HOW EXECUTIVE COACHING CAN CHANGE LEADER BEHAVIOR AND IMPROVE MEETING EFFECTIVENESS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Business meetings are the focus of extensive executive time and effort. Research has shown that poor leadership during meetings results in negative outcomes; however, few studies have explored effective leader behaviors during team meetings. From "expert leader" observations, the author hypothesized that more effective meeting leaders ask questions, summarize, and test for consensus more frequently, and they disagree, attack, and give information less frequently. Executive behaviors were observed and tallied into these categories during team meetings before and after executive coaching. Three cases illustrate how coaching was done using these measures of meeting leadership behaviors. After coaching, study participants (20 men, 1 woman) exhibited significant behavioral changes. Implications for practice include the utility of new methodological tools and the efficacy of coaching on meeting leadership effectiveness. Research seems warranted on the measures themselves and on team and organizational outcomes.

Keywords: executive coaching, meetings, team leadership

Meetings remain a neglected aspect of organizational behavior and are rarely studied empirically (Rogelberg, Leach, Warr, & Burnfield, 2006; Schwartzman, 1986), despite consistent evidence that the average executive is spending more time in meetings than ever before (Tobia & Becker, 1990). Recently, Rogelberg and colleagues (2006) found meetings to be predictive of important negative employee attitudes, including job satisfaction and intent to quit. Yet, executives can also lead meetings that are positive team experiences and produce high-quality decisions (D. L. Bradford & Cohen, 1984; Nadler, 1998). Strong anecdotal evidence suggests that an executive's ability to lead meetings

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shapes how team members perceive his or her effectiveness as a leader. Executives commit extensive resources to meet because important elements of business seem to be conducted best in meetings, including resolving conflicts, solving problems, generating innovations, making decisions, communicating strategy, and building commitment. Clearly, meeting leadership remains an essential, if unexplored, component of the executive role.

Meeting effectiveness may also offer a promising focus for coaching, particularly with senior executives confronting strategic decisions. Hambrick and Finkelstein (1987) noted that CEOs might not exert a strong, direct influence on organizational culture, but often they do exert a powerful effect on their top management teams. Further research suggests that the behavior of CEOs' teams is related to both financial performance and income growth (R. S. Peterson, 1997; R. S. Peterson, Smith, Martorana, & Owens, 2003). Thus, a company's success may be heavily, albeit indirectly, influenced by its leader's abilities to lead team meetings.

This article describes an approach developed and used to coach executives, many of them CEOs, to become more effective by changing specific behaviors when leading meetings of their management teams. The observation by Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, and Doyle (1996, p. 68) that "the majority of weaknesses in leadership effectiveness are the result of required skills that have never been learned" underlies the approach of this work. However, because the tools and procedures were designed for purposes of applied behavioral change (i.e., coaching), the study was exploratory in nature. Therefore, it was intended to inspire future, more rigorous, research and to suggest fruitful directions for applied development by skilled coaches rather than to provide definitive tests of the proposed hypotheses.

The executive coaching approach described here was used with only a fraction of the executives I coached over a 10-year period during which the tools were constructed and the sample was collected. However, in cases in which meeting leadership was the focus of coaching, it was clear that meetings were a significant problem for these executives. Typically, early in the coaching process, the executives themselves voiced dissatisfaction with their team meetings and frustration with their ability to achieve satisfying results. Team members also expressed negative feelings about the executives' meetings, and many were outspoken in their criticisms. Like Tolstoy's observation about bad marriages, it became apparent after observing many bad meetings that they could be deficient in many different ways. Although meeting dynamics were often dramatically different, outcomes were similar. Usually, there was broad agreement that the meetings were unproductive. Attendees often characterized them as a waste of time. In addition, the meetings nearly always lessened, rather than enhanced, the teams' satisfaction with their respective leaders. Lastly, the teams generally felt less committed to the organization as a whole as a result of their meeting experiences. All three (productivity, satisfaction, and commitment) are classic organization outcome measures.

On the other hand, good meetings led by very highly skilled individuals (i.e., the expert leaders discussed below, in contrast to average leaders) tended to follow a relatively consistent, common pattern. This study aimed to describe such commonalities and to provide information on how executive coaching can help executives improve meeting leadership. Three general questions were addressed: (a) Can more effective meeting behaviors be identified? (b) Can the identified behaviors be changed though executive coaching? (c) Will such behavioral changes lead to positive outcomes from the meetings for the participants and for their organizations?

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Researchers have noted that a lack of attention to process and weak skills in process behaviors can pose major problems for effective meeting leadership (Basadur, 2004; Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojzisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007). Observations suggested that when leaders were unaware that there was more to their meetings than the content dimension, their meetings were generally less successful and failed to engage team members, resulting in lower levels of satisfaction and innovation and higher levels of interpersonal conflict. In contrast, leaders who attended to the both the process as well as the content generally held more successful team meetings. Therefore, an initial goal of coaching was to place greater emphasis on the process of leading a meeting, rather than on the content of the meeting itself. Thus, I hypothesized the following:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Executive coaching will significantly increase the percentage of process behaviors and significantly decrease the percentage of content behaviors observed among meeting leaders.

Process behaviors include proposing, reducing tension, asking clarifying questions, summarizing, and testing for consensus. Content behaviors are giving information, seeking information, supporting, and disagreeing/attacking. For definitions and examples of each behavior, see the section *Meeting Leadership Measurement System (MLMS)* below.

Korsgaard, Schweiger, and Sapienza (1995) found that CEOs who increased the participation of their team members in strategic decision making achieved better quality decisions. Team members perceived them as more trustworthy and felt more satisfied and committed to implementation. I observed that leaders who gave their own opinions too frequently or too aggressively or who disagreed directly or attacked others' opinions held less successful meetings. High levels of these behaviors—giving information and disagreeing/attacking—tended to reduce team member engagement, decrease satisfaction, and lower decision quality. Therefore, a coaching objective was to reduce the percentage of leader behavior in these two categories; I explored the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2:* Executive coaching will significantly decrease the percentages of giving information and disagreeing/attacking behaviors observed among meeting leaders.

