



Episode11

Collaboration in 2023 with Heidi Gardner

Agnes Kunkel

Hello, I'm Agnes Kunkel, your host in 2023, your window to the World Beyond covid-19. Today we have over eighteen point million confirmed cases worldwide and over 700000 people have confirmed to have died from covid-19. It's a tragic. Actual hotspots are still United States, Brazil, India, Russia and South Africa. United States seem to have passed the peak of new cases. Brazil is still very critical and India is still rising, with new daily cases. Today, its sixth of August 2020. Our guest today is Professor Dr. Heidi Gardner from Boston. Professor Gardner is a distinguished fellow of Harvard Law School and was a professor at Harvard Business School. Dr. Gardner is author of The Washington Post best-selling book, Smart Collaboration. She's founder of Gardner, a research and advisory company specialized on smart collaboration. Her extensive research proved scientifically the impact of smart collaboration on our business results. It looked like it could be a great step ahead in establishing the importance of smart collaboration for business success, a point that seems not to be clear to everyone. And Dr. Gardner hopefully will talk to us about the impact of covid-19 on our culture of collaboration and how smart collaboration might help to cope with the tremendous economic problems covid-19 caused in our economies around the world. Welcome, Dr. Gardner. Welcome, Heidi.

Heidi Gardner Thank you so much for having me.

Agnes Kunkel

You are an expert on the subject of collaboration. You have written, as I mentioned, several bestsellers on this topic. Recently Your book, Smart Collaboration for In-house Legal Teams, was published. At the moment. What are your main research topics?

Heidi Gardner At this time, we are moving our research agenda from demonstrating the business case for collaboration in the talent case for collaboration, which early on was our focus. And these days instead, we're focused on "how to", in other words, the discourse has moved from why we should bother collaborating to. OK, I understand why we need to, but what are the approaches that we can take? And we're getting that question from leaders of giant organizations, from leaders of small organizations and people at all levels in companies and financial institutions and health care institutions and the government. People now who are bought into this idea need advice and tools to be able to implement and successfully execute the ideas of Smart Collaboration.

Agnes Kunkel

You are so right. You typically work with many companies and academic institutions around the world. How has your own way of working changed in times of contact restrictions?

Heidi Gardner Well, contact restrictions have certainly changed the way that we are engaging in our research and in the work that we do with all of the different kinds of organizations I mentioned. The most obvious change is that I'm now working remotely. Typically, I would be on an airplane many, many times a week, all even when I'm based in Boston. At Harvard University. I tended to visit the UK or Europe at least once a month, and I was often in places like you mentioned, India or Brazil or South Africa, and now I'm doing all of that work remotely. It's added some challenges, of course, in the sense that it's harder to engage with people when I can't see them face to face. I'm oftentimes now doing webinars for sometimes hundreds of people at once, but I miss the opportunity to see how the ideas are landing with them. It's hard to speak into the void and not know if people are excited by the ideas or confused by them or even the chance to look into somebody's eyes in a big audience. I would

just love to pick one person and say, OK, for you, you know, what does this look like? And now we're doing this virtually. So there are challenges associated with it. But I'm an optimist at heart and I try to look at the upside in the current situation. And one of the benefits is that we are able to engage with people in so many places where I didn't have the opportunity to travel or whose companies may not have sponsored them to attend Harvard program on campus or who just didn't have access to in-person events. And I've been delighted, almost overwhelmed with the demand for people to learn more about this topic of smart collaboration. And people are doing the very best they can to take advantage of technology solutions and all sorts of other approaches for broadening their knowledge and learning more about Smart Collaboration despite us not being able to get together in person.

Agnes Kunkel

So you serve the wave?

Heidi Gardner

Yeah, I think that's how we say it, yes.

Agnes Kunkel

In our opening story, the collaboration between these two employees, Thomas and Antonia, doesn't really work. I guess you are familiar with all these problems. More from the research side, or do you have personal experience with all these misunderstandings and being caught in a silo, that stuff?

