

---

# Collaboration is one of your strategic pillars – now what?

By Dr Heidi K. Gardner and Csilla Ilkei



**L**ike many organizations, you have collaboration baked into your strategy. You know that working across silos, and with the broader ecosystem, produces far better outcomes than what you could achieve on your own.

But where most leaders fall down is actually implementing collaboration – effectively. We wrote a whole white paper<sup>1</sup> about this topic. Through our research and experience with hundreds of law departments and firms globally, we have identified three critical crunch points where lawyers can tangibly supercharge collaboration – during team launches, in client interactions, and following new leadership appointments.

These situations are times in which injecting smarter collaboration into your mindsets and actions can make a big difference. They help you make real traction toward your strategic outcomes, and show others that smarter collaboration really is the way to go.

### Team launches

Embedding smarter collaboration principles and practices into team kickoffs is a great place to start. For example, lawyers these days are teaming up with colleagues from technology, compliance, and other business areas to figure out the best use cases for generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in their business. Our observation is that few of those teams are working optimally.

Cross-silo teams are essential for tackling complex issues, but they often fail to reach their full potential due to shaky foundations. When smarter collaboration is not properly embedded from the get-go, it results in rework, frustration over role ambiguity, and time wasted at unnecessary or poorly planned meetings (e.g., key players weren't invited). As the late Richard Hackman's research shows, when team launches are mishandled, performance suffers by 30%.<sup>2</sup>

To address this issue, we have developed a team launch toolkit that gives new teams the framework to conduct effective and efficient kickoffs. In a very short meeting with the right team members, they can identify the critical aspects of their work, how each person contributes, and how they work best together.

Ideally everyone will have taken a Smarter Collaboration Self Profile (a Gardner & Co.

psychometric tool) so they know, for example, if the group is skewed. For instance, a team with all “risk spotters” is unlikely to push the innovation boundaries far enough. When they figure this out, they will need someone to step outside their comfort zone and act more as a “risk seeker”.

## Cross-silo teams are essential for tackling complex issues, but they often fail to reach their full potential due to shaky foundations.

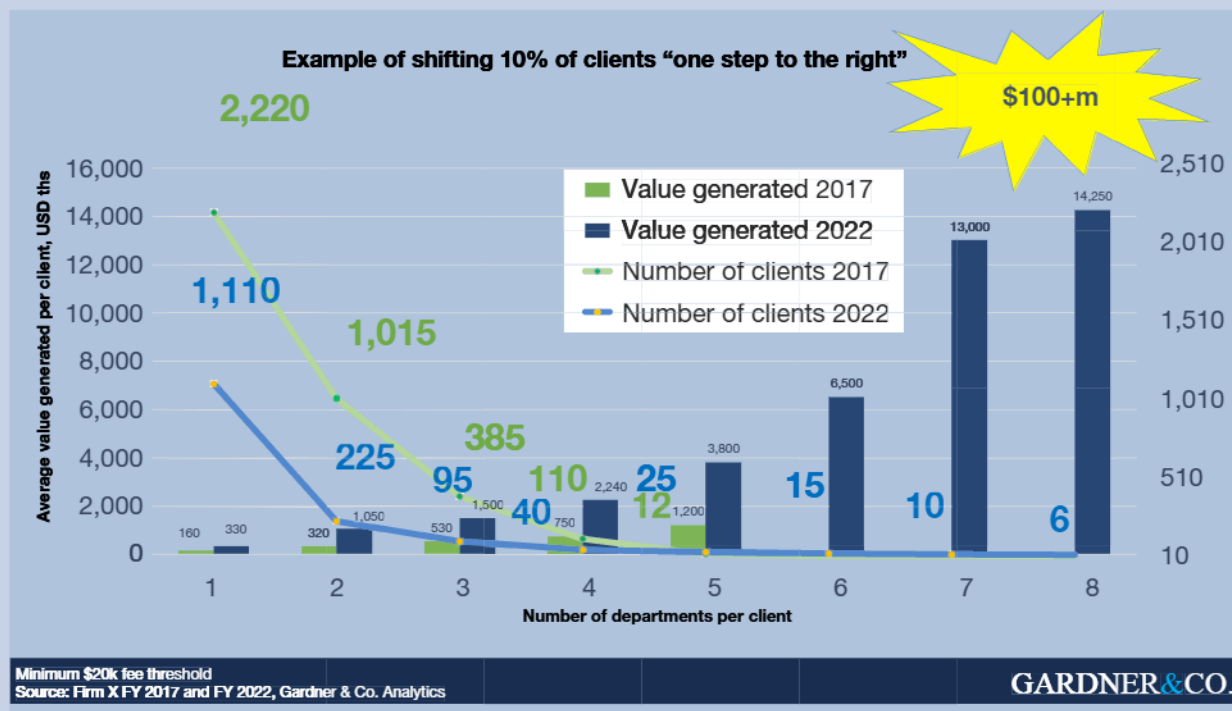
This “performance booster in a box” allows teams to identify blind spots and mitigate them before unhealthy friction arises, trust erodes, and performance drops. Over time, it should become second nature for new teams to start off by level setting in this way.

