Enhancing Nonprofit Leadership Through Coaching

LeaderSpring's Executive Coaching Project

PREPARED FOR:

LeaderSpring

PREPARED BY:

BTW *informing change*

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BACKGROUND

The LeaderSpring program, based in Oakland, California, has a long history of cultivating high-performing leaders for nonprofit organizations.[1] LeaderSpring offers a competitive, two-year, no-cost fellowship that strengthens nonprofit leaders' skills through a peer learning community, training and mentoring. The LeaderSpring fellowship provides multiple ways for fellows to strengthen their leadership, including individualized action planning, monthly peer-hosted training sessions, study trips to nationally recognized nonprofit organizations and overnight retreats that foster community building. LeaderSpring's program seeks to develop nonprofit leaders' individual skills, while also helping to build the capacity of their nonprofit organizations, thus creating a stronger, more viable nonprofit field.

In 2006, LeaderSpring received funding from CompassPoint Nonprofit Services as a part of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation-sponsored Coaching and Philanthropy Project. These funds were used to expand LeaderSpring's Executive Coaching Project (ECP). The ECP complements the existing fellowship components and makes customizable, one-on-one coaching available to fellows (See Exhibit 1 on page 3). LeaderSpring set out to better understand the effectiveness of their coaching model by asking the following questions:

- What can be learned from LeaderSpring's process of recruiting, selecting and managing its team of coaches? How can a project effectively vet good, quality coaches?
- How does coaching support leaders? What is the perceived value of coaching among those who are coached (often referred to in coaching as the "coachees")?
- What can be learned about how coachees effectively select an appropriate coach? What are the key factors that nonprofit leaders should consider when seeking a coach?
- How are coaches utilized and for what reasons? How is the relationship between coaches and coachees managed and how does it evolve over time?
- How does the pro bono nature of coaching impact the process and its effectiveness?
- How can a learning community of coaches be fostered? What is the impact of this experience on the coaches themselves?
- What lessons can be gleaned from LeaderSpring's community of coaches about how to effectively coach nonprofit leaders?

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[1] Throughout this evaluation, we use the term nonprofit leader, although LeaderSpring occasionally accepts executive or senior leaders from public agencies (i.e., one fellow in the evaluation cohorts worked at a public agency).

- How can leadership programs expand the impact of coaching and the pipeline of nonprofit coaches to include people of color and experienced executive directors?

This brief summarizes findings from an evaluation conducted by BTW *informing change* of two cohorts of LeaderSpring fellows, the East Bay 2008 cohort and the San Francisco 2009 cohort. These were the second and third cohorts to participate in the ECP. For these cohorts, coaching was optional and most LeaderSpring fellows chose to have a coach; more recently coaching has become a required fellowship activity for both fellows who already have a coach and those who select one through the ECP. Data were collected from a variety of sources including a survey administered by LeaderSpring and completed by 92% of fellows and 83% of coaches at the completion of each cohort. BTW also collected data from eight telephone interviews with fellows and their corresponding coaches, participated in two coaches' conference calls, attended one retreat of LeaderSpring coaches, reviewed relevant secondary materials about LeaderSpring (e.g., program and project description, coaching templates and tools, marketing materials) and held ongoing conversations with LeaderSpring staff regarding the project.

This brief describes LeaderSpring's ECP model and the coaching process, explores key findings from the evaluation and offers some reflections on this project for LeaderSpring staff as well as others who may want to replicate it.

