
Do you measure up? Equipping leaders to promote smarter collaboration

By Dr Heidi K. Gardner

With his blue-collar background, Jorge prided himself on his ability to connect with people from all walks of life. So when he received feedback that he *didn't* tend to solicit opinions from across hierarchies, he was floored.

“It was a complete slap in the face,” he remembers telling his wife. “But then it made me ask: Why do people see me so differently?”

Getting 360 feedback... effectively

While it can be hard, having a full view of one’s professional capabilities – including collaborative skills – is crucial. But nearly all law firms make a mistake in using 360s as a performance management mechanism (in other words, a bonus determinant) – not as a developmental tool.¹

When people fill out a 360 knowing it will be used for someone’s bonus, they tend to react quite differently than if they know it is genuinely being used to improve their abilities. But highly effective collaboration skills are vital for a partner’s ability to provide the highest value to clients, and to accomplish a range of other strategic goals for their career progression and the firm’s sake.² Law firm

leaders, therefore, should use a 360 tool to seek inputs that help lawyers become better collaborators, leaders, and client service practitioners. You might argue that partners should have open conversations to provide each other with this kind of honest feedback – but in our experience, that’s extremely rare.

Using a structured, science-backed instrument is vital. Research shows that women tend to receive feedback that is less specific and actionable than their male peers get – compromising their ability to learn and grow.³ But a 360 tool that links to a research-based competency grid is more likely to provide an observation-based assessment that is useful regardless of a recipient’s demographics.

Pivotal moments for 360s

Gardner & Co. recently launched its “Smarter Collaboration 360” tool that focuses on people’s collaborative competencies (see Figure 1). Through feedback from one’s colleagues and even outside stakeholders (such as clients or fellow directors, if you sit on a board), analyzed versus one’s own self-assessment, it looks at nine core areas of smarter collaboration.

Figure 1: Smarter Collaboration 360 Core Competencies

<p>Responding and initiating. Ability to collaborate or refine others’ work, as the situation demands</p>	<p>Applying conceptual and practical thinking. Ability to embrace discussions about both complex ideas and the execution of them</p>	<p>Getting involved in the work. Ability to flex between being actively involved in work versus empowering others to get work done</p>
<p>Assessing and managing risk. Ability to assess and mitigate the downside(s) of a situation while seizing opportunities to capture upside potential</p>	<p>Building collaborative relationships. Ability to create a positive environment where people actively work with each other to achieve better outcomes</p>	<p>Balancing group and individual work. Ability to use collaboration at the right times (not too much, not too little), involving people across a broad spectrum of views and roles</p>
<p>Demonstrating trustworthiness. Ability to demonstrate both the character and competence that encourages others to work with you</p>	<p>Showing trust in others. Ability to show an appropriate level of trust in others</p>	<p>Communicating collaboratively. Ability to draw in and integrate a diversity of perspectives, even conflicting views</p>

Source: Gardner & Co.

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These are the distinct areas, from our decade-plus of research at Harvard and with scores of law firms and in-house legal departments, where collaboration can be honed to produce the desired outcomes – everything from higher revenue and profit, to faster innovation, to deeper client relationships, to better talent engagement and retention.

In our work with law firms, we have used the 360 with client relationship partners to help them understand how they can become stronger team leaders. This means not only knowing how they can improve client service, but also how to motivate people to want to work with them.

When partners need to decide where to invest their time in building a client relationship, their top criterion should be the relevance of their expertise to the client’s needs. But at the margin, they will decide how much effort to put in based on the person leading the team. One partner told us, “I’m able to serve a client much better when the lead partner is adept at building a cohesive team and knows when she should get directly involved – or not. And when a client team leader shows trust in people and actively shares credit for the work, I’m much more motivated to go above and beyond.” So it is a much better experience, including for the client, if the team leader ups their game with collaborative leadership.

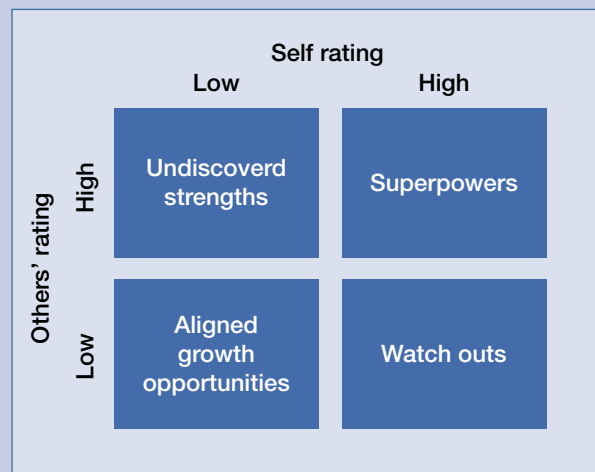
We have also used the 360 – along with individual coaching and group sessions led by our Gardner & Co. facilitators – for senior leadership teams to boost trust, open dialogue, and significantly improve

culture, resulting in higher productivity and talent retention.⁴

Identifying “undiscovered strengths”

Our 360 tool compiles feedback, crunches the data, and then highlights the most striking insights. For instance, in a 2x2 matrix we show an individual’s superpowers, watchouts, aligned growth opportunities, and undiscovered strengths. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Capabilities by type



Source: Gardner & Co.

All of these findings are important, but perhaps the most valuable is “undiscovered strengths”. These are areas where others rate you significantly higher than you rate yourself. Recognizing these surprise strong suits allows you to build your confidence to make even greater use of these skills and behaviors and teach others how to employ them.

