



**HARVARD LAW SCHOOL**  
Center on the Legal Profession

**Implementing A Smart Collaboration Strategy,  
Part 2: Optimizing Individuals' and Leaders'  
Collaborative Behaviors**

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## Background

*Your client's most pressing and high-value challenges are increasingly complex and ambiguous. Firms can better meet—and exceed—their clients' expectations when lawyers collaborate to integrate their expertise across organizational silos, disciplines, and geographic divides to provide more holistic, tailored, joined-up advice. We call that Smart Collaboration. Our research at Harvard University over the last decade, using robust analytics on millions of data (such as timesheets, personnel and financial records) points from dozens of professional service firms, has empirically demonstrated that firms engaging in smart collaboration boost revenues and profits, increase client satisfaction and loyalty, and are better able to attract, engage and retain top talent.<sup>i</sup>*

*Implementing Smart Collaboration requires a clear-eyed view of the current state of collaboration, and then targeted approaches for strategy implementation. In **Part 1** of the series, we outlined the diagnostic phase which helps identify current collaboration barriers and bright-spots, and provides guide-posts for future areas of focus. Improving firm-wide collaboration requires a bottom-up ground swell of support and starts with individuals understanding their own collaborative behaviors and skills.<sup>ii</sup> In this paper, **Part 2** of the series, we show how to equip lawyers (and potentially others in the firm) with the capabilities to turn their natural ways of working into strengths that improve collaboration. We also show how to improve leaders' understanding of their group dynamics so that they are better able to manage, direct, and motivate their teams (practice groups or key account teams, etc.).*

*Once partners understand their collaborative strengths and the strategies needed to deploy them, they need to direct those skills toward specific client opportunities. This is the*

*focus of **Part 3** of the series, where we discuss tech-enabled ways to analyze, identify and prioritize collaborative growth opportunities, along with ways to create accountability for execution. Even with the right targets, we know from research that many partners lack the skills and confidence to pursue complex client opportunities which require cross-silo collaboration. **Part 4** of the series outlines seven principles for effective capability development, shows how to calculate the return on investment for skill development programs, and provides a case study on one kind of BD capabilities program that generates 10x ROI.*

## **Understanding Individual Behavioral Tendencies**

Each person has the potential to enhance collaboration at the team and organizational level by deploying their unique combination of strengths in conjunction with the diverse strengths of others in the group. Smart Collaboration at the organizational level hinges on team diversity – effectively deploying the group’s broad set of behavioral tendencies and skills to maximize the impact of collaboration. By becoming aware of your natural tendencies and making deliberate choices about how to behave in a team setting, you have the power to help the group collaborate more effectively.

For example, one behavioral tendency we have uncovered is called ‘risk spotting’. If you are strong on this tendency, you will be acutely aware of potential risks. You can use this ability to help groups avoid falling prey to ‘group-think’ and ensure that a diversity of views, including dissenting opinions, are heard. In contrast, people with the ‘risk seeking’ tendency are relatively quick to identify opportunities. This tendency is valuable in surfacing new and potentially bold ideas.

Both behavioral tendencies (risk seeking and risk spotting) can thus be valuable depending upon the context, and they will be more valuable if used intentionally and in balance with tendencies of other group members. More generally, because no single behavior is optimal across varying situations, individuals, leaders and teams need to understand how to use those tendencies effectively and flexibly.

This capacity starts with people understanding their own behavioral tendencies and preferences, as well as the natural tendencies of those they work with.

## Collaboration for Distributed Teams

Collaboration is challenging in the best of times. It becomes far more difficult, and essential, when teams are spread across locations—whether that’s multiple offices or some members working from home. During the COVID-19 crisis, almost overnight in some firms, remote working became the reality. Many groups who had previously worked almost exclusively face-to-face were now forced

to operate through distributed teams.

Partners were forced to communicate in new ways (video, email, conference calls) with both their teams and their clients. As

stress and uncertainty increased because

of disappearing client work, compensation cuts, and distributed teams, effective collaboration (trust, communication, teamwork) suddenly became even more essential.