LEADERSPRING'S EXECUTIVE COACHING PROJECT

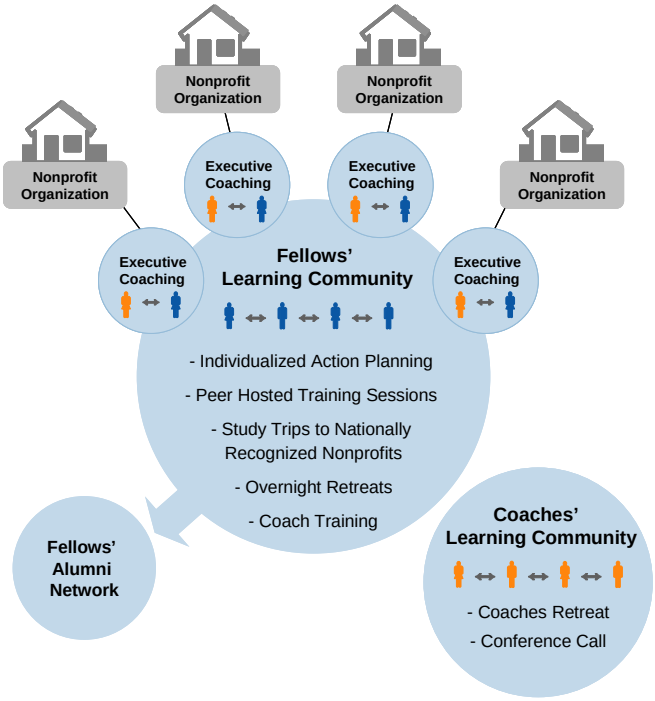
The fellowship's highly competitive application process helps to ensure that fellows are committed to their social justice work, self-improvement and learning. This commitment in turn helps LeaderSpring recruit coaches to donate their services to the ECP. LeaderSpring staff identify coaches who agree to work with a fellow by providing six months of pro bono coaching that includes approximately ten sessions lasting an average of 60 minutes.[2] Some key motivations for fellows to participate in the coaching sessions include the desire to receive real-time, one-on-one assistance in developing leadership or management skills, to increase their self-confidence in their leadership role and to work on specific organizational issues.

The design of the ECP emulates the fellowship's peer-based model and creates a professional learning community for participating coaches. The learning community offers opportunities for peer learning, reflection and

[2] Throughout this brief, we refer to the coaching services as pro bono; however, in 2008, in response to ECP coaches' requests, LeaderSpring began offering a minimal stipend of one dollar per hour of coaching, which enables coaches to apply their ECP hours toward credentialing requirements of the International Coaching Federation (ICF).

support for coaches. For two cohorts, LeaderSpring brought coaches together for a full-day retreat at the beginning of the coaching period to introduce them to the fellowship program, to start building a community of coaches and to help coaches reflect on their own leadership path. In subsequent cohorts, due to the high number of coaches who had already been a part of the ECP, LeaderSpring held an opening conference call instead of a full-day retreat. At the end of the coaching period, LeaderSpring facilitates another coaches' conference call, which allows coaches to share their ECP experiences and learn from one another.

Exhibit 1
LeaderSpring's Fellowship & ECP Model



Through the ECP, LeaderSpring also intends to expand the availability of coaching to nonprofit leaders, especially coaching that is culturally competent. The fellowship presents a unique opportunity to expand the pipeline of people who can provide skilled, culturally competent coaching, since the majority of LeaderSpring fellows are women and people of color (See Exhibit 2 on page 4). To tap into this opportunity, LeaderSpring provided fellows, in the 2008 and 2009 cohorts, with a coaching skills training. LeaderSpring brought in a skilled trainer who taught fellows how to apply coaching techniques to their work and with their staff. Throughout the fellowship program, fellows have opportunities to practice these techniques with their peers and hone their coaching skills at their organizations.

Recruitment, Selection & Matching of Coaches

While an effective coaching relationship depends on a variety of factors, the "match" between a coach and a fellow is critical for success. For this reason, LeaderSpring has established a careful matching process that provides both the fellow and the coach with a choice in identifying their partner. In this way, the process helps to ensure that the ECP "matches" are of the highest quality.

Exhibit 2
Who Are LeaderSpring's Fellows & Coaches?

Fellows

- A total of 24 fellows participated in the coaching for East Bay 2008 and San Francisco 2009 cohorts.
- Gender:
  - 71% Female
  - 29% Male
- Race/Ethnicity:
  - 46% White/Caucasian
  - 25% Latino/a
  - 13% Asian-American
  - 8% Black/African-American
  - 8% Arab/Middle Eastern
- All fellows are executives or senior leaders of organizations based in San Francisco and the East Bay.

Coaches

- A total of 24 coaches held sessions with fellows from the East Bay 2008 and San Francisco 2009 cohorts.
- Gender:
  - 79% Female
  - 17% Male
  - 4% Transgender
- Race/Ethnicity:
  - 58% White/Caucasian
  - 21% Latino/a
  - 8% Black/African-American
  - 8% Asian-American
  - 4% Native American
- 70% of coaches are based in the San Francisco Bay Area.[4] Coaches are also based in Seattle (15%) and the East Coast (15%).