Professional colleagues and I frequently have observed several process behaviors in effective meetings and rarely in ineffective ones, including when leaders reduced tensions, followed up with questions to deepened participation, gave summaries that kept the team together, and asked questions to determine whether the team agreed on a consensus. The category called *reducing tension*, for example, seemed to be to make high levels of task conflicts far more acceptable. Tension in meetings seemed quickly reduced when the leader used humor, especially self-depreciating jokes at his or her own expense. Many study participants proved to have an excellent sense of humor and a quick wit. With coaching, they readily recognized that poking fun at themselves was a valuable way to "lighten up" the tone of meetings. In addition to philosophical, nonsarcastic comedy, suggestions that synthesized conflicting views under a broader umbrella concept were also effective tension-reducing devices.

Since the time of Plato's Socratic dialogue, one tool of successful leaders has been asking questions (Clemens & Mayer, 1987). The goal of coaching was often to decrease the leaders' dominance over their team members, while enhancing team member engage-

ment. One technique for achieving this objective was for leaders to ask more follow-up questions, thereby encouraging team members to elaborate on their ideas. This category was called *clarifying questions*. Increasing the number of clarifying questions asked by the leaders would seem to offer specific advantages found in the participative leadership literature (e.g., Vroom & Yetton, 1973), such as a deeper understanding of problems and potential solutions, resulting in higher quality decisions. Guiding leaders to prepare a series of potential follow-up questions to agenda items and then counting how many questions they actually asked should be effective in raising the number of clarifying questions.

Summarizing is not a behavior commonly found in the literature. Yet, expert leaders were observed to use summaries to keep meeting discussions focused, to prevent key points from getting lost, and to ensure that members understood the issues. Because they were drawing more information from team members, this behavior seemed to be a technique to align and manage the information while creating a feeling of team cohesion. Thus, coaching aimed to increase summarizing behaviors.

Testing for consensus has long been recognized as a useful leadership behavior. For example, Bass (1965) noted several ways leaders could use consensus testing, including preventing self-authorized agendas, blocking members from monopolizing and dominating the discussion, and bringing nonresponsive team members into the discussion by asking their views. In addition, observations of expert leaders suggested that they listened respectfully to team members' opinions and asked for the team's agreement in order to show a willingness to share power. However, no leaders in this study expressed a willingness to accept a group-based decision if they disagreed and felt the outcome was important (i.e., no majority rule). Nonetheless, observations of team members' reactions suggested that they were more satisfied when testing for consensus was a standard part of their meeting leader's behavioral repertoire. Thus, coaching aimed to increase consensus testing by explaining how this tool might be used to increase, rather than reduce, the leader's control and to improve team members' commitment to and satisfaction with meeting decisions.

Given these goals, I hypothesized the following:

> *Hypothesis 3:* Executive coaching will significantly increase the percentages of reducing tension behaviors, asking clarifying questions, summarizing, and testing for consensus behaviors observed among meeting leaders.

As experienced managers, the leaders in the study all demonstrated skill in the basics of how to run a meeting. For the most part, they routinely prepared agendas, adhered to time constraints, and kept discussions orderly and on topic, employing all the traditional practices in directing the activities of their teams. Because study participants were already skilled in the proposing behavior category, and because no difference in this category was noted between expert and average leaders, no attempt was made to modify this behavior via coaching. Thus, I hypothesized the following:

> *Hypothesis 4:* Executive coaching will not change the percentage of proposing behaviors observed among meeting leaders.

Finally, the MLMS categories of supporting and seeking information yielded mixed results in early work; therefore, they were rarely targeted for change through executive coaching. Thus, no hypotheses were made about these two behaviors.

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Client perceptions of personal growth and satisfaction must be a fundamental goal of executive coaching. Therefore, the participants should perceive an increase in their understanding of effective meeting leadership as a specific result of their coaching experience. The executives should also perceive an increase in their meeting leadership skills after coaching. Finally, they should see improvements in their meeting outcomes as a result of coaching. I explored these issues with the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 5:* Executive coaching will be viewed positively by study participants as having led to increased understanding of meeting leadership, improved skills in meeting leadership, and more positive meeting outcomes.

Method

Participants

Participants were 21 business executives (20 men and 1 woman, all American citizens, although 2 were foreign-born and educated) who self-presented as clients for executive coaching. Ages at the time of the coaching ranged from 36 to 59 years, with a mean age of 46 years ($SD = 6.5$). Positions held by the participants included founder and owner, president and CEO, group vice president, chief operating officer, general manager, chief information officer, vice president of engineering, and department director. Ten participants had master's degrees in business administration, six had bachelor's degrees, two had other master's degrees, one had a law degree, one had a medical degree, and one had no degree. Two participants were also certified public accountants. Estimated annual salaries ($n = 18$) ranged from \$100,000 to \$30,000,000, with a median annual salary of \$272,500. Bonuses were not included in these estimates. Salaries were positively correlated with age ($r = .48$, $p < .05$).

In general, the study sample comprised well-educated, professional executives who managed companies or major business units within their companies. Most had more than 20 years of work experience, having worked their way up the corporate ladder. They held corporate leadership positions and were judged to be worthy of investments such as individual executive coaching.

Anecdotally, 12 of the 21 executives were characterized by their bosses as being brilliant, aggressive and intimidating. Other common descriptors were blunt, insensitive, arrogant, and strongly opinionated. Ten of the participants had previously received feedback and remediation because of problems communicating with direct reports and peers. Some had received low ratings on 360-degree feedback, unfavorable employee survey scores and comments or complaints to human resource professionals from direct reports and team members about their interpersonal styles. Despite such characteristics, all participants were rated as high-potential executives within their companies.