Heidi Gardner

Well, certainly from the research and the personal perspective. one of the uncommon characteristics of my background is that I've had the opportunity to live and work on four different continents. And so I've lived in Japan and Germany and, you know, 12 plus years in in the UK, mostly London. I've also lived in South Africa and of course, in the U.S. And I understand oftentimes that these sorts of misunderstandings have at their heart a sense of stereotypes, perhaps, or different cultural expectations. And I've experienced those myself, having lived in so many different places. But from a research perspective, we now have ways in a very objective sense to understand what the root causes are when people have these sorts of underlying

disagreements or friction in their working relationships. And so at Gardner and Co., we have just developed and launched a psychometric tool that we call the Smart Collaboration Accelerator, and by giving people the opportunity to take an online self-assessment. Takes less than eight minutes, but people answer a series of questions and then afterward have instant access to an online report that helps them understand where they fall on seven different behavioral dimensions that are scientifically backed to be associated with smart collaboration. And this is an opportunity for people to reflect on their natural ways of working. And our philosophy underlying this tool is that no matter where somebody lands on each of these dimensions of smart collaboration, no matter what their natural tendencies are, if they're self-reflective and very purposeful about how they use those tendencies, they can be an asset when it comes to collaboration. When we take a look at the example of Thomas and Antonia, we could imagine, and I'm guessing here they didn't really take the Smart Collaboration Accelerator. But my hunch is if they did, they would be very, very far apart on one of these dimensions.

And the dimension that springs to mind is their preferred communication style. And one of the dimensions in the Smart Collaboration Accelerator is whether somebody has a preference for close communications or distant ones. And so think about Thomas. He seems like a classic distant communicator. He doesn't engage in very frequent communications with his team unless they are very task focused. And he has a very strong belief that personal matters, matters should be personal and that task matters have their own channel and never the two shall meet or mix. And then you see Antonia and she's almost a classic profile of somebody who's has a close communication style. She's she has warm communications with other people. She uses these emojis. She probably uses some jokes or makes reference to her personal life in even work related conversations. And neither one of these are inherently good or bad. But I think it would have helped both Thomas and Antonia if they would have had the option to use this Smart Collaboration Accelerator tool and recognize that they have these differences on this dimension. And to appreciate that somebody who brings a different style into a collaboration can actually be a strength. It would have been helpful for Thomas to appreciate that Antonia's close way of communicating bring some warmth and

interactivity and reciprocity to a relationship. And perhaps she could have appreciated that his style can be perceived as more efficient, and it keeps the team on task. And I think if they had had an opportunity to understand their own behaviors in the context of their team, they could have avoided some of this friction and become much more productive as a team.

Agnes Kunkel

This Collaboration Accelerator sounds great. Is it accessible on your company's website or is it just for limited people?

Heidi Gardner

So the Smart Collaboration Accelerator is a tool that is delivered through people who are highly trained in the methodology. And so, yes, we are working with coaches and facilitators and trainers literally around the world to get them accredited in this tool, because we think that even though part of this is quite self-serve, that the people who engage with this tool will probably have some questions. And we want to make sure that they have access to somebody who's able to answer those questions with all of the research behind it and not just really kind of making it up as they go along. But anyone for sure, anyone who's interested in this can get in touch with us and we're able to relay them to coaches in their area who can help them through working on this process because we've used it. Gardner and Co has used it with some of our clients and we really have seen some absolute light bulb moments when leaders say, oh, my goodness, all along I thought I was being very empowering by being a hands off manager. And now I see that I'm actually two hands off and my team needs more direction. That's an important insight for a leader to recognize.

Agnes Kunkel

Right, great. So that would be fine if you could give us some information where in Germany someone is working with these tools.

Heidi Gardner

I will Be happy to.

Agnes Kunkel

You mentioned. But you're now doing your work remotely, so studies from the last century have shown that even a few stairs, a few steps from one floor to another, greatly reduced collaboration between employees. What

does now these dramatic physical distance due to our collaboration skills or our collaboration method?