The matching process begins with LeaderSpring staff recruiting coaches from a list of referrals. Coaches report that they are motivated to apply to the ECP for a variety of reasons, including a desire to "give back" to their community through pro bono work, to be engaged in the development of highly committed leaders, to gain more coaching expertise in the nonprofit field and to strengthen their business networks. LeaderSpring staff assess potential coaches' experience using an application process and a list of desired qualifications (See Exhibit 3 on page 5). Selected coaches participate in sample coaching sessions with the LeaderSpring staff or board members. These sample sessions give LeaderSpring the opportunity to become familiar with the coaches' style and personalities, which they take into account when making coach-fellow matches.[4]

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[3] This includes one coach who is based in Sacramento, California.

[4] LeaderSpring acknowledges that not every coach will meet all the desired coach qualifications; this list serves as a set of guidelines rather than a list of requirements.

"I am very, very grateful and satisfied with my LeaderSpring coach's knowledge, style and the way she communicates. I will be working with her in the future and will hire her if she is available for organizational, staff and board development.

—Sally Al-Daher, Executive Director

Involving board members in the sample session process augments LeaderSpring's capacity to conduct the intense and time-consuming vetting process and engages board members in the project.

Exhibit 3
LeaderSpring's Desired Qualifications for Coaches

- Minimum of one year coaching experience
- Interest in community leadership development
- Coaching certification or comparable training
- Experience in the nonprofit sector
- Previous position as an executive director
- Knowledge about issues relating to culture, identity and diversity
- Motivation to join a peer learning community

LeaderSpring's ECP Matching Process

Staff Recruit Coaches
↓
Coaches Apply to ECP
↓
Staff or Board Members Vet Coaches
↓
Fellows & Coaches Hold Sample Sessions
↓
Staff Gather Input from Fellows & Coaches
↓
Staff Match Pairs

Based on information collected through the vetting process, LeaderSpring staff selectively match each fellow with at least two potential coaches. Fellows hold a 30-minute sample session with each coach, which enables both the fellows and coaches to test whether they can establish trust and rapport before committing to a match. The sample sessions also allow fellows to discuss areas of interest for their coaching and determine how closely a coach's expertise matches their interest areas. Coaches and fellows believe that it is important to conduct the sample sessions as face-to-face meetings, when possible, noting that non-verbal communication plays an important role in creating the first stage of a coaching relationship.

After each sample session, the fellow and the coach complete a feedback form to document their initial impressions, their level of interest to be matched with each other and any perceived barriers to working together. If a fellow gives a poor rating to both initial sample coaching sessions, LeaderSpring staff organize additional sample sessions with alternate coaches.

Once all feedback forms from the sample sessions have been submitted, LeaderSpring staff match fellows with coaches. In making these matches, staff consider the feedback from sample sessions along with other characteristics, such as personality, ethnicity and gender. Since LeaderSpring staff work closely with the fellows throughout the fellowship program, they have a unique advantage and are able to consider each fellow's personality and style when determining the match.

Important Questions to Consider When Selecting a Coach

- Do you feel you can have a good rapport with the coach? Are you able to trust him/her with your reflections, fears and challenges?
- Are you able to open up and communicate about deep issues over the telephone, or do you prefer to discuss issues face-to-face?
- To what extent is it important for the coach to have the same gender, cultural or ethnic background as you? To what extent would a similar background allow the coach to understand related issues that may arise in coaching sessions (e.g., cultural views of power, family background)?
- To what extent do you desire a coach with a deep understanding of the nonprofit sector and the associated values, structures and challenges? What could a coach with other backgrounds bring to the coaching relationship to help you achieve your goals?
- To what extent do you desire a coach with experience in your field (e.g., arts, human services) or specific areas of expertise (e.g., conflict resolution, work/life balance, leadership transitions)?

The Coaching Process

Most fellows report that they meet with their coach for approximately ten one-hour sessions on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, with additional interim communication by informal phone calls or e-mails when needed. In the 2008 and 2009 cohorts, coaching typically started about six months into the fellowship program; for current cohorts it now starts a few months earlier.

"The goals my LeaderSpring coach set at each coaching session, and being held accountable for them, was very helpful."

