. Practically, it means I've got two bosses, or maybe three or maybe four. And realistically, what does it mean...

**I might prioritize my solid line versus my dotted line.**

Exactly. If you then apply the convention of team to all teams, which is what all the conventional books that talk about team say, "and there is universal application of this." And it's that bit that I take issues with. There's nothing wrong with the convention of teams. It's the universality assumption in there, because the needle hasn't changed, with around 50% of team being ineffective. That research was done in 2004, and only about 20% were high performing teams. And the assumption is that you take what works in the high performing teams, and you apply it to everyone else. And I'm saying hold on a second, that doesn't work. If you look at the team, if you look at the structure of the team, it actually lends itself to a completely different perspective on this. A group dynamic that works, which is called communities of practice, has been around for millennia. If you compare what it was to be a hunter, hunting a woolly mammoth, you'd have a team of four guys and women, whoever it might be, running after this thing. One goes left, one goes right, the other one jumps on top of it, or whatever it might be, that's a conventional team. You then get four people go fishing with rods, and they go on different parts of the river. They don't need each other, one's fishing for their own family and other one's fishing for their family. And they come back at the end of the day, and they compare and contrast it. There's two sorts of hunting that goes on. One is conventional teams, one is community of practice by definition. This is exactly the same age as conventional team, it's just nobody's paid attention to it, because there's this dream team, this fundamental belief and this mental model that we have, that makes great movies.

**It's a compelling myth, isn't it?**

Here's one. If you're not yet convinced, who is in the same team as James Bond?

**Well, he's got back office, right? He's got Money Penny, and he's got M and Q, but he's on his own.**

Whenever I ask this question, that's exactly what people answer. He's 007, who's 006, 005, 004, 008? They exist, and in Fleming books they're in there, but that is not of filmmaking type. You don't want to do like, we come together, we share our learning, it wouldn't make a good movie. But in the 50s, 60s, whenever it was written, they've been around. It's just a case of let's notice it, because there's a huge potential that is not tapped.

**I've been in good teams, I've been in bad teams, and I wondered is it to do with me, is it do with my boss, but actually, this is a lovely, different lens to look at it. But if someone is listening to this and thinking "I'm not leading a traditional team, I'm leading an extra-dependent team," what skills do they need to develop or exhibit to make a difference? What is the skill set of the outstanding leader of the extra-dependent team?**

First of all, in many ways they need to be a practitioner of the practice. That's why sales managers come from a sales background. That's why risk managers come from a risk management background.

**They need to be one of us.**

And then they need to be able to facilitate learning, not coordinate, they don't need to be able to do the tradition of running high energy meetings where everyone's holding themselves performant, accountable and things like that. Because you can do that one to one, you can have those one to one performance conversations. There are some really lovely techniques that coaching generates, like listening, asking questions, just facilitating that sharing of the practice, having some humility to that they are a co-learner... This is where the action learning plays in. As a person facilitating action learning, you are a co-learner in that, you're not an expert. And as a leader, you might be the expert, and you might not be the only one and you might not be the most expert in it.

**So it seems like it's more of a collaborative leadership style versus one that I've experienced, which is, we're all competing as a group for the leader's attention, for the bonus, for the kudos. It's almost like servant leadership, it's moving away from the heroic leadership of the past, to a different model, is that what you are saying?**

Yes. So the Shackleton thing is hero leadership. And it doesn't have to be in conventional teams. When the hero leadership is applied to the extra-dependent team, too often we hear that the default dynamic in such team is competition. And that's done by two things. One is that they start to see difference rather than similarity, they don't need each other, so let's compete with each other, and secondly, it's fed by the manager. So the manager wants to hold them accountable, does it in a public forum around the same table. And they're batten down, they're being held accountable in front of each other, they resist and they tighten, they batten down the hatches and they become increasingly competitive. The challenge for the leader is to create the safety for that. One of the things that leaders don't realize is that they do depend on every single individual. You can imagine, if you've got a team of seven risk managers in different places, you are accountable for every single one of those people. If one of them screws up, you've screwed up. But if you screw up one risk over here, it doesn't mean that all the others have been affected at all, but it does mean it for the line managers. So line managers have to recognize they do have a dependency on everybody else, even though everybody else doesn't. That's why it feels like it's herding cats, you want to be able to control it, because you depend on them. None of the cats depend on each other. They depend on people outside the team. So there's a bit of weariness of that. Suddenly it's okay, I'm not doing anything wrong. This is where the idea of doing some kind of team intervention at the top of the organization, and it automatically cascading down and everyone does the same thing just won't work. Because as soon as you start cascading down, you come to a team and it won't work in that team.

**Because it's not a traditional team.**

Because it doesn't work in that way, because it's not structured to do that. The more they work together, the less effective they will be, the more they work apart, the more effective they will be. The challenge is to say let's work apart and learn together.

**You wrote this book last year and it's obviously based on a body of knowledge beginning with your master's in the late 90s, so 20 years of experience, writing a book which is fundamentally challenging a huge amount of dogma around a very heavily researched topic, which is teams. I'm curious, what kinds of results do you see from organizations that recognize this, and embrace the practicalities versus pretending to think that there's only one model? I'm interested in what kind of outcomes organizations are getting, what happens to companies that figure this out?**

A couple of examples come to mind. One is the sales team I've been working with for the past couple of months. They would come through the annual cycle. The previous year, they had a massive spreadsheet for how they were going to operate, and what they were going to do and the performance targets, and things like that. This year with my work, they had a flip-chart of paper with one graph on it. They had their own individual goal, and they had a shared repertoire of their common practice, which they had a part to play in sharing amongst the team. It turned from complexity into simplicity.