Well, I think what we are seeing is that there are some people who are suffering in times of remote working. And conversely, we are seeing people who are thriving. And I think the last point is a real surprise that there are some people who actually prefer to work remotely and those might be people for whom logistically it's much better for them. They no longer have a long commute to the office or perhaps they've got some responsibilities at home that makes it better for them that they can be working flexible hours as opposed to specific hours in an office. And so there are some people who are thriving. I think what we can learn from them is that it's really crucially important to help people get familiar with technology and to make sure that they have the technology available to them, whether that's the tablet that they're working on or the right kind of broadband or that they have a space that they can use this quiet enough that they're not distracted. I think there's lots of physical components to being able to work well at home. But I think there are also behavioral tips that we can give to people for working at home or working remotely, things like making sure that they are connected enough to people inside the organization to hear about new opportunities, to make sure that they remember to check in with some of their teammates, even if they don't have a live project that they're working on at the moment, to check in and update people and let them know where their interests have gone, where the new kinds of skills that they're developing. We hear a lot of people these days who are working from home are taking advantage of online learning, for example. And we think that people who are thriving in this remote work environment are those who are not only taking advantage of all of these online resources, but are working with their colleagues to figure out how to put those new skills in place because that allows them to be more productive and more engaged at work.

Agnes Kunkel

Yeah, you can be more productive. You mentioned the technical infrastructure. Do you think it should be enhanced to support collaboration between employees, teams, managers and everyone?

Heidi Gardner Certainly, I think there's a minimum threshold that is absolutely necessary for people to be supported in their work. And I take a look at my team at Gardner and Co. We started as a very small team and we were all quite privileged to have our own laptops and headsets and good broadband, et cetera. But as our team grew and we brought on more people, for example, this summer we have three university students who are working as interns for us. And, you know, they have very different setups than my privileged situation where I have my own home office and they are working in an apartment that they're sharing with roommates. They may be struggling to find times of day when they're not going to get interrupted and so forth. And I think the technical infrastructure is part of what companies or organizations can provide for their employees in terms of paying for broadband upgrades or making sure people have the physical technology. I think the other kind of maybe it's not classically called infrastructure, but it's a support structure that's necessary, is compassionate and understanding leadership. I think it's really crucial for leaders and managers, at all levels these days, to understand the challenges that their workers are facing and to give some degree of flexibility, whether that's in the specific hours that people are working or people's ability to join, you know, by video or call or some other medium. And I think that we need to be incredibly thoughtful as leaders in delivering the kind of support, both social, emotional support and technological support that will help to lower the stress and anxiety that all of us are facing right now.

Agnes Kunkel

As you just started to talk about leadership and giving emotional support, let's talk about your research. You have found that the higher hierarchical level, the more difficult is smart collaboration. When you now look at maybe career advice and leadership tasks, how important is the skill to be able to establish smart collaboration in this new working world?

Heidi Gardner Well, maybe if we take a step back, we've been using this term smart collaboration and people might be wondering what do we actually mean by this? I think it's important to realize that Smart Collaboration means something quite specific in the way that we have been researching it. When we talk about smart collaboration, we think about people who have diverse experiences or bases of knowledge or expertise coming together and working

effectively in order to tackle more complicated problems than any of them could do on their own. So when you think about, for example, some of the issues around covid-19, one of the big problems for a lot of leaders is making a decision about when and who and where people should be making the move back into an office based setting. And this is a multifaceted problem. If you have a leader who relies only on their own experience, they might make a misinformed decision about that. We need leaders who are willing to open up that decision to all different kinds of experts, including health care experts and transportation experts and organizational behavior experts and people who are subject matter experts in doing the actual work that that company is meant to deliver. They're going to have to bring in those different kinds of experts to make informed and well-positioned decisions about how quickly to people move back into an office based environment. Who are the right people to bring back first? How do you equip them in the office or outside to allow them to be productive? And it's bringing together those people with different bases of expertise to tackle this incredibly nuanced and complicated problem.