*“Lawyers...all are wondering when they and others like them might go back to the office. But, in reality, the answer is, it’s not going to happen — at least not as we once knew it.”*

**Joe Andrew, global chairman of Dentons**

A growing number of law firm executives are acknowledging that that they plan to **retain some elements of distributed teams for the long-term.**<sup>iii</sup>

## **Tools for Understanding Individuals' Collaborative Behaviors**

Many people have, to some degree, an intuitive sense of their behavioral tendencies. However, this can lead to blind spots and an overreliance on those strengths, even in sub-optimal situations. People need an unbiased view of their tendencies so that they can choose how to respond in any given situation and thereby increase their ability to create the outcomes they want. This objective view can be gained through psychometric tests.

Psychometric tests are a standard and scientific method used to measure individuals' psychological characteristics and behavioral tendencies.<sup>iv</sup> A robust and scientifically developed psychometric test which follows prescribed standards will be rigorously evaluated for validity, reliability/errors of measurement, and fairness in testing.<sup>v</sup> These tests can be helpful tools to more deeply understand your behavioral tendencies so that you can be more deliberate in how you use them.

We have conducted empirical research with multiple law firms to identify specific behavioral tendencies closely aligned with Smart Collaboration. For example, in our research we measured the results of partners' actual collaborative actions such as expanding a client relationship across practice groups, and studied the behavioral tendencies associated with those successful collaborative outcomes. We distilled these behavioral tendencies into seven dimensions of Smart Collaboration, as outlined below.

## Using a Behavior-Based Psychometric Tool for Smart Collaboration

As noted above, one major imperative in implementing a strategy of Smart Collaboration is helping partners, other fee-earning staff, and allied business professionals to understand how their own behavior contributes to—or undermines—effective collaboration across the firm. This is where it is crucial to use a psychometric self-assessment that predicts collaborative behavior at work and in groups. According to our studies in law firms, seven key behavioral dimensions affect collaboration:

- **Individual vs Group:** our tendency to engage in collaborative work. In general, would we rather work on our own or in a team?
- **Close vs Distant communication:** our preference for the frequency of interactions, and comfort with revealing personal information. Do we talk about our outside relationships and interests with colleagues, or keep that side of our life private?
- **Wary vs Trusting:** the base level of trust we are likely to feel for our colleagues. Do we inherently trust others, or wait for them to prove themselves?
- **Complex vs Concrete:** our attraction to more complex problems and innovation. Do we enjoy new things and new ways of working, or prefer to deal with practical ideas and applications?
- **Responder vs Initiator:** our tendency to take initiative and anticipate events. Do we tend to deal with situations as they arise, or look several steps ahead to see what the situation could be and act now to influence the future?

- **Risk Spotter vs Risk Seeker:** our tendency to balance the risk with opportunity in working with others. Do we more readily see problems and risks and try to avoid them, or see opportunities and feel motivated to pursue them?
- **Hands-on vs Hands-off:** the need for control in one’s environment. Do we have a high desire for routine and structure, or do we prefer spontaneity?

Once people get an objective view of their own position on each dimension, they can learn how to use their own tendencies as a strength.<sup>vi</sup> This is critical: rather than try to change an individual’s behavioral preference, the objective should be to help a person maximize their effectiveness by being mindful of when and how to use those natural tendencies. A strengths-based approach is particularly effective for people working under stressful conditions—whether caused by time pressure, anxiety caused by economic uncertainty, or the pressure of very high expectations—because stress increases a person’s tendency to stay in their comfort zone (what psychologists call “reverting to central tendencies”).

Turning the insights from a psychometric assessment into action requires practical, personalized guidance. For example, a ‘distant’ communicator: requires less frequent communication; minimizes small talk and pleasantries; prefers to get straight to business; keeps their private life separate from their professional one; and is comfortable with working in distributed teams. Table 1 shows examples of how a ‘distant’ communicator can leverage their behavioral tendencies to the benefit of the team.

Table 1 - Collaboration Strategies (Distant Communicators)	
<b>Recommended Actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share the limelight and give others—especially introverts—the time and space they need to contribute fully</li> <li>• Empower others to take initiative on team communications</li> <li>• Keep the team focused on what needs to get done; set clear agendas and bring meandering discussions back on point; help streamline written work products</li> <li>• Create a shared vision so that the team understands the business priorities even with infrequent communication</li> </ul>

Working in distributed teams can increase the barriers to effective collaboration. For example, the lack of casual interactions in an office break room means that people have fewer chances to hear about what others are working on and find opportunities contribute to those projects. Table 2 provides an example of a recommended action and watch-out for a ‘distant’ communicators working in a distributed team.