Let’s consider an example. Imagine that your 360 report listed the following three behaviors as undiscovered strengths:

- Good at engaging when needed (Getting Involved in the Work competency).
- Anticipates and acts on potential opportunities (Responding and Initiating competency).
- Encourages debate to surface different perspectives (Communicating Collaboratively competency).

How could a partner use this information to boost

their own and their team’s performance? First, you could look at the tailored suggested tips in your report. For “Good at engaging when needed,” for example, the report advises:

You know when to jump into a project to help colleagues or offer your unique expertise. This is a crucial skill to maintain: it keeps projects on track and prevents colleagues from feeling frustrated or disengaged. Can you use your insights for real-time coaching?

From these insights, you know you have a good level of involvement in other’s work, and should keep up your current balance. You could also go a step further by observing how others balance hands-off and hands-on approaches. Then, when it makes sense, you might acknowledge how they are excelling and where they could lean more in one direction.

We also recommend sitting down and reflecting on your 360 results. Without any tips or distractions in front of you, think about how they make you feel. Other than surprised, are you happy, proud, concerned others see you differently? Why might you not have seen certain strengths, and what does it mean for your growth and development going forward?

In the case of “Anticipates and acts on potential opportunities”, you might question why others rate you significantly higher than you rate yourself. There’s always room for improvement, but maybe you’re a little hard on yourself in this area? Could you potentially channel unease in this domain toward keeping up the good work, helping others, and growing in spheres where you are less strong?

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Developing and executing a developmental action plan

Ultimately, lawyers – and their colleagues – benefit from a joined-up plan for boosting their collaborative abilities. This means taking all feedback they have received and prioritizing key developmental actions (see Figure 3).

In other words, what are the top actions to start, stop, and continue?

Ideally, a professional development coach can help you determine which steps to focus on. And then they would help you make progress in these areas over time. For those working more independently, a data-based 360 tool should provide ideas for high-value growth. These can be refined through considering:

- *Your personal and career goals.* For example, do you aspire to lead core relationship teams

Figure 3: Three different types of developmental actions



Source: Gardner & Co.

for the firm's top clients? Do you want to sit on the most powerful committees, which demands that you earn greater respect from peers or nominating groups? Do you want to generate strong followership, so that you can have a pipeline of slightly junior talent to "sub in" for you when you're over-stretched?

- *Your firm's strategy.* Is your firm trying to be on the cutting edge of technology adoption? Do successful partners constantly innovate their practice? If so, zero in on 360 feedback about your peer's beliefs in your ability to embrace untested ideas, identify potential opportunities, and take reasoned risks.

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- *Patterns of success and energy (or the opposite of both).* What kind of people gravitate toward you, and vice versa? Which situations allow you to perform at your best – and how has this changed as you matured in your practice? How do you react under pressure? The latter is a good indicator of your core behaviors (or "central tendencies," as psychologists call them), and knowing this can help you see how your competencies are showing up when it really matters.

To start, we recommend setting two to three commitments or goals for the next few weeks. From there you might think about a couple of objectives for the next six months. Make sure you write down these goals – research shows that when people write down and monitor their goals, they boost their chances of achieving them. Also,

specify concrete ways that you will achieve these goals.

For example, a partner at one of our client firms – Lisa – wrote: "I will show greater trust in my fellow partners to spur better collaboration – just because I believe in them doesn't mean they know this". To achieve this, she would:

- Actively solicit different views and thank people for speaking up.
- Allow people to experiment – first with low-stakes assignments.
- Pay attention to whether she extends trust to all types of colleagues (e.g., people with different tenures, titles, physical abilities).

Lisa joined up with a peer – David – so they could hold each other accountable for their specific developmental goals. They checked in on Zoom once a week to note progress, problem solve challenges, and tweak goals as they received feedback from new sources.

As they made strides toward their goals, they felt their collaborations become more natural and effective. It took less time to accomplish work innovatively and inclusively, resulting in more satisfied clients and colleagues.

Looking ahead

Continual improvement and feedback are vital in lawyers becoming smarter collaborators – and achieving all the related performance benefits. Embracing 360 feedback as a developmental tool, rather than a performance metric, gives them actionable insights without the pressure and politics of bonus determinations.

Through using a well-structured, research-backed 360 tool, they can identify and leverage their strengths while addressing areas for growth. More specifically, recognizing "undiscovered strengths", superpowers, and gaps in competency gives lawyers a strong basis for refining their collaborative skills.

When they also set specific, actionable goals and engage in regular reflection and peer accountability, they are much better equipped to navigate the complexities of modern collaboration and reap the powerful outcomes.



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.

- 1 Gardner, H. K. and Matviak, I. (2022) ‘Performance management shouldn’t kill collaboration’, *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2022/09/performance-management-shouldnt-kill-collaboration>
- 2 Gardner, H. K. and Matviak, I. (2022) ‘Smarter collaboration: a new approach to breaking down barriers and transforming work.’ Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press.
- 3 Doldor, E., Wyatt, M., and Silvester, J. (2021) ‘Research: men get more actionable feedback than women’, *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2021/02/research-men-get-more-actionable-feedback-than-women>
- 4 Heidi K. Gardner (16 April 2024), *In early May, we are launching the Smarter Collaboration 360 (“SC360” for short) development tool to help boost people’s collaborative competencies*. LinkedIn. www.linkedin.com/posts/heidi-k-gardner-ab5b825_smartercollaboration-collaboration-tool-activity-7185992090495930368-5mwe