That's what we mean by smart collaboration. It's not simply being nice to each other, and it's not simply coordinating or reaching consensus. And so your question is really important. What are the skills that a leader needs in order to be able to foster smart collaboration and indeed to have the organization benefit from it and some of the skills that that leader needs start with self-reflection and understanding from a humble perspective: Where is the limit of their own expertise? Because, and this has been documented for decades, the more powerful somebody becomes, the less likely they are to realize their own limitations. They almost get caught up in the hype of how powerful they are, and they believe that they can do more and more. And what lacks is humility. And for some leader to step back and say this is a complicated problem, far more sophisticated than I should decide on my own. That's the first step for engaging in smart collaboration. And then somebody can take an objective look and say, well, who are the other experts that we should bring in? And and that humility, the willingness to admit your own limitations and your ability to take an objective view of a complicated problem and see when it would be helpful to bring in other people's perspectives and experience.

That's a critical skill. And honestly, I'm seeing that some leaders really haven't built up that skill set.

Agnes Kunkel

As you just mentioned, the special expression of smart collaboration, in your book, you talk about another special expression: Staircase to trust. What do you mean by that term? I think maybe these important powerful executives do not trust someone beyond their own person.

Heidi Gardner

Yeah, this idea of trust is so critical to the conversation. I'm really glad you brought it up. And when we think about collaboration, we think about people joining forces to tackle these complicated problems. We have to realize that there are actually two at least two different kinds of trust that are essential. The first is what we call competence trust. In other words, if I want to open my big, important project to somebody else, I have to believe in their skills and their abilities. I have to believe that they are going to deliver on time and on budget and that their skills are really top class. Otherwise, I really don't want to work with them because I'm afraid they're going to make mistakes or bring down the quality. And so competence, trust is really essential. But think about it this way. Even if I know that another person is the world's greatest expert in an area, if I think that person is a jerk, I still don't want to collaborate with them. And perhaps we've all had that situation where we know that there's somebody who has knowledge or expertise that would be useful. But because they're difficult to work with, because we don't trust them as a human being, we think that they are going to steal credit from us, fairness is so crucial. So both kinds of trust, competence trust and interpersonal trust are absolutely essential pieces to have in place before people are willing to collaborate with each other. So we say to people, if you don't have trust in somebody, not that you believe that they're a bad person or incompetent, but you don't know enough about whether they're truly trustworthy to collaborate with them. How do you establish the relationship? And this is where the staircase to trust is helpful. Think of it like this: Taking the first step, climbing up this staircase. Maybe you can say, well, I would like to reach out to Heidi and work together, but not on the like not on the biggest, riskiest, most high profile project. Let's find a step we can take together on a project or a piece of work or a decision that is lower risk. It has not enormous implications, if something goes wrong,

probably it's not a good idea for that first step to be a very time pressured situation. We want a project where we would have the ability to get to know one another a little bit and ask each other lots of questions. And one step at a time we will add in more complicated problems. We will add in slightly more high profile projects. We will add in the opportunity to work in, you know, perhaps remotely, when normally it would be more comfortable to work in person. And we will just take it one step at a time where at each stage we demonstrate to each other that we are both trustworthy, both in terms of our competence and our character. And as we over time build that trust in each other, we climb up and up and up the staircase so that over time then we have complete faith in each other that we were able to tackle complicated problems, high risk problems, and really engage in the kind of collaboration which is going to pay out at the highest levels.

Agnes Kunkel

Sounds as if everyone needs to understand and to execute what you just mentioned, to build this step by step staircase, improving deep trust to partners in collaboration projects.

Heidi Gardner

Absolutely. I think people can benefit from this idea of the trust staircase, whether it's a work related project or even perhaps think about using it in their personal life. I think that, you know, as we are getting to know people in our communities, as we are working on projects that are maybe it's our kids school or at a community service organization, it's a smart idea to establish trust with people over time and to give them a chance to understand our own capabilities. And in Ways that we can also admit where our limitations are and be vulnerable in some sense, because that's when we really demonstrate trustworthiness.

Agnes Kunkel

When we think back of Thomas from the beginning of this episode, if you would be the manager of Thomas upper-line management and you would like to give Thomas feedback, or maybe both Antonia and Thomas, you would like to give these two employees feedback, how would you do that?