Table 2 - Tips for Working in Distributed Teams (Distant Communicators)	
<b>Recommended Actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Keep connected with your network.</b> Virtual working can make it harder to maintain your network, but the size of your network will have a strong influence on the number of potential collaboration opportunities available. Humans’ natural tendency, especially when under stress, is to gravitate toward people who are similar to us (what psychologists call “homophily”). Check that you are maintaining your communication with people in your broader network as well. Virtual working can make contact more infrequent for most people, so the contact people do have becomes more meaningful, creating an opportunity to strengthen and deepen your network.</li> </ul>
<b>Watch-outs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mind your poker-face.</b> Being inscrutable (poker-faced) is a strength in many situations but make sure you show enough of yourself for people to feel a connection with you. This is especially important in virtual meetings where people cannot as easily see your facial expressions or hear your tone of voice to judge your reactions.</li> </ul>

Research also shows that change occurs over time and requires deliberate, repetitive effort. Doing so—especially getting time-starved lawyers and staff to focus on collaboration—means that people will need to receive periodic prompts to help them focus on the most high-impact practical actions they can take to engage in Smart Collaboration. An example of a prompt for working effectively in a distributed team is shown in Table 3.



Table 3 - Prompts (Distant Communicators)

<b>Recommended Actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Set clear boundaries.</b> If calls are too frequent or too ad hoc that it becomes frustrating for you, be part of the solution to resolve it: propose ideas that are effective and acceptable to the rest of the group. Talk with the team to review the best mode for different types of communication. Set/remind your group about boundaries of work/social life balance, i.e. when people can and cannot contact you.</li></ul>
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## Leaders' Benefits from a Behavior-Based Psychometric Tool

Leaders need a view of their team's overall behavioral profile. With insights from a team profile, leaders can better understand, manage and motivate their teams to engage in enhanced collaboration within the group, with other parts of the firm and with clients.<sup>vii</sup>

For example, imagine that you lead a team with a high proportion of people with a 'concrete' tendency (behavioral preference for tackling pragmatic issues rather than ambiguous or complex ones). Your team overall may struggle to understand and lean into ill-defined problems. By identifying the few team members with a preference for the 'complex' (i.e. those that are attracted to complicated, ambiguous and uncertain issues and innovation), you can leverage them to help the group define a problem—that is break it down into comprehensible pieces, and create a problem summary that facilitates a common understanding. As the group moves toward a clearer view of the challenge and requirements, the majority members who prefer the 'concrete' can focus on developing execution plans.

Likewise, imagine your group is highly 'wary'. Their wary tendency gives them a strong ability to remain objective in their decision making — a real positive. However, the group lacks innate trust. Since it is easier to build competence trust (faith in others' technical and work-related capabilities) than to foster interpersonal trust (belief that others have good intentions), especially with distributed teams, the leader may focus on quickly building team member's belief in each other's abilities. Do this by showcasing member's relative strengths and sharing their past and current successes.

**Case Study: Autonomous Vehicles.** During our research we interviewed a law firm partner who won a massive piece of business from a traditional automaker that wanted to move into autonomous vehicles. The partner credited the win to the team she brought together from across the firm. The partner, in the automotive practice, realized that the client didn't require just an automotive expert. The challenges they would wrestle with would cover government regulation, product liability, technology licensing and IP, union negotiations, and employment law, just to name a few hurdles. By bringing together experts from across disciplines the partner was able to paint a more holistic picture of how they would support the client and won the business.

By understanding the behavioral tendencies and skills within the team, the leader can identify potential barriers to effective collaboration and intentionally deploy the needed skills to drive the team forward. To act most effectively on these insights, leaders will need to apply an understanding of their own behavioral tendencies to see how those mesh with group members'. For example, a leader with strong 'hands-off' tendencies whose team members are predominantly "hands on" will need to find practical ways to stay in closer touch throughout the work process than they would normally do. Ideally, the leader will debrief their individual and team-level profiles with a professional coach who can help them develop authentic, realistic strategies for action.

