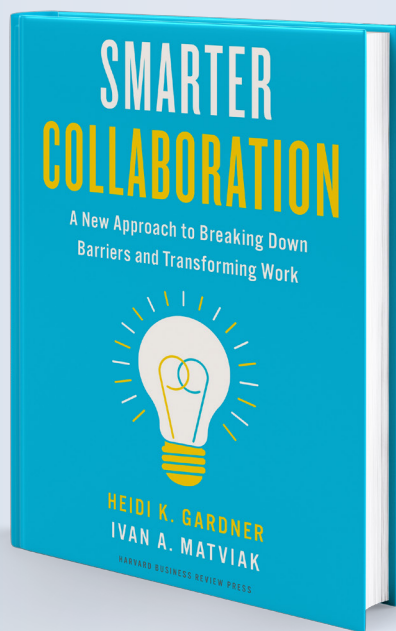


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Smarter Collaboration

A New Approach to Breaking Down Barriers and Transforming Work

By Heidi K. Gardner

Heidi K. Gardner is a Distinguished Fellow at Harvard Law School and a former professor at Harvard Business School. Previously a McKinsey consultant and Fulbright Fellow, she is the author of *Smart Collaboration: How Professionals and Their Firms Succeed by Breaking Down Silos*, a Washington Post bestseller. She was named by Thinkers50 as a Next Generation Business Guru and is cofounder of both the research and advisory firm Gardner & Co and Smart Collaboration International.

Modern Businesses Must Collaborate to Get Ahead

In today's fast-paced, increasingly remote business climate, the stakes for effective collaboration are higher than ever. For-profit companies are looking for ways to serve their customers better, engage in more profitable work on a more consistent basis, and get ahead of the many challenges facing businesses today. Non-profit organizations are simultaneously looking for more effective ways to carry out their missions. Through this culmination of challenges for non-profits and for-profits alike, collaboration has understandably become a topic of interest for many sectors and industries. However, the biggest challenge lies in getting implementation right to avoid falling into a collaboration trap.

Collaboration works when it's done right. Harvard Law School Fellow Heidi K. Gardner, wrote this sequel to her first publication, *Smart Collaboration*, to showcase the profound transformation of many organizations that embraced the concepts laid out in that book. *Smarter Collaboration: A New Approach to Breaking Down Barriers and Transforming Work* is the culmination of research involving thousands of executives worldwide. Its aim is to help today's businesses thrive through effective collaboration. "By design, this book asks and answers practical questions. What are the barriers to smart collaboration? How are they overcome? And those answers, again, come directly from the front lines. Throughout this book, we'll use three lenses to explore smarter collaboration: The WHY, The WHO, The HOW." With an updated plan of action that combines practical advice, new empirical research, and rich stories, Gardner illustrates the fundamental dynamics of collaboration "now expanded to reflect our work in such diverse industries as financial services, health care, biotech and pharma, consumer products, automotive, technology, telecoms and media, energy, government, and higher education. But *Smarter Collaboration* goes much further, with a new emphasis on the who and how."

Part 1: The Business Case for Smarter Collaboration

No matter what industry you're in, every business owner strives to run an innovative business with low risks, loyal customers, and a diverse team of highly engaged expert employees ready to tackle the most challenging problems.

No matter how you define your bottom line, smart collaboration is good for it. Collaboration makes fast and effective innovation possible. It helps businesses build customer loyalty and minimize risks. All of this contributes to attractive outcomes and enhanced profits and revenues.

“More than mere teamwork, smart collaboration creates a virtuous circle through its elements of why, who, and how.” Why collaborate? To give everyone involved a sense of meaning and purpose while focusing on transformational goals. Who benefits from collaboration? People with varied experiences and expertise can draw strength from their diversity. How is collaboration effective? By creating highly engaged employees who work with their teams to lean into challenging problems. Once it’s done right, the cycle works so well that it becomes self-reinforcing.

Gardner begins by “showing how smarter collaboration enhances engagement, which is a much-vaunted element of talent management but currently under serious strain.” She explains how smart collaboration directly affects the mental and physical well-being of all people involved and can help organizations reach their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. “And since today’s most dynamic companies no longer even try to get lifers, we wrap up with a new twist on hiring: showing how smarter collaboration with today’s employees can improve your chances of making them “boomerangs,” who return later as employees, brand ambassadors, or future customers.”

While smarter collaboration can help a business on all fronts, increase its chances of satisfying an alumni network, and make its DEI initiatives more likely to succeed, your company must purposefully link its strategy to its collaboration to enjoy these benefits. And that is the focus of the second part of this book.

Part 2: Assessing Your Collaborative Starting Point

It’s common to find business leaders whose views about collaboration are disconnected from their organizational reality. Gardner explains how “research in social psychology confirms that people’s views change when they attain greater power,” meaning that a leader’s views about collaboration are often skewed as a result of their relatively lofty position as a leader. However, the challenge is more than mere perception.

There are several reasons why a leader’s experience of collaboration genuinely differs from those of others in the organization. “First, leaders often are long-tenured within their company, meaning that they have had ample time to build broad-reaching, productive networks of colleagues. Second, many were promoted to senior leadership in part because people trusted them along the way—and as we’ll explain later, trust is a critical foundation for collaboration. Finally, few people say no to an executive’s request to collaborate.” The upside, Gardner explains, is that a leader’s positive experience, which is reinforced daily, “creates a chasm between their perception of collaboration in the organization and everyone else’s reality,” which creates fewer obstacles for them when it comes to collaboration.