Measures

Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale—Third Edition (WAIS–III; Psychological Corporation, 1997; Wechsler, 1997)

I administered the verbal subtests of the WAIS–III (i.e., Vocabulary, Similarities, Comprehension, and Information) to the participants to obtain estimates of their mental abilities. Axelrod and Ryan (2000) demonstrated that prorated Verbal scores did not differ

significantly from Full-Scale IQ scores. The 21 participants' Verbal IQ scores ranged from 126 to 145, with a mean of 135 ($SD = 6.8$). Undeniably, a common characteristic of these top executives was their high intelligence. For some participants, this distinction was at the core of their leadership difficulties because they had reputations for not respecting the opinions of others, including their team members.

Meeting Leadership Measurement System (MLMS)

To measure and understand leaders' behaviors in business meetings, it was necessary to develop a behavioral coding system since no existing framework captured the full array of these behaviors. However, Bales's (1950) Interactive Process Analysis offered a practical starting point for several reasons. This technique allows an observer to tally meeting behaviors, assigning them systematically one act at a time to a category. The measure within each category is its percentage of the leader's total responses during the meeting. For example, the category called *seeking information* is simply the total number of questions the leader asked, divided by that leader's total responses during the meeting. The decision to adopt a similar system was guided by several practical reasons. First, although most executive team meetings lasted about 2 hr, they could and did, in fact, vary considerably in length, so that absolute counts were not comparable. Also, the percentages seemed to reflect a particular leader's emphasis and personal style, and the behaviors seemed to be relatively consistent from meeting to meeting.

Metacategories are general classes of leader behaviors differentiated by their primary objective. Historically, two metacategories have emerged in the leadership literature: task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors (Bales, 1950; L. P. Bradford, 1976; Fleishman, 1995; Schein, 1969). Because the business meetings observed in this study almost always centered on some kind of task content, several of Bales's *task answers* and *task questions* categories were included in a content-oriented metacategory within the MLMS.

From observations, the content dimension seemed to comprise information-related behaviors about the subject at hand. It included the following categories: giving information, seeking information, supporting, and disagreeing/attacking. Giving information was made up of statements that provided facts or opinions, such as, "Our costs are down 20%," and "My former company tried that, and we liked it." Seeking information included statements that asked for facts or opinions, such as, "What about your new project?" or "Does anyone know how many products we have in that market?" Supporting was a positive emotional response or evaluation, such as, "That's a good idea," or "I agree with you." Finally, disagreeing/attacking was a negative emotional response or evaluation, or when more pointed and aggressive, an attack, such as, "Wrong!" "That's just stupid!" and sarcastic humor, "You're *such* a genius."

Describing the need for an effective balance between two factors in meeting leadership, Yukl (2009) wrote, "An effective leader insures that the group uses a systematic decision process ('process control'), but does not dominate the discussion ('content control')" (p. 355). This notion of balance informed the development of the two dimensions of the MLMS and the creation of a process dimension. The following MLMS process categories included behaviors that "expert leaders" regularly employed to guide their teams through productive meetings: proposing, reducing tension, asking clarifying questions, summarizing, and testing for consensus.

A useful dimension from Ohio State University leadership research (Fleishman, 1995) was *initiating structure* whereby the leader defines and structures roles and directs the

activities of group members toward the team's goals. This dimension has an extensive literature (e.g., Bass, 1990; House & Aditya, 1997; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). The MLMS proposing category is similar to two initiating structure items from the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (Stogdill, 1963): "Decides what shall be done and how it will be done" and "Schedules the work to be done." Proposing became any behavior that suggested, decided, or structured how the meeting should be conducted. For example, the meeting leader might propose, "First, let's review the audit, and then look at the next agenda item, our marketing issues."

Additional categories were needed to measure emotionally oriented process behaviors, such as the second Ohio State University consideration dimension and Bales's reduction of tension category. Both philosophical humor to create a more positive tone and statements that brought together differing points of view for smoother team functioning were included in the MSML reducing tension category. Examples included, "We will get all the facts—even if we have to make them up ourselves," and "But if we can combine the two, that problem goes away." Humor that was sarcastic and hostile was excluded and typically scored as disagreeing/attacking.

Three other common process categories (see Yukl, 2009, p. 357) were added: asking clarifying questions, summarizing, and testing for consensus. Clarifying questions were inquiries that added further information or refined a topic already under discussion. Examples included, "Which is the most important?" or "Tell us more about that, especially how it started." Asking clarifying questions became a particularly important category. I observed that leaders who asked follow-up questions encouraging team members to elaborate on their ideas seemed to improve the level of engagement and participation. Team members reported feeling that their views were heard and they felt respected.

Summaries restated or enumerated content already presented. For example, one might summarize, "There seem to be three very different views here: the field perspective, the R & D issues, and the experiences of the product managers." I observed that expert leaders used summarizing as a mechanism to ensure understanding and keep the team together and collectively focused.

Questions aimed to determine the level of agreement among the group were testing for consensus, such as "Can we move ahead to the next item now?" and "Are we ready to adopt those two points?" Testing for consensus was included as a category because these behaviors have been shown to be valuable in increasing commitment and in changing perceptions of leadership style (Schein, 1969).

To estimate the reliability of the MLMS, a professional colleague and I observed and scored the same meeting, obtaining a level of consistency suggesting that the MLMS categories were sufficiently differentiable that we both felt confident we could reliably code responses during live observations. Further dialogue on scoring rules and practice ensued, and interrater reliability was reevaluated informally after live behavioral observations. We scored four low-level meetings, each approximately 2 hr in length, containing 300 to 400 coded behaviors. Because the coding differences seemed minimal, these data were not retained. Unfortunately, as is typical in field settings, clients rarely allowed multiple observers at their executive team meetings because of concerns about company confidentiality regarding their strategic deliberations, thus limiting further reliability checks. Recently, a colleague computed an interrater reliability of .97 for the data from the first observation. Using Cohen's (1960) kappa, the reliability of those ratings ranged from 0.66 to 1.00 across the nine categories. The mean kappa for the four content

categories was 0.88. For the five process categories, the mean kappa was 0.89, which we felt was an acceptable standard.