## Conclusion

When law firms can get their partners to engage in Smart Collaboration, they boost their revenues and profits, increase client satisfaction and loyalty, improve the success rate of lateral hires, and improve their ability to attract, retain and engage talent. Not surprisingly, then, a majority of major firms around the world have included the tenets of Smart Collaboration in their firm's formal strategic plan.

Because a plan is only as good as its execution, firms need to embed the behaviors of Smart Collaboration throughout the firm. This work starts with partners because they are (or should be) seen as role models, making sure they have the self-knowledge and capabilities to act collaboratively. To strengthen the culture, junior lawyers, business professionals, and other staff also need these same insights and abilities. As explained above, research shows that validated psychometric self-assessments are important tools to help make these strategic behavioral shifts.

## About the Authors



Heidi K. Gardner, PhD, is a Distinguished Fellow at Harvard Law School and Faculty Chair in the school's executive programs. Previously she was a professor at Harvard Business School. Dr. Gardner's book "*Smart Collaboration: How Professionals and Their Firms Succeed by Breaking Down Silos*" became a *Washington Post* bestseller. Named by Thinkers50 as a Next Generation Business Guru, Dr. Gardner co-founded the research and advisory firm Gardner & Co.

Dr. Gardner has authored more than seventy books, chapters, case studies, and articles. Her books include *Smart Collaboration for In-House Legal Teams* (2020), *Leadership for Lawyers* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2019), and *Smart Collaboration for Lateral Hiring* (2018).

Dr. Gardner has lived and worked on four continents, including as a Fulbright Fellow, and for McKinsey & Co. and Procter & Gamble. She earned her BA in Japanese from the University of Pennsylvania, a Masters degree from the London School of Economics, and a second Masters and PhD from London Business School.

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Previously he was an Executive Vice President at State Street Bank where he led the bank's insurance sector and served as President/Chairman of three of the bank's FinTech subsidiaries. Prior to State Street Ivan led the Bank of Scotland's small business commercial banking operations for the UK. Earlier in his career Ivan was a consultant with Bain & Co's strategy and private equity groups in London and Johannesburg and led strategy, product, marketing and sales functions at the Walt Disney Company (London and Paris) and Procter & Gamble.

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<sup>i</sup> Heidi K. Gardner, *Smart Collaboration: How Professionals and Their Firms Succeed by Breaking Down Silos*, Harvard Business Press, 2017; Heidi K. Gardner, “When and Why Clients Want You to Collaborate”, *The American Lawyer*, 2016; Heidi K. Gardner, “By Failing to Collaborate, Law Firms Are Leaving Money on the Table,” *The American Lawyer*, 2018

<sup>i</sup> “*Smart Collaboration for Lateral Hiring*,” by Dr. Heidi K. Gardner and Anusia E. Gillespie, Globe Law and Business, 2018

<sup>ii</sup> Dr. Heidi K. Gardner and Ivan Matviak, “Implementing a Smart Collaboration Strategy, Part 1: Building the Case for Change,” *Harvard Law School White Paper Series*, 2020

<sup>iii</sup> Joe Andrew, “Let’s stop asking ‘When are we going back to the office?’,” *The Hill*, April 28th, 2020

<sup>iv</sup> Ziegler M., Brunner M., “Test Standards and Psychometric Modeling,” In: Lipnevich A., Preckel F., Roberts R. (eds) *Psychosocial Skills and School Systems in the 21st Century*. Springer, 2016

<sup>v</sup> Adrian Furnham, “The Great Divide: Academic Versus Practitioner Criteria for Psychometric Test Choice,” *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 2018, 100:5, 498-506

<sup>vi</sup> We have developed a set of technologically enabled, psychometrically validated tools based on these ideas. See <https://smartcollaborationaccelerator.com/>

<sup>vii</sup> For a technical treatment of different compositional effects of personality on group outcomes, see Lisa M Moynihan and Randall S. Peterson, “A Contingent Configuration Approach to Understanding The Role Of Personality In Organizational Groups”, *Research In Organizational Behavior*, Volume 23, 2001, p.327-378