Businesses looking to thrive through collaboration must first implement a “strategy of smart collaboration.” This strategy must include the practical steps an organization must take to get from here to there. The first step, Gardner explains, “is to design and conduct a rigorous, data-driven, smart collaboration diagnostic.”

The organizational diagnostic outlined by Gardner in this section “presents a set of methodologies for judging the strength of your collaborative foundations.” This powerful approach helps companies assess their collaborative opportunities and prioritize their actions to deliver a return on their efforts. She “presents a new way of looking at the behaviors underlying smarter collaboration so that every person can understand how to use their natural way of operating as a strength to contribute to collaborative teams.”

This section also explores how team dynamics and individual attributes contribute to understanding collaborative strengths and using them in business. She explains the seven behavioral dimensions of smart collaboration on an individual level, issue-centered and group-centered behaviors, how to identify your own behavioral tendencies accurately, how to understand and use collaborative strengths on a team level, and how to get and keep great people.

Part 3: How-To’s and Use Cases for Smarter Collaboration

Even when all parties enter a collaborative effort with enthusiasm and motivation, things can disintegrate if there’s no strategy to help things gain momentum. It’s not uncommon for an organization to bring people on board who lose interest or aren’t aligned with or inspired by the company’s core values, and their enthusiasm fizzles out, or they move on to a new endeavor that catches their eye.

This section of the book “explores the challenges of integrating talent—both those new joiners whom you hire on their own and those who join as part of an acquisition—and how a focus on smart collaboration can help.” It “provides a holistic approach to the who and how of collaboration.” Gardner begins by showing how collaboration helps solve a major organizational dilemma: how to ensure that the people you bring aboard actually stick around, become profitable, and thrive.

In an effort to motivate people to engage in collaboration, many of today’s businesses have tried (to no avail) to incentivize people to collaborate. However, as Gardner points out, “If paying people to collaborate worked, this chapter—and even this book—could be quite short. You’d just have to point people in a collaborative direction, put money on the table, and wait for things to sort themselves out. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way.”

For this reason, she has created a “comprehensive three-part system that combines aspirational goals and performance metrics, discussions aimed at performance improvement and development, and a revamped annual compensation review.”

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organization won't see results overnight. “Even the most motivated performers need strategically aligned structures to help them take full advantage of their collaborative efforts.” Transformative efforts also require “significant ongoing vigilance and leadership.” Gardner “tackles the challenge of supporting collaborative efforts over time” by laying out a practical approach to embedding collaboration into a company's culture so that it takes root and thrives in the long run.

Part 4: Troubleshooting Collaboration Challenges

Diversity and inclusion are hot topics in the business world today. Gardner begins the final section of this book by explaining how “collaboration can create the appearance of diversity without real inclusion.” She argues that mismanaged collaboration can actually marginalize certain workers, especially if it's used to “provide a veneer of diversity.”

When collaboration is truly “smart,” it's inherently inclusive. Gardner explains how “Organizations that practice smarter collaboration are more likely to call on the right people at the right time, regardless of their place in any formal hierarchy. They are more likely to encourage diverse inputs, recognize a broader range of potential solutions to challenges, value unorthodox contributions, and give more types of people opportunities to engage in higher-value work.”

She goes on to give us a closer look into these types of “traps.” She explains how to avoid setting them by suggesting ways for companies to engage in truly smart collaboration, a collaboration that fosters inclusion, in turn making it more engaging and productive. In Gardner's words, “It's a virtuous cycle that requires leadership and intentionality.”

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, mismanaged collaboration can strain individuals and teams to such an extent that trust is destroyed, and the collaboration becomes a weak link for the business. This doesn't only happen when a dramatic turn of events causes pressures to build and dysfunctional behaviors to surface. The same outcomes can be seen even after everyday performance pressures arise, such as a client demanding a defective product be fixed immediately; the team working on an important project, the outcome of which many people are waiting for and counting on; or a situation in which a new boss becomes anxious and scrutinizes every move the team makes, effectively transmitting their anxiety to the team; In this section, Gardner shows us how to “sustain a collaborative culture during crises, which can help separate your organization from the pack and set you up for a strong post-crisis rebound.”

The best teams can handle any pressure when it arises and maintain their efforts to collaborate effectively when it's most important to work together. The first step to maintaining this level of composure is for the leader to understand their behavioral tendencies and how they've manifested themselves under pressure in the past. Keeping these patterns in mind can help leaders remain alert to certain reactions that can “unintentionally undermine collaboration.” These possible pitfalls should be discussed openly, and a plan should be made for how cross-silo work should play out in a crisis. “Remembering that the go-it-alone urge tends to arise under pressure, you need to identify specific ways that people, departments, and even the board will be able to tap into resources to help them navigate.”

While some organizations have trouble building collaborative efforts, others tend to go overboard. Gardner explains how “Some companies throw teams non-strategically at every problem, on the assumption that if some collaboration is good, more must be better. But spreading resources too thin and overusing teams for routine work leads to bottlenecks and burnout.” She goes on to describe the “steps that can be taken on three levels—senior leader, teams, and individuals—both to head off overcommitment and to manage it when it arises.”

Each team member is obligated to help build an organization's culture through the stories they tell, the ways they engage with others every day, and the accomplishments they choose to celebrate. Smart collaboration begins at an individual level, and smarter collaboration is meant to be the means to an end. “That end,” Gardner maintains, “is your strategy.”

Implementing the who and how of collaboration is the key to successful collaboration. Gardner believes that “smarter collaboration should be at the top of every senior leader's agenda, because it is essential for addressing the highest-value challenges and opportunities in today's complex, data-rich, war-for-talent setting. At the end of the day, collaborative success hinges on leadership focus and strategic execution.”

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