

Not just a soft skill: 6 tips for smarter corporate collaboration with Dr. Heidi Gardner

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You've likely heard **collaboration** categorized as a "soft skill." Distinguished Harvard Fellow and award-winning author, [Dr. Heidi Gardner](#), says that's not true.

Dr. Gardner was in Toronto for BLG's smarter collaboration session, sharing the stage with [Patrice Walch-Watson](#), senior managing director, general counsel and corporate secretary for Canadian Pension Plan Investments; [Sandra Perri](#), senior vice president and general counsel at Sun Life Canada; and Graham Ross, BLG'S chief client officer. Known as champions when it comes to collaboration, these panelists were selected to share their experience as advocates for smarter corporate collaboration at their organizations.

Pulling from findings in Dr. Gardner's latest book, [Smarter Collaboration: A New Approach to Breaking Down Barriers and Transforming Work](#), and key takeaways from the discussion, here are tips for smarter corporate collaboration that can help to build a stronger and more inclusive workplace.

What is smarter collaboration?

Dr. Gardner shuts down the idea that collaboration is a soft skill in the workplace, explaining that smart collaboration is the only way to get the most important work done.

Smarter collaboration starts with keeping the end goal in mind and being hyper-intentional about who you bring together for your organization to be more profitable, innovative and tackle more complex issues. To start thinking smarter, consider these questions: what kind of experts do you need? At what point do you need to bring different people in so they can contribute different perspectives? Whose life experience could lead to the best possible results?

Dr. Gardner emphasizes the importance of life experience in the room - not just who is well-known, who puts their hand up, or who you've worked with recently. Once the right voices are present, it's important to ensure those people feel safe to speak up and share ideas.

Collaboration traps

Two main collaboration “traps” that organizations fall into were raised during the discussion.

Trap one: Over-collaboration

There is a myth that if some collaboration is good, more is better. This leads to what Dr. Gardner calls **over-collaboration**, which is the notion that every initiative requires the full team. This is where thoughtfulness comes into play. Take the time to reflect on whether a full team is required and if the answer is yes, identify who should be in the room and what needs to be in place so each person can contribute in a valuable way.

Trap two: The illusion of inclusion

Organizations often want to do the right thing by ensuring diversity and inclusion across their teams. Dr. Gardner asks, “What happens when there are good intentions about having a more diverse workplace or a more inclusive environment, but you stop with the diversity and don’t make it inclusive?”

Inclusion in the workplace refers to an environment where people are genuinely **recognized and appreciated for their talents and contributions -not simply asked to** participate in order to increase apparent diversity. Though perhaps rooted in good intentions, diversity alone may lead to tokenism, where select people are tapped more often than others. This can cause those individuals to be stretched so thin so that they **can’t engage as deeply, grow their skills, or take the time to reflect on the wins and losses of each project.**

To ensure your organization doesn’t fall into this collaboration trap, it is important to have a large diversity bench to draw from and ensure to focus on the “how” when forming teams. People need to know how you’re going to use their time and what their involvement will be from the start.

6 tips for smarter collaboration at your organization

Smarter collaboration doesn’t happen overnight - it is a journey. If you’re a leader looking to achieve results through smarter corporate collaboration, start with these six tips:

1. **Break down the walls.** Different functions of an organization often work in silos. There is the question of “why am I helping X team when I’m on Y team?” However, looking for ways to work cross-functionally in a strategic way and allowing time for things to gain traction can be beneficial. As leaders, look for these opportunities and outline the benefits from the start.
2. **Share successes.** Keep people motivated by showing that their efforts to collaborate are connected to outcomes and that leadership is proud of them for it! From Patrice Walch-Watson’s experience, it’s been “impactful” when leadership

rewards success in different ways. When you can get a win, continue to build on those successes, celebrate the achievements and talk about them often.

3. **Connect the dots.** It is important to be aware of what individual behaviours are helping to drive team efforts forward. Sandra Perri says, “be very intentional about connecting the dots for people and focusing on particular behaviours that you are looking for that are tied to value.” One such behaviour is the ability to influence outcomes without having formal authority - “when we see that, we try to call it out and encourage it because it’s critical to effective collaboration.”
4. **Get new joiners to land well.** No organization thrives from a revolving door of people. However, new joiners can be a huge benefit if they’re set up for success. Two questions to consider from Dr. Gardner: How quickly are new joiners getting involved in big projects? And when are they being introduced to big clients? You don’t want it to take years for new joiners to feel a part of the team, says Graham Ross. It is a shared interest to ensure people land well at the organization.
5. **Create an environment where people feel valued.** Dr. Gardner says collaboration is often viewed as “a big hug,” but smarter collaboration requires people to lean into tough conversations and pressure test ideas to get the gems. This starts with creating an environment where people feel safe and confident to share ideas. Successful results come from those who believe their voice is valued and understand what they will get from going out of their comfort zones.
6. **Make the most of time together.** As many organizations shift to a hybrid work model, questions pop up around collaborating effectively in our new ways of working. Regardless of your organization’s model, patience, listening and surveying what works and what doesn’t while operating in a hybrid environment is key. It is important to outline your expectations clearly. When you can get together, ensure the time is valuable and productive.

Start your journey

As leaders, you can get started today. Take the time to outline your end goal, reflect on your talent and their unique offerings, and think smarter when bringing teams together.

To dive deeper into Dr. Gardner’s findings, you can start by reading her [latest book](#). For additional insights on corporate collaboration or to keep the culture conversation going, reach out to Graham Ross.

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