—David Knego, Executive Director

Most fellows report their coaching sessions are conducted by phone (41%); about a quarter (27%) say their sessions take place in person and about one-third (32%) report utilizing both methods. Coaches and fellows note benefits and drawbacks to each coaching format. In-person meetings build rapport and trust between coaching partners, especially at the start of the coaching relationship. Some coaches and fellows highly recommend face-to-face coaching sessions, due to the importance of nonverbal communication; one fellow reported needing an in-person session to minimize distractions. However, scheduling in-person meetings can be difficult, with compounding challenges when the coach and fellow do not work in the same immediate geographic area. Some fellows prefer coaching by phone because they think it is an easier way to discuss sensitive issues. Phone sessions are also easier to schedule and reduce travel time, which can be an especially important consideration for coaches who are providing their services pro bono.

LeaderSpring provides a clear framework for the coaching process, which is helpful for coaches and fellows as they work together on specific issues. For example, LeaderSpring provides an orientation to fellows about how to be effective consumers of coaching. LeaderSpring also provides coaching pairs with a Coach-Fellow Agreement Form that sets out the project's expectations for both the coach and the fellow. Coaching pairs can use the form to record any additional agreements that they make during their initial sessions.

At the onset of coaching, fellows take the lead in working with their coach to identify what they want to accomplish through the coaching sessions. For the most part, fellows' coaching goals closely relate to their overall fellowship goals; however, both coaches and fellows appreciate the ECP's flexibility which allows fellows to determine their own personal coaching goals. LeaderSpring embraces the view that a fellow should be coached as a whole person—both in their personal and professional lives—and that a positive change in a fellow's personal life can translate to positive changes in a work setting. For this reason, fellows are given overt permission to pursue coaching goals that may seem more personal as well as goals which may be uncomfortable to address in the peer community of LeaderSpring fellows (e.g., family or cultural issues, fears, issues perceived as weaknesses).

"For me, coaching meant that there was someone available to talk to about issues that I could not share with almost anyone else. It also helped me think outside my own framework and experiences as to how to approach the challenges. That tremendous emotional and professional support was life-saving for me. I've allocated funding from my budget to support that continued service."

—Jill Ellis,
Executive Director

LeaderSpring staff also acknowledge that fellows' initial coaching goals may change over time as new issues or concerns arise, or as fellows make progress toward their original goals. For example, new issues may arise as a coach initially spends time observing and listening to the fellow, identifying needs for development and celebrating the fellow's strengths, then moves to questioning and challenging the fellow. Some coaches will move to addressing how to bring about desired changes within the context of the fellow's organization. The flexibility and adaptability in LeaderSpring's approach to the coaching process enables such natural changes to take place as needed over time.

Some coaches follow a regular pattern of reviewing topics from past sessions and holding discussions with fellows about the extent to which they should continue on the current topics or pursue other topics, since new issues may have arisen since the last coaching session. When a fellow changes issue areas over the course of the coaching, the coach usually makes connections to prior discussions to draw out themes or patterns. Almost all of the fellows (96%) think their coach maintained an awareness of issues raised in previous sessions. About half (45%) of the coaches report they utilized specific tools, including the LeaderSpring Coaching Log, to maintain this awareness throughout the sessions.[5] Other coaches prefer to rely on handwritten notes to track discussions. Fellows report they often find it helpful to have coaches send them follow-up steps after sessions.

At the conclusion of the coaching sessions, LeaderSpring requires that coach and fellow pairs evaluate their coaching relationship. The project also asks fellows and coaches to provide input about how LeaderSpring could improve the ECP. Both fellows and coaches rate their coaching relationships very highly. Fellows appreciate their coaches' approach, style and tools and feel supported

[5] LeaderSpring staff make the Coaching Log available to coaches as a tool to assist fellows in accountability for their homework and goals, and to track conversation topics, progress and challenges.

in their work (See Appendix A). Almost all coaches report that their fellows were ready to engage in the coaching process and were open to new perspectives. They also report that their overall relationship with fellows was positive and productive (See Appendix B).