In an effort to assess the validity of the MLMS, I interviewed team members privately after the meeting about their sense of the meeting. Questions included, "How did you feel about the information (the leader) gave you? About right? Not enough?" This response was compared with the giving information category. Responses to the questions, "Did you like the meeting?" "How much did you feel really involved in it?" and "Did you think the meeting was productive?" were compared with the asking clarifying questions, testing for consensus, and disagreeing/attacking categories. Finally, responses to the questions, "Did the meeting seem to stay on track? Or, did the meeting seem to lack direction?" were compared with the proposing and summarizing categories. Team member perceptions seemed consistent with the meeting profiles. For example, when the proposing and summarizing behaviors were low, meetings were described as "drifting, losing focus, or wasting time." Such meetings were generally accompanied by feelings of frustration.

In another effort to assess the validity of the MLMS, I interviewed the meeting leaders, who almost always accepted the profile-based feedback as valid reflections of their behavior. For example, when shown his high asking clarifying questions percentage, a highly skilled leader replied, "Yeah, not surprising. I like to ask a lot of questions before I commit myself. Otherwise, some people will just line up with me without really risking their own ideas." Similarly, leaders could easily recall the immediate reduction in tension that resulted from a joke they made about themselves.

Developing an Average Meeting Leader Profile

Over a 2-year period, a sample of 36 managers was gathered. Limited efforts were made to build a representative sample. I simply asked to sit in and observe typical decision-making meetings at various client companies. After the meetings, leaders and team members were asked, "Was this a typical meeting?" If all respondents agreed, the meeting was included in the sample. In retrospect, some groups were notably contentious, with high levels of disagreeing/attacking, but others were routine and lackluster. At the time, I had only a general notion of what "normal" was. Eventually, a composite profile of an average leader from 36 different leaders was formed. Table 1 contains the percentages of meeting behaviors coded in each category on the MLMS for such leaders.

Table 1

Average and Expert Leader Profiles on the Meeting Leadership Measurement System (MLMS)

Meeting behavior	Average ($n = 36$)	Expert ($n = 3$)
Content	80%	50%
Giving information	50%	18%
Seeking information	10%	15%
Supporting	10%	15%
Disagreeing/attacking	10%	2%
Process	20%	50%
Proposing	7%	10%
Reducing tension	0%	5%
Asking clarifying questions	3%	15%
Summarizing	5%	10%
Testing for consensus	5%	10%

Despite the lack of a large, standardized sample, the average leader profile was useful as a starting point for coaching executives. The profile served well, in part because client executives usually scored better than average in one or more categories. Reinforcing these positives facilitated rapport and fostered openness for setting improvement goals toward the expert leader profile (see Table 1).

Developing an Expert Meeting Leader Profile

Over a 10-year period of active consulting, I sought to identify "expert leaders." The goal was to find exemplary leaders whose meeting leadership behaviors could represent a standard worthy of study in order to gain valuable insights and, perhaps, serve as a model for imitation by other executives. Although a larger sample of expert leaders would enhance reliability and credibility, unfortunately but not surprisingly, the phenomenon of excellent meeting leadership seemed rare. From more than 100 possible candidates, only three leaders were identified whose meetings were widely perceived to be expertly led. All were senior executives (mean age = 55 years) responsible for multiple profit centers. Each enjoyed a reputation within their organization for "running great meetings."

Colleagues and I noted that, in our experience, leaders whose meetings were exceptionally effective did in fact seem to lead in ways that were markedly different from average leaders. For example, they skillfully "moved the meeting along" so that their teams eventually reached, as one team member remarked, "new ground on a higher level." In contrast, average meeting leaders often focused on getting "the right answer," which often meant simply getting their team to support the leader's preconceived solution. A second observation was that expert leaders gave far less information during their meetings, yet their teams developed better solutions. If expert leaders did not provide substantive expertise to their teams, what did they do to achieve positive results? Over time, it became clear that expert leaders asked more questions, especially questions intended to deepen and broaden team discussions. When more follow-up questions were asked by an expert leader, team engagement seemed to increase. Over time, a rule of thumb developed that the more balanced the team's participation, the more likely a robust, innovative solution would result. From their studies of management decision-making and problems-solving teams, Kepner and Tregoe (1981, p. 59) wrote, "Managers need not have all the right answers. What is required is the willingness to ask the right questions." They also noted that, "Regardless of the content of the problem, the search for specific and accurate answers demands specific and precise questions."

Expert leaders conducted lively meetings, filled with spirited debate in which a wide diversity of opinions was assertively voiced and defended. One team member proudly dubbed his leader's meetings "the varsity scrimmages." Tension peaked at times, but it was regularly relieved with philosophical or self-deprecating humor. Team norms strongly supported mutual respect, integrity, civility, and task conflict, but not interpersonal conflict. These norms paralleled those described by Simons and Peterson (2000) in their study of successful top management teams. Team members were enthusiastic about these meetings, which seemed to have a spirit of rough fun, and they prepared diligently for them. Outcomes such as decision quality were frequently impressive even to an outside observer.

Because the expert and average samples differed qualitatively and the quantitative differences were used heuristically, no statistical tests of significance were performed. On

key categories, the two samples did not overlap. For example, all average leader scores on giving information exceeded 40%, whereas no expert exceeded 28%.

Executive Coaching Survey

After coaching had ended, a participant spontaneously wrote, "The feedback helped me tremendously with conducting meetings. Decision-making quality is vastly improved by harnessing the collective intelligence of the team." As a result, I decided to contact the participants to record their feedback on an executive coaching survey. A three-item Likert scale with five response options (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) was constructed to measure the participants' perceptions of postcoaching changes in their understanding of effective meeting leadership, in their meeting leadership skills, and in the quality of their meeting outcomes.

