

A Better Way to Get Lawyers to Collaborate

By [LawVision](#) on November 17, 2020

There is an old story about a policeman who comes across a drunk man searching for something under a streetlight. He asks the drunk what he is looking for. The drunken man responds that he lost his keys, and the policeman joins him under the streetlight to help him search. After a few minutes, the policeman asks if he is sure he lost them under this light, and the drunk replies, "No Sir, I lost them in the park." When the policeman asks why he is searching here and not in the park, the drunk replies, "This is where the light is."

The story teaches the principle of "The Streetlight Effect," an observational bias that occurs when you only search for a solution where it is easiest to look.

The law firm world's unsuccessful efforts to consistently create and run effective, collaborative client and industry teams may be due, in part, to the Streetlight effect. It's possible we've been looking in the wrong places to improve performance.

In the [January 2020 Thomson Reuters Legal Executive Institute Annual Marketing and Business Development Benchmarking Survey](#), nearly 60% of respondents reported that their client teams were not "very effective."

As the pandemic took hold this year, many of our law firm clients reported that initially intra-firm collaboration increased as unique legal issues emerged and lawyers scrambled to deploy subject matter experts to clients with unique pandemic challenges. However, we also heard that physically distributed virtual teams have posed real challenges for true collaboration.

As the pandemic wears on, collaboration continues to decrease. In a recent [Thomson Reuters HighQ Webinar](#), Acritas research showed the quality of collaboration between teams since COVID-19 has decreased by 15%.

When we ask law firms the reasons for client and industry team failure, they cite structural and administrative reasons like the format of meetings, lack of good tracking software, staffing, support, inadequate financial incentives, time tracking, access to industry information, size of the group, and time restrictions. Interestingly, the Acritas research reported that when it came to collaboration barriers, "lack of incentive" (a structural problem) ranked almost the same as "individualistic attitude" (a behavioral problem).

Could it be that law firm marketers place too much emphasis on structural and administrative failings ("we just need to be better organized and manage the process") and not enough focus on the inherent behavioral tendencies of members of a team?

Dr. Heidi Gardner, author of "[Smart Collaboration: How Professionals and Their Firms Succeed by Breaking Down Silos](#)," shows through her groundbreaking research on collaboration that increased collaboration empowers firms to increase margins, inspire greater client loyalty, attract and retain the best talent and gain a competitive edge. Despite those proven benefits, the annual Thomson Reuters benchmarking survey has not shown a significant increase in the success rate of client teams over the years.

If better collaboration within client teams has tangible benefits, but efforts to improve it fail consistently, perhaps we are

looking for solutions in the wrong places.

Maybe the focus on administrative and structural problems misses a more fundamental source of the failure. Namely, the natural tendencies we all have when it comes to collaborating.

A new tool we use to facilitate better collaboration is called the “[Smart Collaboration Accelerator](#).” It is based on Dr. Gardner’s research and uncovers natural collaboration tendencies. The tool gives team leaders critical information about a group, enabling them to leverage each team member’s collaboration tendencies, which catalyzes better engagement and participation.

The Gardner research identifies seven behavioral dimensions that accelerate collaboration. Understanding team members’ behavioral dimensions allows you to be more thoughtful about when your collaboration tendencies promote effective collaboration and when they may be cause for concern. When you are aware of your natural preferences, you can make better choices about deploying them in a team setting and collaboration improves.

For example, one of the Accelerator’s seven behavioral dimensions captures a participant’s level of trust in others. On the “Wary” end of the dimension, people do not trust others until trustworthiness is proven. These people also tend to be less optimistic about outcomes. On the “Trusting” end of the dimension, people trust others more innately and tend to be very optimistic about results. Understanding where team members sit on the “Wary/Trusting” dimension allows a team leader to use wariness to identify issues before they become problems and get diverse perspectives that enable creative solutions to problems. It also gives team members tools for building the trust needed within the team to work together effectively.

With a full report of all seven dimensions, an experienced facilitator can help a team leader move beyond mere structural and administrative obstacles and get to the heart of how team members naturally approach interaction with the group. The Accelerator has broad applications. It has been used to drive client satisfaction, increase diversity and inclusion, launch new teams, smooth post-merger integrations, integrate laterals teams, improve geographically distributed teams’ performance, and break down siloed organizations.

LawVision will be holding two seminars with Dr. Gardner on the use of the Smart Collaboration Accelerator in law firms. The first will be held on November 18, 2020, at Noon Eastern. A second seminar will be held in January 2021.

You can [register here](#).