### Client engagement

Lawyers are devoted to serving clients with practical, substantive, and innovative counsel. To truly excel at this, they must bring the full breadth of the law firm or department to their client interactions – including joined-up insights and guidance from the right set of experts across different groups.

But alas, all too often lawyers approach their clients in a siloed way. Sound familiar? Perhaps you are simply too over-worked to bring in another expert, or maybe you protect your client relationship so that you remain the “go to” person.

Either way, you are leaving significant value on the table. Our recent case study of the five-year journey of a premier law firm<sup>3</sup> captures a series of deliberate initiatives and actions that resulted in a 50% reduction in mono-line clients, while increasing their most broadly served engagement from five practice groups to eight.



The research also uncovered that they built relationships with key senior decision-makers, leading them to more complex, higher-value work. And the side effect? A significant growth in the value they created for their clients, measured by average fees – ultimately revenues and, in fact, profit – well above market growth.

The flip side was that their clients were much better served – the in-house legal teams received deeper, more customized insights that saved them time. Ultimately, they consolidated their legal panel to gain even greater efficiency, including external counsel that knew their business and industry incredibly well.

So, if collaboration is so great, what stands in the way? The answer is that “it depends” entirely on the organization’s culture, growth pattern (e.g., merger history, lateral composition), and strategy. We offer a Smarter Collaboration Diagnostic so that leaders can understand the real barriers – not just the ones they surmise or can observe from their perch at the top of the organization.

In *Smarter Collaboration: A New Approach to Breaking Down Barriers and Transforming Work*,<sup>4</sup> Ivan Matviak and Heidi Gardner explain several reasons why leaders’ experience of collaboration might be different:

- Leaders are often long-tenured within their

company, and have had enough time to build broad-reaching, productive networks of colleagues – they themselves don’t necessarily face some of the common collaboration challenges.

- Many leaders were promoted to senior leadership in part because people trusted them along the way – and trust is a critical foundation for collaboration.
- Only a very few people say “no” to an executive’s request to collaborate.

A comprehensive diagnostic also surfaces “bright spots” where collaboration already works well, generates compelling evidence about the potential upside of making changes (e.g., the money on the table mentioned earlier, client satisfaction and engagement), and takes into account the organization’s strategy.

With these insights, leaders can set their highest-priority solutions. One common approach for law firms is smarter collaboration pilot programs. These are small-scale, short-term experiments that test customized approaches for super-charging smarter collaboration in specific teams, before a broader rollout is performed across the organization.

Its key components are designed to keep people

working toward strategy-driven collaboration. In successful pilots, these often include:

- *A masterclass* to launch and upskill leaders of each pilot group. Sample topics include using data to pinpoint multi-service opportunities; engaging and influencing other lawyers; and harnessing market intel to generate distinctive business insights.
- *Objective-setting* with associated KPIs (leading and lagging indicators).
- *Ongoing (typically monthly) implementation support* with a dedicated coach.
- *Measurement against key performance indicators* (and ideally versus a control group).
- *Wrap-up workshop* with leaders/pilot sponsors to review progress and key learnings, and decide on a broader rollout.

Pilots capture quantifiable progress in a low-risk environment, helping to develop the proof-of-concept for the institutional deployment of smarter collaboration. For more on this topic, including the rationale for implementing pilots, several use cases, how to execute, and example outcomes, see our recent white paper, *Smarter Collaboration Pilots: Pivoting to Actions and Results*.<sup>5</sup>

## New leaders

A third high-value opportunity for institutionalizing smarter collaboration is the arrival of a new leader. In both law firms and legal departments, these leaders may bring a wealth of technical legal knowledge, experience serving clients, and time management skills.

In the area of collaboration, however, they often have significant gaps in their capabilities that are likely to prevent them from achieving their full potential. For instance, they might not know:

- How to identify critical situations requiring collaboration;
- How to motivate others to collaborate; or
- How to shift their approach based on their new team.

These shortcomings might have been acceptable before, depending upon the metrics they were being evaluated against. But now they are major

impediments to talent engagement and other bigger-picture performance objectives.

Leaders could simply guess where they should invest their developmental efforts. But a more objective, data-backed approach based on specific feedback from colleagues and clients allows them to know what areas will yield the greatest impact. For example, we now have a tool – the Smarter Collaboration 360 – that helps leaders understand their skill level for nine core competencies of smarter collaboration (based on input from them, their colleagues, and in some instances people outside the organization).