The most frequently reported challenges in the coaching relationships relate to fellows having enough time and energy, both emotional and mental, to fully engage in the sessions and complete tasks between sessions. Competing priorities and demands on an executive director's time sometimes supersede coaching appointments or result in inadequate preparation for sessions (e.g., incomplete homework, not taking action steps). Some of the LeaderSpring fellowship requirements also place additional time pressures (e.g., planning for study trips, follow-up homework from peer sessions). A few coaches, who reported scheduling as a major challenge, stressed the importance of fellows canceling or rescheduling sessions in a timely manner. Other reported challenges include the establishment of initial rapport between fellows and coaches and personal limitations or barriers (e.g., coming to terms with weaknesses, facing fears, family priorities).

"I really valued my coach's persistence in helping me see my strengths and calling on my resistances that were keeping me from moving forward on my goals. She created a safe space where I could just 'be' during the coaching session. I was extremely happy with the progress I made towards achieving my goals in a relatively short period of time.

—Laura Valdez, Executive Director

Coaching Styles, Tools & Techniques

Coaches approach their relationship with a LeaderSpring fellow with a wide variety of styles, tools and techniques. Most coaches describe their style as supportive, but challenging. Fellows report that as they discussed issues in coaching sessions, their coaches would push back in a non-judgmental manner when they heard inconsistencies. The amount of challenging or questioning differs from one coach to another; some fellows with stronger personalities need to be pushed harder by their coach to make breakthroughs and see new perspectives. Such differences in learning and coaching styles support LeaderSpring's decision to carefully vet coaches and to pay close attention to matching a coach's style with a fellow's personality.

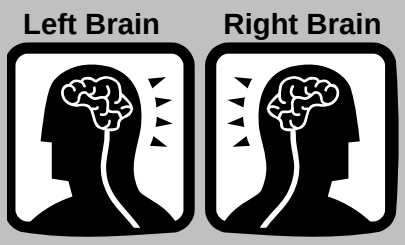
Often a coach's initial sessions with a fellow include structured techniques and tools (e.g., questionnaires, assessments) to help determine issues to focus on during the coaching. Many coaches utilize a combination of structured activities and reflective techniques to support fellows in reaching their goals (See Exhibit 4 on page 9).

Exhibit 4

Types of Structured or Reflective Techniques that LeaderSpring's ECP Coaches Utilized With Fellows

Structured Techniques:

- Goal setting
- Planning
- Scale ratings on progress towards goal achievement
- Prioritizing
- Time and task management
- Lists of next steps, previous actions and future benchmarks
- Reading or homework
- Accountability/to-do lists
- Self-evaluation



Reflective Techniques:

- Scenarios/role playing
- Inspirational poetry/quotes
- Journaling
- Brainstorming
- Reflection
- Breathing/meditation
- Visualizations
- Re-framing or questioning
- Encouraging movement
- Intuition or "gut-checks"

"My coach's ability to relate to me as the child of a working class parent and a woman of color was critical to my taking steps and committing to new goals. Without her cultural awareness I truly doubt I could have moved comfortably with her guidance in such a short period of time. At times our experience was so similar that it made the coaching sessions truly revelatory for me."

—Laura Guzmán, Fellow

The ECP strives to provide culturally competent coaching to ensure that the coaching experience is relevant to fellows of color and to fellows who work in communities of color. LeaderSpring facilitates the development of cultural competency by providing cultural and diversity awareness training as a part of the fellowship. Sometimes fellows take what they learn in this training into their coaching sessions and address issues related to their personal situation (e.g., cultural traditions and expectations) or their organization (e.g., develop a culturally representative staff, listen to and understand different cultural perspectives, communication styles and work processes). When appropriate, LeaderSpring staff match fellows and coaches of similar cultural backgrounds, although this is not the single defining feature of the matching process.

