

The Science Emerging Behind Effective Team Collaboration

By [LawVision](#) on April 29, 2021

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In the Am Law 200 law firm world, [client teams](#) are one of the drivers for retaining and expanding existing client work. As someone who has worked on a variety of client teams, I have experienced those that work extremely well and those that inevitably collapse under their weight. A lot of this has to do with leadership, of course, but an important point is that every team member plays a role in team dynamics.

Research-based findings are now putting some science around the art of collaboration. Dr. Heidi K. Gardner, a distinguished fellow at Harvard Law School, has done significant research around this area. As I explored in an earlier [article](#), Dr. Gardner recently launched a self-assessment tool to help individual lawyers (and other professionals) understand their preferences in a team environment.

Some trends are already emerging from the use of this collaboration tool. After taking a self-assessment questionnaire, participants are measured on seven behavioral tendencies. One tendency measures the difference between “trusting” and “wariness” when working in a team setting. In a recent engagement, we had a group of diverse attorneys take the assessment, and one finding we uncovered through the assessment tool was a high propensity for wariness. This is not necessarily a “negative” as there are positive attributes to a wary tendency, including looking for demonstrable abilities of other team members and approaching possible ideas with a due diligence mentality. However, as a group, it is likely to restrict optimal collaboration if not addressed properly by the team leader.

What are some of the ways you can overcome wariness on a team?

- Set clear goals for the group
- Publicly acknowledge strengths of group members
- Over-include information
- Make sharing errors easy and blame-free
- Encourage opportunities for members to get to know each other on a personal level

Even self-identified wary team members can build up “competence trust,” i.e., faith in the technical and work-related work of others. What is more difficult is building interpersonal trust. This type of trust is the overall belief that others have good intentions within the group. Remote working makes it even more difficult to foster interpersonal trust. As unnatural as it may seem, having opportunities for team members to get to know each other, say through icebreakers or social calls (like virtual happy hours), will help build those bonds on a personal level.

In looking at another dimension, Responder v. Initiator, we found a strong preference for responding among the team participants. If you have a group dominated by responders, they are unlikely to initiate action preemptively but will jump in with their time and energy when it comes to responding to requests made of them.

Some of the takeaways:

- Encourage the group to make connections with Initiators in the group and beyond.
- Make sure the group is not “out of sight, out of mind” with the rest of the organization.
- Be careful not to get over-committed.

In my experience, this is a somewhat typical behavioral pattern of a group of attorneys. That is why it’s important to encourage the group leader to seek out and make connections with those “Initiators” in her/his team. For those who are used to responding, there is also the danger of members of the group or the whole group quickly getting overloaded. This is especially likely in the realm of virtual work – the leader will need to make sure the group does not become over-committed.

A team that tends to be dominated by “Responders” can quickly become “out of sight, out of mind” with the rest of the firm. In this situation, the marketing team can be especially helpful. Be sure that the marketing professional supporting the group highlights accomplishments, especially new client wins, and relevant articles, thought leadership, or changes to team membership.

There was a song during the 1980s British Invasion that included verses about being “blinded by science.” Using the Smart Collaboration Acceleration tool provides just the opposite effect: it is opening team leaders’ eyes to the behaviors of their group members. By achieving that understanding, team leaders can employ the science, i.e., understanding the team members’ preferred behaviors to achieve better outcomes for their team.