

6 KEY TAKEAWAYS

Dynamic Thinking for an Interpersonal Edge | From Tension to Teamwork: Real Strategies for Legal Collaboration

On May 22, 2025, [Brodie Erwin](#) (Raleigh litigator) and [Colleen Bear](#) (Senior Manager Talent Management and Coach) co-hosted **Kilpatrick’s** bi-monthly virtual roundtable discussion with in-house counsel. This month’s installment focused on improving trust and collaboration between in-house legal teams and outside counsel by better understanding interpersonal dynamics.

Below are key takeaways from the Roundtable about what it truly takes to break down silos, handle conflict constructively, and ensure that outside counsel become trusted business partners with their client’s in-house legal teams. Technical expertise is just the starting point. The most effective legal teams are the ones that build real trust, communicate clearly, and collaborate seamlessly—across departments, with outside partners, and in the face of constant change.

1

Trust isn’t optional—no trust, no team.

Real teamwork starts with vulnerability and honesty.

Try this: At the beginning of an engagement or case, ask your counterparts (or those that you are working with) what their expectations are and what they expect from you regarding communication, deliverables, and handling interpersonal conflict should it arise. Seeking out detailed information on expectations up front pays dividends in the long run.

Debate about ideas, not people.

Healthy argument fuels better solutions—leave the drama at the door.

Try this: Set ground rules for disagreement. Encourage the team to challenge the proposal, not the person. Rotate a “devil’s advocate” role to keep the conversation sharp but respectful. But everyone must understand that once a decision is made, the team must all “row” in the same direction to successfully accomplish the organization’s goals.

2

3

Get out of your silo—early and often.

The best legal teams work shoulder-to-shoulder with business and external partners in the moment, not after the fact.

Try this: Bring in business partners or outside counsel from the start. Regular cross-functional check-ins can help you spot issues early—before they turn into fire drills.

One size doesn’t fit all—flex your style.

Incorporate data, details, relationships, and vision to get true buy-in from your entire audience.

Try this: Use Herrmann’s Whole Brain Thinking approach—lead with facts for the analysts, details for the planners, big-picture outcomes for the innovators, and empathy for the people-focused.

(Herrmann International. Whole Brain® Walkaround. <https://www.thinkherrmann.com/>).

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Help others get to yes.

Be the connector, not the bottleneck—find creative paths forward.

Try this: Swap “no, because...” for “yes, if...” to offer solutions that meet legal and business goals.

Emotional intelligence is your secret weapon.

Listen, relate, and build trust—because legal advice only matters if people actually use it.

Try this: Ask, “What’s your biggest worry about this project?” and really listen. You’ll build trust and uncover better solutions.

6

Trust, clear communication, and true collaboration are essential for thriving in today’s legal environment. Legal expertise will always matter, but what really sets great lawyers apart is the ability to connect with others, listen actively, and adapt to new situations. Whether you’re leading a legal team, working closely with business colleagues, or interacting with outside counsel, these approaches can help you navigate everyday challenges and deliver better results.