Procedure

I was retained as a paid executive coach engaged directly by the participants or by their firms. All participants either requested coaching or agreed to it when given the opportunity. As the executive coach, I measured participants' meeting leadership behaviors at the onset of the engagement and again following the coaching using the MLMS. All of the meetings involved problem solving, decision making, and action planning on complex business issues by team members with different functional and operational responsibilities under the direction of a single formal leader. Team meetings were never leaderless; all were led by the participant executives. The number of team members present at the observed meetings ranged from 5 to 22 ($M = 8.6$, $SD = 3.8$).

The postcoaching MLMS records represented the final meeting of a series, usually from four to six observed meetings, in the coaching engagement. These measures were used to explore the hypotheses that specific, valued changes could be made through executive coaching that would in turn improve the executives' understanding, skills, and meeting outcomes. After the coaching was concluded, I recontacted the participants by e-mail or telephone and administered the executive coaching survey. These responses were used to explore the hypotheses that the executives in the sample would report that, from their experience with the executive coaching approach described, they gained a better understanding of effective meeting leadership, refined their leadership skills, and significantly improved their meeting outcomes. The length of time that passed between the final meeting and the administration of the executive coaching survey ranged from 5 to 57 months ($M = 32.9$ months, $SD = 17.1$).

Executive Coaching Process

Executive coaching has been defined as a process of "equipping executives with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective" (D. B. Peterson & Hicks, 1996, p. 14). As Tobias (1996) noted, coaching is tailored to the individual and is conducted on a one-on-one basis over a period of time.

The coaching process began with establishing a coaching relationship and identifying performance improvement goals. In some cases, meetings were mentioned directly, but meetings were not always viewed as the highest priority problem. However, when poor interpersonal skills or teamwork were reported as primary concerns, as coach, I offered to observe meetings in order to provide feedback on team dynamics and leadership skills. These initial observations using the MLMS produced the precoaching records. In complex cases, two meetings were observed before feedback was given.

Following these meetings, I began the next session by reviewing the executive's perceptions of the meeting. The dialogue typically began with, "Was this meeting necessary?" and "Was its purpose clear?" I would then ask, "How well prepared were the participants?" and then, "How satisfied were you with the way things went?" The intent was to cover basic good business practice issues, such as those recommended by Streibel (2003). Nearly all of the participating executives easily accepted the framework that meetings should have a clear purpose adequately defined by the leader, that an agenda should be sent in advance so that team members could prepare adequately, that meetings should begin and end punctually, and that discussions should stay on topic and flow logically to well-understood decisions.

I explained each behavioral category on the MLMS and described the average and expert leader profiles, using relevant examples from the observed meetings to illustrate the categories. Next, I presented the leader's profile, comparing pluses and minuses to the average and expert leader profiles. The approach to providing meeting leadership feedback paralleled the work of Naylor, Pritchard, and Ilgen (1980), with an emphasis on positive feedback, addressing the nonlinear aspects of effectiveness and goal setting. In categories in which his or her responses were similar to the model, the executive's relative strengths were emphasized, followed by a dialogue on how to improve in his or her next meeting.

I then asked the executives to describe their observations of team dynamics during the meeting, and over time by directing more attention to this aspect of meetings, they seemed to become more perceptive. For example, if team members had been silent and unengaged, I would discuss the leader's low percentage of asking clarifying questions and set an appropriate target for improvement. The executives understood this category as being an effective way to draw their team members into the discussion and imagined questions they might ask at the next meeting. In another example, if the leader thought the previous meeting skipped from topic to topic, I would direct his or her attention to summarizing as a frequently neglected tool that expert leaders use to control discussions.

Similar coaching dialogues about the evolving leadership patterns were repeated following each meeting, observing Diedrich's tenet (1996) that coaching must be an iterative process as opposed to a problem-centered quick fix for the team. The benefits of goal setting being well established (Locke & Latham, 2002), I encouraged each leader to think about possible goals for the next team meeting. Being highly achievement-oriented and competitive by nature, these leaders were often eager to see their scores and show improvements. The power of the MLMS was that it simplified the many impressions and complexities of a meeting into an understandable and actionable set of ratios. Executives seemed to enjoy testing themselves against a standard of excellence, and once they understood the profiles and ratios, they began to think actively about behavioral changes that could help them become more skillful in how they led meetings. They began to set personal goals and make a conscious attempt at changes on the basis of the coaching feedback. A typical coaching session concluded with the executive setting a few, very specific goals.

Although the quantitative data were a fundamental part of coaching, in every case the leader's profile had to be understood qualitatively as well. Each leader brought a distinctly personal background and operated within a unique set of contextual and other variables that I had to understand to maximize the meeting profile's value for the executive and his or her specific team makeup. In every case, it was important to understand each leader's personal style. For example, a CEO with extensive experience in two prestigious con-sulting firms noted this background had shaped his meeting leadership style. He gave far

less information (19%) and sought far more information (22%) than other executives in the sample.

Case Studies

Three cases follow to illustrate how I used the MLMS in coaching executives in the study and to invite reader consideration of Lowman's (2001) insightful questions: "Who was the client? Was a correct diagnosis made? Was the coaching intervention appropriate? Was it effective?" and "Where was the 'research'?"

Case 1

Situation

James, the CFO of a large public company, was a well-respected senior executive assigned to solving serious operational issues. He had recently added three high-potential, rising-star managers to strengthen his four-person team. However, the new managers were highly opinionated and assertive. As a result, James's problem-solving meetings became conflict-ridden, frequently antagonistic and unproductive, and he sought coaching to help understand and improve team performance.

Action Plan

After interviewing James extensively about his personal and work history and his current situation, I provided feedback to James from the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire, other inventories, and historical examples that portrayed him as a tough-minded and aggressive executive. James accepted this portrait and the MLMS as an accurate database for analyzing his meeting leadership. A striking finding from two meetings was the high ratio of attacking/disagreeing to supporting comments, the opposite of the Fredrickson and Losada (2005) guideline that team performance flourishes with a ratio of three or more positives to one negative. Surprised by this finding, James had supposed that because his sarcastic humor elicited laughter, it reduced tension. However, I presented specific examples where team members responded in kind. (James: "Maybe you're just too smart for our little company." Team member: "Maybe if *I* ran finance, the company wouldn't be so little.") James then decided his first goal should be to reduce hostility by curtailing his sarcasm. A secondary goal was to increase his level of supporting. James committed to identifying positive aspects of a team member's idea and providing a supporting comment, even if he disagreed with parts of it.