Heidi Gardner Well, you know, feedback is such a loaded term. Honestly, what I would not do is to approach either one of them and say, could I offer you some feedback? Because as soon as that two syllable word feedback comes out of my mouth already, people's heart starts to race and they get a little bit nervous. And it sounds maybe even simplistic and silly, but I would start that conversation by asking if it's OK if I make an observation or to say, I've observed something in in our work together and I'm wondering if this is a good time to bring it up, because if we don't create the context where somebody is ready to listen, then all of the feedback that we try to give constructively is going to fall on deaf ears. And so I would approach the situation first by creating the right space for engaging in dialogue. And so I think that that's an important way to think about feedback. Any time that we're offering it to somebody is to make sure that it's welcomes some specific content that I might think about for these individuals. You know, if I were working with Thomas, I might ask him to start by reflecting on why he thinks Antonia behaves the way she does. What do you think she's trying to communicate or what do you think she's trying to accomplish by using all these emojis? And that way, I'm not giving him advice and I'm not giving him feedback in the sense of my observations of the effect that his behaviors have.

And those are both tempting things to do when giving feedback. But instead, I would ask him to become more reflective. And when we ask people to reflect on themselves and we ask them to take other people's perspective, we are providing an opportunity for them to understand a situation in ways that will allow them to generate their own advice to themselves, which is always going to be better received than from somebody else. And we're helping them develop a skill that is widely applicable. We're helping them to take perspective, which is part of emotional intelligence. And maybe next time, rather than him jumping to a conclusion or labeling somebody as childish or time waster or all of the other things that he may have called her in his mind, he'll stop and ask himself, why is it that she's doing what she's doing? And that alone could be useful. So I might rather than offering feedback or even offering him an observation, I might ask a few questions that help him reflect on the situation and take other people's perspective.

Agnes Kunkel

Sounds like it would be great to have you as a line manager.

Heidi Gardner

(laughs) Well, you'll have to talk to some of the people in my organization and hold me accountable for whether I actually do all of these things. But it's certainly the ideal. And I hope that I can live up to it as a leader myself,

Agnes Kunkel

I think you can.

So, when we think about our listeners, what would be the three or four main points that we should keep in our mind from your work, from smart collaboration, from trust, from working in cross-functional teams? What do we have to keep in mind?

Heidi Gardner

Well, let's start with what we were just talking about, and that is perspective taking, I think, when we can appreciate that, when other people, absolutely every single time, are approaching a problem or an opportunity or a challenge, they will be approaching it from their life experience. And perhaps one suggestion to all the listeners is to remind ourselves to stop and ask what perspective is this individual bringing? And, you know, if there's time for it and hopefully we make time for it, ask them to share their perspective, you know, to ask them: given what you've experienced, what is it that you can contribute to this conversation? And you might be surprised that somebody says, OK, well, you know, I've dealt with a similar situation or I've lived in that country and I know how people think when they're living in Japan or South Africa or ask them to think about other kinds of experiences that they've had with skills that are applicable. And so, the first thing I would recommend to people around collaboration is trying to take others perspective and appreciate where they're coming from.

The other the other suggestion I have is to remember that when it comes to collaboration, it we have to realize it takes an investment. Collaboration isn't easy and it isn't free. In other words, when we are learning to collaborate generally or learning to collaborate with a specific other person, there are some learning costs associated with it.

You know, when you and I are working together, we have to understand, you know, things like what times of day do you are you most productive? We have to understand how you like to give and receive feedback. We have to understand what jargon do you use. And when you use specific terminology, what does that actually mean? So the first time you and I work together, there's a steep learning curve, and that's an investment we have to make in order to be able to collaborate effectively.

And the warning I will give people is that much of the cost associated with learning how to collaborate effectively and efficiently happens in the early stages. But all of the benefits that we know to come from collaboration tend to flow in over time. In other words, in our research we have identified that teams that collaborate more effectively, they generate higher revenues and profits. They are a more attractive place for talent to work and their talent is more engaged and they tend to lose fewer people to competitors. You know, all of those benefits that we've demonstrated empirically through our research, they happen in the longer run, maybe the maybe the the medium term or the longer term. And so people have to remember that it takes an investment early on your you are figuring out whom to collaborate with and what are your systems and structures and processes and the language you need to use. Invest in that, make those the make the time and the energy investments so that you become good at this. And then we can guarantee because our research demonstrates it through numbers and statistics and science and math, we can demonstrate that over time people who are better collaborators end up with better outcomes personally and professionally. So make the investment.

