

# Making directors more productive

By Iain McCormick

**B**oard behaviour analysis is a simple technique that can be used to improve governance and make meetings more effective. It's based on classifying what directors say in board meetings and also classifying their contributions in a limited number of behavioural categories. The categories are easily learned through a series of exercises and can be used to:

- Assess board effectiveness.
- Analyse verbal exchanges between members.
- Describe behaviour when talking or listening.
- Plan behaviour tactics before a board meeting.

A governance coach watches and listens to the directors' communication at a meeting and identifies each verbal contribution, noting the name of the speaker and the category into which his or her remarks fall.

There are seven behavioural categories.

**Seeking:** Comments that set out to produce suggestions, clarification, reactions or information, eg, "Can you explain the risk involved in this?"

**Building consensus:** Comments that advance an idea or proposal so as to involve others, eg, "We have had a suggestion about raising funds, what do board members think of this?"

**Telling:** Comments that put forward information that effectively tells others what to do, eg, "We need to just push on with this!"

**Supporting:** Comments that support, agree with or build on previous proposals.

**Disagreeing:** Disagreeing with, blocking or placing difficulty in the path of an idea without offering alternatives, eg, "I can't see the point of doing what has been suggested."

**Giving information:** Comments that offer facts, opinions etc in a neutral manner.

**Over-speaking/Interrupting:** Comments

that reduce other members' opportunity to hear or be heard.

By the end of the observation the governance coach has recorded:

- The total number of contributions made by the group.
- The total contribution for each individual.
- The individual and group figures for each category.

The patterns frequently seen in board meetings include:

## The brain dump meeting

This meeting is characterised by members giving information but low levels of "supporting or disagreeing". Ideas flow but the board fails to pick up on the best of these or to understand which are most relevant for the discussion. It is frustrating being involved in a brain dump meeting because decisions are seldom made and time is usually wasted. Chairs should ensure that the best ideas form the basis of clear board decisions.

## The combative meeting

This type of meeting comprises much "telling" and much "disagreement". It is recognised by statements such as: "We just need to get on and set the targets in this area!" followed by: "There is no point in setting targets until we have a clearer strategic direction!"

Robust boardroom debate is critical. It can, however, degenerate into unproductive conflict. The chair should encourage debate but ensure that it leads to common understanding and agreement.

## The unbalanced meeting

The level of contribution from a few members is usually very high in these meetings. Individuals dominate the meeting and leave other directors with little opportunity to advance their views. The chair must draw out

contributions from quieter board members and politely close down talkative speakers.

## The balanced meeting

Sound board meetings have clear characteristics:

1. All board members contribute – not to exactly the same extent but all clearly have the opportunity to put their ideas forward.
2. The level of "giving" information is balanced by suitable levels of "supporting and disagreeing" which indicates a robust debate.
3. There is a sound level of "consensus-building", followed by good levels of "supporting and disagreeing".
4. The level of "overspeaking/interrupting" is moderate and members can both hear and be heard.

Good chairmanship is a delicate balancing act. Chairs must understand and make useful contributions to the content of the meeting while simultaneously understanding and monitoring the group dynamic and board behaviour.

## How board behaviour changes

Board behaviour analysis helps directors understand what needs to be done to improve meeting productivity. Usually the governance coach observes half the meeting, provides survey results and feedback allowing the board to then agree on how it wants to change the group dynamic. The board then returns to its normal meeting and the coach observes again. Toward the end of the meeting the coach presents the results of both the first and second observations. Directors invariably see a major change and improvement in the board dynamic and their meeting productivity. ●



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