**So extreme clarity.**

Extreme clarity, and trust and faith in each other. There was a real speeding up of the process, the real clarification of the process, and some kind of liberation in it. Another one, I worked with a vicar who took it back, and he said it transformed his team meetings, because everyone was really bothered when people couldn't make it. Now they're a different kettle of fish from a corporate, but some people just didn't arrive. And they said "all of a sudden, we realized we didn't need everyone in the room for us to make a real difference." The people in the room could learn from each other. So that's another example, and the last one was a team of matrons that I worked with, where they had spent about eight months, being told by their bosses to come up with their standards of how they were going to operate in an NHS hospital. And I eventually had the opportunity to step in with it. And within a day we've managed to sort that out. But it wasn't about agreeing what those standards were, we spent the first half of the morning helping them to understand not their differences, but their similarities. Once they had started to recognize their similarities, only then were they able to say "okay, so we do have a common set of standards that we can talk about." They started to recognize that, one was being in charge of oncology, and other one being in charge of surgery, all of those differences just went into the shadows, and their commonality stood out.

**It's by applying different lens about what's the same, versus what's different.**

For me, the big difference is there's just too much complexity in organization, that is feeding complexity. Let's stop chasing after the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow with this promise of teams that everybody's talking about, and just look at your team for what it really is, not what you think, or anybody else thinks it ought to be.

**And that feels very liberating as you talk, and from a personal point of view, if I compare my two experiences, one on one extreme, and one of the other extreme. There's one which is complexity, you're on the back foot, you're wasting a lot of time, you're managing stuff that isn't important. The other extreme is you're liberated to actually focus on what's important and really show up, and it's like no longer driving with one foot on a break. Brilliant.**

It is barely simple, just about saying "my team isn't a team in the conventional sense, and that's okay." Because there's something else to turn to, and that's extra-dependent team.

**Lovely. So Dave, to wrap this up, let's move to the last three questions I sent you in advance. Firstly, what have you changed your mind about recently?**

So I thought long and hard about this, and the answer I came up with was Switzerland. And it's really interesting, because I've been in France and Germany and other places, and I've studied history, it was my university degree. But Switzerland never played a part of it. In the last two

years, I've started to do lots of work, I've got a partnership route here, and I'm here now and I'm loving it. And I'd never really appreciated the history of it, the diversity here, the beauty of it. So I have got a very different view on Switzerland, and I'm really warming to it, and that happened very recently.

**Brilliant. Excellent. Second question, where do you go to get fresh perspectives, especially when you're dealing with challenges?**

There's a multitude of places. I can both have a strong point of view, and also be very doubtful of myself. And they sort of juxtapose, and are sort of contrary to each other. One of my main sources is Natasha, my wife, and she keeps me true to what's going on and some other challenges, and where my true values are, my values around family and things like that. She's a great one. I often turn to colleagues, because one of my values is living what I say, doing what I say, so sharing my practice and hearing from others and colleagues. James Wilson, I do a lot of work with him and he's really great, he complements me in challenging ways, and there's lots of things that have helped me in working with him in the last two years. I listened to a quite a lot of podcasts, one I'm truly regular of is In Our Time with Melvyn Bragg, Thursday mornings in the UK on BBC. There are all sorts of topics, mathematics, philosophy, history, all sorts of things, it's just really interesting. I was listening to one on the way over here, which is around authenticity, which is part of the work I do. It was really interesting, the philosophical perspective that was being examined, and it just helps to feed and re-challenge and reframe some of the things that I'm having.

**Super. And then the third question, what's been your biggest low, what have you learned from it, and how have you applied that learning?**

I suppose my biggest low is, after leaving the army, which I did voluntarily, I then joined the company, and within five months was made redundant, through no fault of anyone, but was the first of three redundancies. That was my first experience proper, and my issue was that I'd learnt enough to know that I didn't know much. So I was out of work for about eight months, really tough. In that time I did temping work, and that was the worst thing, I just wanted to keep my hand in. I was 28, I was engaged, had expectations of me, I've done all sorts of things in my career. I was absolutely determined to pursue a new life and career in developing people, even though I didn't feel like I had any experience in it. So I had to work flat out, anything I could get my hands on. So writing CVs helped me to develop my writing skills, going to interviews, and getting rejected helped me to become more resilient, and also be able to speak more publicly. Every time I come across somebody who has been redundant, the first thing I do is to offer my support to them, because I know it's a dreadful place to be. I've supported my neighbor and other people, and I typically did it pro bono, just because I wanted to help them. And it happens all over the place. There's a number of things I've applied, one is that I continue to do that, wherever possible, in that transition for people at vulnerable position. But also, I learned how to write, which has played out well in the future.

**So where can people get in touch with you?**

So our website is [www.organizational-coaching.com](http://www.organizational-coaching.com). Or they can go to [www.extraderpendentteams.com](http://www.extraderpendentteams.com) as well, they'll head to the same website. I'm on [dave@organizational-coaching.com](mailto:dave@organizational-coaching.com), please email me, share your experience, it would just be great to have a conversation, see what it's like. And I'm on LinkedIn under my name, David Kesby.

**Right, we'll put all that in the show notes. It's been great to see you and talk to you in person, I really enjoyed the book. What was interesting was, I'm drawn towards anything that challenges conventional wisdom, and what struck me reading the materials is that there's a lot of dogma in terms of what it means to be part of a team, and how organizations, individuals and leaders are expected to lead teams. And this turns it on its head, and gives some really good perspectives on it's okay for things to feel different, and there is a new way of thinking about this, which, as you say, is well researched. When I first heard about it, the penny dropped in a couple of areas, there was a couple of a-ha moments about it's okay to feel like this. And also if you're a leader or a manager waking up and realizing you're leading one of these teams, there are some practical next steps as well. So really enjoyed it. Thanks for your time.**

Thank you very much.

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