A second finding from the MLMS was the lack of structure in James's meetings. All MLMS process categories were below the average profile. Yet, James insisted that he was too busy to even define an agenda. I suggested shorter meetings focusing on one or two clearly framed issues. An agenda would inform team members what to prepare and identify the outcome James expected (i.e., "Define a workable theft of service policy" rather than "Theft of service"). In 1-hr premeeting sessions with me, James anticipated ways he could structure a productive discussion, using proposing, summarizing, and testing for consensus, and prepared clarifying questions to explore and reconcile key issues.

Over the next year, James discussed his leadership with me after each monthly meeting, reviewing his MLMS scores, along with a descriptive report. James gradually eliminated the antagonism from his meetings with a positive ratio of supporting to

disagreeing/attacking. Tension reducing increased with nonhostile humor from both James and his team members. James subsequently increased his levels of proposing, summarizing, and testing for consensus behavior, and combined with a focused agenda, team productivity improved. Eighteen months later when coaching ended, James reported that among his peers, he had earned a reputation for spirited discussions that created effective solutions to his organization's operational challenges.

Case 2

Situation

Bill, a senior vice president of information technology for a billion-dollar firm, was described by both peers and direct reports as being both brilliant and demanding. His impressive technical background seemed a good fit for his challenge of modernizing a struggling department. However, when Bill's 360 feedback revealed that his managers were fearful, frustrated, and thinking of quitting, the president asked me to coach him. "He thinks he knows best and does not want or value our opinions," his direct reports said. In contrast, Bill felt the managers were passive and disinterested. When Bill's team did not dispute or comment on his ideas, he believed they had nothing better to offer or approved of his approach, and if he did not carry the task, no progress would occur. Furthermore, he denied having attacked any team member in a manner to justify a sense of intimidation, although the team's previous boss had displayed a volcanic temper.

In Bill's first two meetings, there was no overt conflict. On his MLMS, neither disagree/attacking responses nor supporting comments were recorded. Using proposing (16%), seeking information (26%), and giving information (40%), Bill followed his agenda, with team members providing set presentations. Stylistically, Bill's questions were complex and often seemed like cross-examinations.

Action Plan

After a reviewing two MLMS reports, Bill chose a single goal: to draw out and involve his team members, rather than just to advance his own ideas. He and I listed simple questions tailored to let team members tell about their area of expertise and relate their experiences with similar problems. To Bill's surprise, participation increased. Several team members cracked jokes, further reducing tension. Pleased with his results, Bill decided he could try other changes.

Bill's new goal was to add supports, especially to reinforce creative ideas and risk taking. However, in premeeting coaching for his fourth meeting, Bill revealed a fully prepared answer to the key technical problem that he judged as perfect. I suggested holding his idea as backup in case the group did not produce the quality he required. In the meeting, Bill praised the team's ideas. Under his direction, the team's suggestions built into a solid solution that Bill later admitted was even better than his own. Furthermore, the team expressed commitment to the solution they had crafted. The level of humor rose toward the end of the meeting, and the team seemed reluctant to end. Coaching continued for three more meetings over 6 months. Bill's MLMS scores continued to show more expert leadership, and participation continued to increase. The vice president of human resources reported acceptable levels of team job satisfaction on Bill's 360-degree feedback retest.

Case 3

Situation

The case of Brad represents my developmental coaching of a founder/CEO. A highly successful entrepreneur, Brad had grown his company steadily over several decades. He sought coaching when he realized he was leading as he had when his enterprise was small, and that further growth depended on his ability to delegate decisions to his vice presidents. However, following several coaching discussions, he concluded that his habits and lack of trust in his vice presidents made this change difficult.

Action Plan

After two team meetings, a pattern emerged in the MLMS data. Using high levels of proposing and seeking information, Brad used his meetings to gather information, and then he made the decisions. With my help, Brad selected the tactic of using clarifying questions to test the vice presidents' judgments and, thereby, to eventually increase his comfort with delegating decisions to them. He began asking team members for their views on strategic issues, starting with the most junior executive, and withholding any comments until all had spoken. Brad closely monitored the criteria the vice presidents used for their decisions. His primary concerns were consistency with core company values and the firm's historical lessons learned, a set of very specific operating principles. During premeeting coaching, Brad thought out inquiries that he felt would surface about these issues and that would ensure better decisions by his vice presidents.

Over the next 6 months, Brad set two additional goals: to reinforce the vice presidents' initiatives by supporting at the expert level, and to raise his testing for consensus scores to the expert level. Over 10 months, Brad frequently achieved these goals, especially when I was present. During the following year, Brad continued his new behaviors as documented by his MLMS scores. Some backsliding occurred when business pressures prompted a brief return to his directive style. One vice president who did not perform well with the new accountability was replaced. At the end of the coaching assignment, Brad's vice presidents reported that they enjoyed increased control of their jobs. Brad was pleased with his progress and substantially more confident about his team's capabilities to lead the company in the future.

Team members often quickly noted changes in the meeting behaviors of their leaders. In the cases of Brad and James, when asked whther they thought the first coached meeting was different, team members answered, "Yes, this was the best meeting we've ever had." In subsequent coaching sessions, executives increasingly discussed underlying concepts, such as increased engagement and balanced participation and better methods for managing process and task conflict. I continued to assist in exploring alternatives, highlighting and reinforcing the executive's improvements. The cases of James and Brad, at 30 and 21 months, respectively, required longer periods of coaching than the typical 6-month engagement, but as Kampa and White (2002) observed, one advantage of executive coaching is its ability to provide sufficient follow-up and support for complex new patterns to become lasting behavioral changes.