And then if I can give one more observation, it is that in times of stress and anxiety, we need to realize that collaboration sometimes is not our natural instinct for a lot of people when they are feeling anxious, and who isn't feeling anxious right now, in the days of Covid worrying about health uncertainties and economic uncertainties and political uncertainties, all sorts of things that are happening in the world right now, all of us are feeling stressed. And so I would say; do a reality check. Next time you feel like you really want to close in on yourself, that you really want to hoard an opportunity rather than

sharing with a teammate. Next time you feel too fragile to ask somebody for feedback, next time you feel like you'd much rather just crank out the work yourself and not bring in somebody with a different point of view, take a minute and ask, is that really the best way forward or is that simply. What stress is doing to your mind right now? And we know that when you can take a moment, literally take three deep breaths and try to force yourself to be rational about the decisions you're making, it doesn't always work, but oftentimes it will help get you in a frame of mind where you can see the upside of collaboration. You'll be able to see how it is that a different perspective or point of view will help you get unstuck from a tough situation or help you see a solution where you couldn't find one before. And so I'd ask people to take those three deep breaths, try to get a little less stressed and become rational about a situation and really evaluate objectively when collaboration could bring to them some of the benefits we've been talking about.

Agnes Kunkel

So you mean it is always time to reach out with your hand to the person you want to collaborate?

Heidi Gardner

It's certainly worth making the effort. And I suppose we need to be understanding and generous when somebody doesn't reciprocate right now. Maybe instead of getting angry with them or frustrated that they're not collaborating, maybe that's a signal that they're under stress. And so rather than getting frustrated, we can exhibit some compassion and say, OK, this is not the right time for us to team up. And if there's anything you're stressed about, let me know how I could help.

Agnes Kunkel

Ok, so I understand we should be more reflective, see problems from different angles. We should think long term or at least mid-term, not short term. I think collaboration is something that is not paying out maybe for the quarterly report. It's paying out for the one or two years report. So think a little bit more long term, take a deep breath and do not get overwhelmed by stress.

Heidi Gardner Very much so!

Agnes Kunkel

As closing question, is there something you have changed in your personal way of working or living during these times of contact restrictions to which you will stick after covid-19?

Heidi Gardner Absolutely, I've made a number of changes in in terms of my own work habits and one of the changes I made, which has felt really fruitful for me, is being able to take a little bit more control over how I'm engaging with people in terms of the beliefs about, you know, when the in-person meetings are really absolutely necessary and how we can leverage technology to sustain relationships. I think it may be hard to build relationships through technological media, but, you know, you and I seem to be doing a fine job right now. And one of the work practices that I engaged in much more in times of Covid really is using technology in order to develop and sustain relationships. And I'm excited by a lot of the possibilities that we see. I'm in touch these days far more frequently with colleagues of mine around the world. And I may have hesitated to reach out to them with just a small question or a research opportunity or even just a personal interaction. And now we're seeing how useful the technology can be to keep warm relationships warm and even to generate them. And it's something that I will continue doing as we move forward. It's given me a tremendous break, not being on an airplane all of the time to exercise a little bit more and to have some of those personal conversations where I reach out and either ask for some support or offer some support to people. And I'm convinced that those are the kinds of practices that I will carry on well into the future.

Agnes Kunkel

Wonderful! So I see that covid-19, I guess it makes our world much smaller so it doesn't make any big difference if you are maybe 100 km away or a few thousand kilometers away.

It was so touching to speak with you, you spoke about this light bulb moments and I had it. And I hope our listeners will have them, too. This was so very insightful, that I will think about what you said about staircase to trust and

opening more perspectives from different angles. I think that I have a lot to think about and I think our listeners too. It was really great to have you with us.

Heidi Gardner Truly my pleasure. Thank you so much.