## Peer feedback provides insights into how a leader is actually behaving – in other words, how people experience working with that person.

Feedback from colleagues is a powerful complement to a psychometric profile. A psychometric like the Smarter Collaboration Profile helps leaders understand their go-to behaviors and comfort zone. It indicates how they tend to behave. Peer feedback provides insights into how a leader is actually behaving – in other words, how people experience working with that person. Leaders can then use these two data points (behavioral tendencies and actual behaviors) to determine their strengths, potential risks, and growth opportunities.

When leaders receive their 360 results, we recommend reflecting on the data by using the personalized action report, which identifies priority areas such as “superpowers” (where the leader and the raters see a strength) and “watch-outs” (where the leader is over-confident versus others’ ratings).

In our next *Modern Lawyer* article, we will take a close look at the nine core competencies of collaboration, and how legal leaders can use their

results in each area to grow, thrive, and strengthen their organization.

## Conclusion

Just because collaboration is part of your organization's strategy doesn't mean you will leverage it effectively. Working hard to apply smarter collaboration principles at various key moments – such as during team launches, in client interactions, and following new leadership appointments – offers an outsize opportunity to your firm or legal team.

The approaches in this and future articles will help you make sure your strategy isn't just a piece of paper – but instead a day-to-day practice of your top values and priorities.

*This is our first of three articles in our smarter collaboration series based on our decades of research at Harvard and with dozens of premier law firms and in-house legal teams. We draw on our bestselling books, numerous published case studies, and the empirical data and fresh insights generated in our ongoing advisory work and research across the legal ecosystem.*



Dr Heidi K. Gardner is a sought-after advisor, keynote speaker, and facilitator for organizations across a wide range of industries globally. Named by Thinkers50 as both a Next Generation Business Guru and one of the world's foremost leadership experts, she is a distinguished fellow at Harvard Law School and former professor at Harvard Business School. She is currently the faculty chair and instructor in multiple executive education programs at both institutions. Dr Gardner works extensively with her team at Gardner & Co., partnering with boards, executive teams, and other senior leaders to boost performance by embedding the principles and practices of smarter, agile, cross-silo collaboration within those groups and across the broader organization and ecosystem. This results in concrete, quantifiable performance improvements. Altogether, Dr Gardner has authored (or co-authored) more than 100 books, chapters, case studies, and articles. This includes bestselling books *Smarter Collaboration: A New Approach to Breaking Down Barriers and Transforming Work* (2022) and *Smart Collaboration: How Professionals and Their Firms Succeed by Breaking Down Silos* (2017). Her research received the Academy of Management's prize for Outstanding Practical Implications for Management, and has been selected five times for Harvard Business Review's "best of" collections.



Csilla Ilkei is an international thought leader, exceptionally skilled in translating science-backed research into pragmatic plans. During her more than 20 years as global manager and knowledge leader at McKinsey & Company, she was instrumental in unearthing global economic, business, talent, and industry trends. With her experience living on three continents and working in 40 countries, Ilkei possesses an inspiring ability to partner with leaders to recognize potential challenges before they become obstacles to success. Her dedication to helping executives, human resources professionals, and others create an inclusive environment that sustains collaborative behaviors is incomparable. Ilkei has designed and delivered countless innovative products and programs that guide leaders, across a wide variety of sectors and regions of the world. As insights director at Gardner & Co., she rigorously researches, meticulously designs, and skilfully leads programs that leverage smarter collaboration to achieve strategic business and talent outcomes. Her perseverance in challenging status quo thinking and commitment to leaning forward into beneficial changes foster bold and dynamic learning environments that drive real progress in these areas.

- 1 [www.gardnerandco.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Closing-the-Strategy-to-Execution-Gap\\_Gardner.pdf](http://www.gardnerandco.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Closing-the-Strategy-to-Execution-Gap_Gardner.pdf)
- 2 <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/BK0018-PDF-ENG>
- 3 [www.gardnerandco.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Gardner\\_Smarter-Collaboration\\_Legal-Case-Study\\_2024.pdf](http://www.gardnerandco.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Gardner_Smarter-Collaboration_Legal-Case-Study_2024.pdf)

- 4 [www.amazon.com/Smarter-Collaboration-Approach-Breaking-Transforming/dp/1647822742](http://www.amazon.com/Smarter-Collaboration-Approach-Breaking-Transforming/dp/1647822742)
- 5 [www.gardnerandco.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Smarter-Collaboration-Pilots-Pivoting-to-Action-and-Results-2024-02-16.pdf](http://www.gardnerandco.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Smarter-Collaboration-Pilots-Pivoting-to-Action-and-Results-2024-02-16.pdf)