Results

This study indicates that more productive meeting leadership behaviors can be identified by means of observation and subsequently changed via an executive coaching process

involving the provision of positively framed, objective feedback. Results generally support the hypotheses regarding coached behavioral changes by meeting leaders, and survey responses suggest that such changes led to increased understanding of meeting leadership, improved skills in meeting leadership, and more positive meeting outcomes.

Changes in Meeting Leaders' Behaviors

Nonparametric procedures and a standard alpha level of .05 were used for all statistical tests. Multiple Wilcoxon signed-ranks test revealed statistically significant improvements in all but two of the 11 meeting behaviors following coaching, with large effects (r) ranging from .52 to .62 (Cohen, 1988, 1992). Results of these tests are shown in Table 2. As predicted in the first study hypothesis, meeting leaders' content behaviors decreased and their process behaviors increased from the first to second meetings. Specifically, the executives made fewer statements giving information and disagreeing/attacking (Hypothesis 2) and made more statements reducing tension, asking clarifying questions, summarizing, and testing for consensus after they received the executive coaching (Hypothesis 3). The frequencies with which the executives made information-seeking and proposing statements did not significantly differ before and after coaching (Hypothesis 4). An unexpected, but welcome, increase occurred in the percentage of supporting behaviors exhibited by the executives.

In general, changes in the meeting leaders' behaviors following coaching did not significantly correlate with their ages or verbal IQ scores (i.e., 21 of 22 ps > .05 for the Spearman correlations reported in Table 3). These findings suggest that the coaching services were similarly effective for the 21 executives who participated regardless of their age or mental abilities. However, the one significant finding suggests that executives with higher IQs were less likely to change their meeting behaviors in the direction of seeking more information from their team members ($\rho = -.45, p = .04$). Nonetheless, insufficient statistical power and restriction of range cannot be ruled out as explanations for the other nonsignificant findings.

Table 2

Percentages of Observed Behaviors of Meeting Leaders (N = 21) Before and After Receiving Executive Coaching

Meeting behavior	Precoaching		Postcoaching		Z	r
	M	SD	M	SD		
Content	75.2	8.6	52.0	7.6	−4.02	.62***
Giving information	47.9	11.4	24.9	6.9	−3.92	.60***
Seeking information	11.5	6.1	12.6	4.4	−1.29	.20
Supporting	9.3	5.0	13.1	3.7	−2.75	.42*
Disagreeing/attacking	6.5	6.0	1.4	1.3	−3.38	.52**
Process	24.8	8.6	48.0	7.6	−4.02	.62***
Proposing	10.6	5.2	12.1	3.9	−0.88	.14
Reducing tension	2.6	2.7	6.4	2.3	−3.46	.53**
Asking clarifying questions	6.7	3.5	13.5	4.0	−4.02	.62***
Summarizing	3.4	2.4	8.1	3.5	−4.02	.62***
Testing for consensus	1.5	1.3	7.9	2.8	−3.71	.57**

* $p < .01$.   ** $p < .001$.   *** $p < .0001$.

Table 3

Spearman Correlations (ρ) for Changes in Meeting Leaders' Observed Behaviors Before and After Receiving Executive Coaching (df = 20)

Meeting behavior	Age	Verbal IQ
Content	.02	.19
Giving information	.13	.03
Seeking information	−.02	−.45*
Supporting	−.04	.16
Disagreeing/attacking	.02	.30
Process	−.02	−.19
Proposing	.27	−.16
Reducing tension	−.21	−.14
Asking clarifying questions	−.03	.29
Summarizing	−.10	.05
Testing for consensus	−.02	−.02

* $p < .05$.

Executive Coaching Survey

One participant could not be located, but 20 of the other original participants contacted by e-mail or telephone agreed to provide candid evaluations of their executive coaching experience. On the basis of their self-reports, each of these executives achieved an enhanced understanding of meeting leadership ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.7$), increased meeting leadership skills ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 0.5$), and improved meeting outcomes ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.7$). No responses lower than 3 were given for any of the survey questions. The executive coaching services seemed to be viewed quite positively by the client participants (Hypothesis 5).

Because a majority of the executives had earned master's degrees in business administration or had taken training courses or seminars, a high percentage acknowledged a basic familiarity with group dynamics and leadership concepts prior to coaching. However, the MLMS categories were new to them. Feedback combining their MLMS data with specific examples of what they had said seemed to make the categories clear and understandable. The executives viewed the techniques as a skill. One study participant summed up the views of most when he said, "It's like riding a bicycle: once you know how it's easy, and you don't forget." Most study participants seemed to enjoy discussing the impact of various behaviors on their team, feeling an increased sense of self-efficacy. From informal team feedback, it seemed that some minimal level of the behavioral changes persisted in all cases. For example, one participant wrote to me months after his coaching ended, "My meetings are quite productive now—not only in my opinion, others have mentioned it as well."

Discussion

The present study advances the executive coaching literature by demonstrating the perceived efficacy of this increasingly popular form of development. The study similarly advances the scant literature about the business meeting, an often neglected and much maligned, but ubiquitous and very important business pastime. I undertook the develop-

ment of a categorization system that is capable of capturing the complex behaviors of leaders in action in field settings. Use of this system shows promise as a coaching technique to improve the performance of many business leaders who regularly lead meetings. Given the importance of meetings in contemporary business, this approach has abundant practical significance.

Limitations

Although the tools created for this study were designed to gain insights into leadership behaviors, team dynamics, and other organizational issues for coaching executives, they began as proprietary consulting methods, and thus were not intended to be used in research. The tools developed and the meeting leadership measures themselves were generated ad hoc to meet a set of specific clients' needs for effective executive coaching.

The first limitation of this study is the sample. The group of executives who received meeting leadership coaching were all high-potential senior executives in corporations, almost entirely male, White, well educated, very bright, and successful. Thus, any conclusions and applications from this study should be limited to executives who are similar to those in the sample. Reasonable caution should be exercised with different populations such as first-line supervisors, female executives, and leaders in not-for-profit organizations, and the approach should be used first descriptively to build a foundational database for coaching with those populations. Although the MLMS has been used to assess the leadership skills of both non-White and female clients, the numbers have been few, and the patterns obtained from these executives have not been notably different to date. However, none were identified as clients whose meetings were disasters. Perhaps these individuals had learned to be relatively effective in meeting leadership as a necessity for advancement. Further research is needed to test the generalizability of the MLMS to populations unlike those in the present sample, but the evidence to date suggests that the system provides an objective, valuable, and promising tool for coaching.

A second and perhaps more serious limitation of the study is the issue of rater bias. In their review of common methodological biases, Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003) cautioned that common rater effects are a serious problem. In the study at hand, I developed the behavioral coding system, conducted the coaching, and performed the pre- and postcoaching behavioral ratings. In addition, the executives' perceptions of successful postcoaching changes were subjective, rather than being measured objectively. My implicit theory may have shaped the findings. Smither, Collins, and Buda (1989) reported that implicit theories held by raters affect attention to and encoding of ratees' behaviors as well as later recall. Moreover, Guzzo, Wagner, Maguire, Herr, and Hawley (1986) specifically noted biased ratings of leader behavior and attributions of group performance. Thus, these possibilities cannot be entirely discounted in the current study, although they are lessened to a degree by the initial reliability and validity checks on the MLMS described above.

Implications for Future Research

The study of coaching is time consuming and does not generally yield billable hours. However, although academic psychologists dominate the research literature, the preponderance of coaching experience lies with work-a-day practitioners. There are at least five areas in which executive coaches trained in the behavioral sciences could contribute important insights. They could study cross-cultural comparisons, personality links to meeting behaviors and profiles, organizational outcome links to meeting leadership,

improved meeting measurement tools, and meeting leadership effectiveness and organizational performance outcomes. First, with the increasing globalization of executive teams, the responses of team members with varying cultural backgrounds could yield valuable insights. Although two of the executives were foreign-born Americans, larger sample investigations of cross-cultural differences would extend the theory and practice of meeting leadership. Further investigation may well find cultural differences in average meeting leadership norms, in the expectations of what is considered expert and in the specific behaviors that produce the best results.

Next, this study's findings and the average and expert leader profiles suggest that important differences in styles are linked to different team meeting problems and different patterns of leader behaviors. It seems likely that further research will identify differences in personality that relate to leaders' behavioral patterns. Case studies of prototypical executives provided by coaches may help point the way. With larger samples, researchers may very well find a different set of personality traits and behavioral profiles. For example, there may be several clearly different types: one for the dominating, charismatic, company founders and CEOs, a second for those executives whose meetings are routine and boring, and yet another for those executives whose meetings are characterized by high conflict.

At a more granular level, research examining the links between executive traits and meeting behaviors may well yield interesting findings. Personality traits, especially the Big Five (e.g., McCrae & John, 1992), have been shown to be related to leadership effectiveness (e.g., Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). It seems likely that traits will be related to profiles of meeting leadership behaviors. One problem encountered by previous research has been that different outcome criteria have been used (e.g., emergence, advancement, and various measures of performance and behavior). Another problem is that varying types of leadership situations have been combined. Meeting leadership offers a readily available, team-level point of focus in which using the MLMS may achieve more precise measures.

The third area in which executive coaches trained in the behavioral sciences could be of use is in studying how outcome criteria are related to meeting leadership behaviors, and this should be a priority for future research. For example, team member satisfaction may be related to high levels of supporting and testing for consensus and low levels of disagreeing/attacking, while decision quality may be more strongly linked to productive conflict and the behaviors that foster it, such as reducing tension, summarizing, and asking clarifying questions. Examining the ratio of questions asked to statements made by the leader may also yield interesting results.

A final suggestion for investigation is to investigate the MLMS itself. Taxonomies of leadership behavior used to measure effectiveness differ widely (Yukl, 2009). Even in the limited domain of meetings, the MLMS structure and categories may not be sufficient for all leaders or all situations, and the categorization rules may require additional refinement. For example, in this study "delegation" was included as part of proposing. Perhaps a separate "delegation" category would be useful. In addition, investigations of norm-setting behaviors that build trust or permit productive task conflicts (Simons & Peterson, 2000) may require additional new categories.

Implications for Consulting Practice

Other psychologists involved in coaching executives may develop better tools to use in behavioral monitoring of meeting behaviors. However, from these results, it seems clear

that the distinction between the content and process dimensions is an important one to consider when coaching an executive with poor meeting leadership skills. Examining the leader's ratio of questions asked to statements made might be another useful suggestion. A coach can in most cases safely encourage executives to ask questions that deepen team member participation, knowing it will increase satisfaction and improve decision quality.

In executive coaching engagements, these topics and measures thereof will allow other consulting psychologists to open a coaching dialogue about a commonly troublesome but neglected business practice with the support of immediate and potentially valuable data. Furthermore, other practitioners can use the MLMS approach to develop specialized tools to match their unique consulting needs. A valid coding system to tally behavioral categories cannot only make collecting data about executive coaching possible, but it will be useful to the client and provide a way for practitioners to document their results and share their insights in print.

Psychologists active in the practice of executive coaching may find these tools and profiles helpful in measuring and understanding leadership behaviors in management team meetings. When linked to change goals, the tools proved a valuable source of feedback. When coupled with their customary techniques, practitioners are likely to generate new insights that will create value for their executive clients. Given that my experience suggests that nearly all client executives have responded favorably, the risk–reward ratio seems encouraging.

In conclusion, in contemporary consulting engagements, clients are increasingly asking for performance data to support the return on their coaching dollars. Each year, fewer clients continue to be content with their subjective judgments and even traditional "bottom line" operational measures. Meeting leadership profile comparisons seem to offer executives valuable feedback on their development. The measures and methods described herein are potentially valuable as a way to document specific improvements in leadership effectiveness as a result of executive coaching.

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