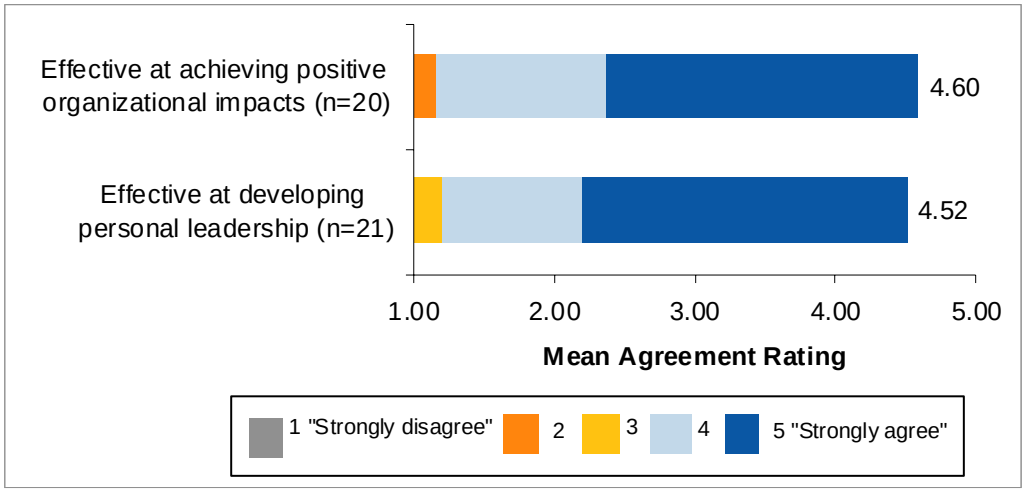
Some fellows report that being matched with a coach with a similar cultural background—as well as the same gender—fosters trust, communication and understanding in the relationship. For example, one fellow reports that by having a coach of the same ethnic background, she felt more free to speak openly about her perceptions and experiences related to culture and race. Other fellows note that they did not have to spend valuable time during the coaching sessions to educate their coach on related issues such as internalized oppression and power dynamics due to race, class and culture. Coaches who had similar ethnic or cultural backgrounds to their fellows report that they were better able to filter information about the fellow's situation and more comfortably and effectively ask pointed questions (e.g., check assumptions about power dynamics, discuss internalized oppression that may have influenced the fellow).

Eighty percent of LeaderSpring's ECP coaches report that they, at least somewhat, integrated cultural or diversity awareness into their coaching. Sometimes coaches brought it up through questions or framing; in other cases, fellows raised the issue of culture, most often after LeaderSpring's cultural and diversity awareness training. Fellows report that coaching delivered through a culturally competent lens helps them to appreciate different communication styles and to understand how others may perceive certain situations or issues in the workplace. Fellows think that a level of cultural awareness in the coaching is helpful for addressing their own power issues (e.g., with board members), and it also helps them address issues related to understanding and communicating with staff members.

IMPACT OF LEADERSPRING'S ECP PROJECT

On a rating scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 5 indicates "strongly agree," fellows strongly agree that coaching through LeaderSpring's ECP was an effective method to help them achieve positive organizational impacts (mean rating of 4.60) and personal impacts (mean rating of 4.52) (See Exhibit 5). Overall, fellows' agreement ratings are high across all types of personal and organizational impacts.[6]

Exhibit 5
Effectiveness of LeaderSpring's ECP for Achieving Personal & Organizational Impacts [7]



[6] Three out of 22 fellows consistently rated impacts lower than other fellows; two of these fellows were in the midst of organizational or personal transitions—in fact one had a limited number of sessions with the coach because of the transition.

[7] For Exhibits 5 through 7, survey respondents had the option of marking "not applicable" if a specific area of impact was not part of their coaching goals. As a result, the number of respondents varies per statement.

Developing Personal Leadership

Fellows report that the coaching through LeaderSpring's ECP led to a variety of impacts for them personally. The most common individual impacts from coaching, as shown in Exhibit 6, include the following:

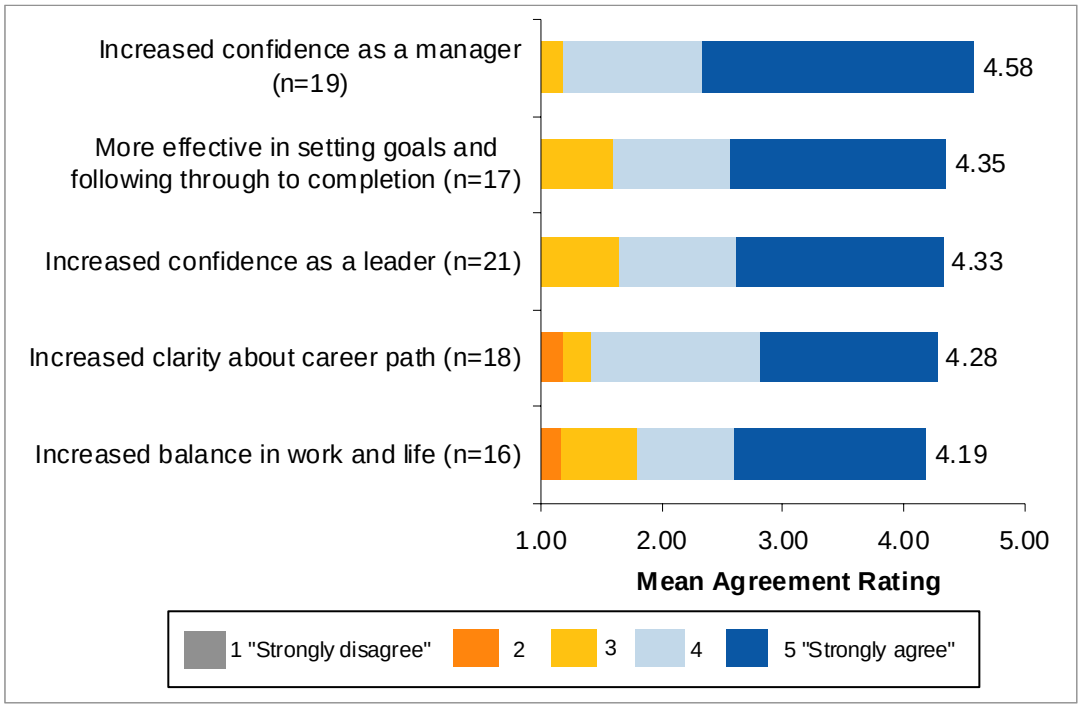
- **Increased confidence in management and leadership abilities**. Coaching helped fellows more fully embrace their leadership position. Fellows report that after the coaching they had a better understanding of their own leadership and management style. This has resulted in greater empowerment in their role as executive director, even among fellows who had been in their leadership position for quite a while. Overall, fellows describe being more comfortable as the leaders of their organizations.
- **More self-reflective, better able to identify areas for improvement and more likely to work toward self-improvement**. Through coaching, fellows practice taking the time to think about and reflect on their work, including how they react to and perceive different situations. Many fellows report they are able to look at themselves through "a new or different lens." They describe how, after coaching, they are better able to identify areas for their own development, including performance issues that had previously impeded their work (e.g., difficulties setting boundaries with board members, fear of public speaking, anxiety over fundraising). After identifying personal development issues through their coaching sessions, many fellows requested assistance from their coach to address them.
- **Enhanced clarity about leadership pathways**. Fellows note that coaching highlighted the need to reflect on their own career path because it helped them to better understand their current and future roles as leaders of their organizations. For example, one fellow noted that the coaching reaffirmed her decision to stay in her current executive director role. Another fellow worked with his coach to transition responsibilities to an interim executive director while he prepared to take a sabbatical leave of absence. As a result of reflecting on their leadership as executive director and their own career paths, many fellows worked with their coaches to determine how to strengthen their organizational leadership teams; in some cases, this meant developing succession plans and preparing for leadership transitions.
- **Increased ability to balance personal life and work responsibilities**. Fellows report that coaching helped them to better manage their time and energy, which in turn has resulted in creating a better balance of responsibilities both at and outside of work. With this greater balance, fellows experience reduced stress levels, enhanced job satisfaction and an improved ability to sustain the heavy work loads and multiple demands that fall to most executive directors.

"The long-term results of coaching have been so beneficial to me.... Recently another director said that he has noticed a change in my attitude, speaking, and presentation....I have gained a confidence just from speaking with someone who knows how to guide a leader to their truths."

—Beatriz Leyva-Cutler, Executive Director

Exhibit 6

Personal Impacts as a Result of Coaching Through LeaderSpring's ECP



"The LeaderSpring coaching opportunity has been absolutely amazing! It's given me the opportunity to take very big risks that I wouldn't have been able to take on my own. I stayed with the organization and have accepted the responsibility of work that will be life-changing for me and more importantly, the children I serve."

—Lisa Kaufman, Chief of Early Education and Executive Director

Organizational Impacts of the ECP

As fellows worked with their coaches, they were able to make improvements within their organizations (See Exhibit 7 on page 13). Sometimes fellows had to complete important personal changes (e.g., enhanced confidence and clarity of purpose) before moving forward to make specific organizational changes (e.g., conflict resolution with staff members). Some coaches noted that organizational impacts may require more time.

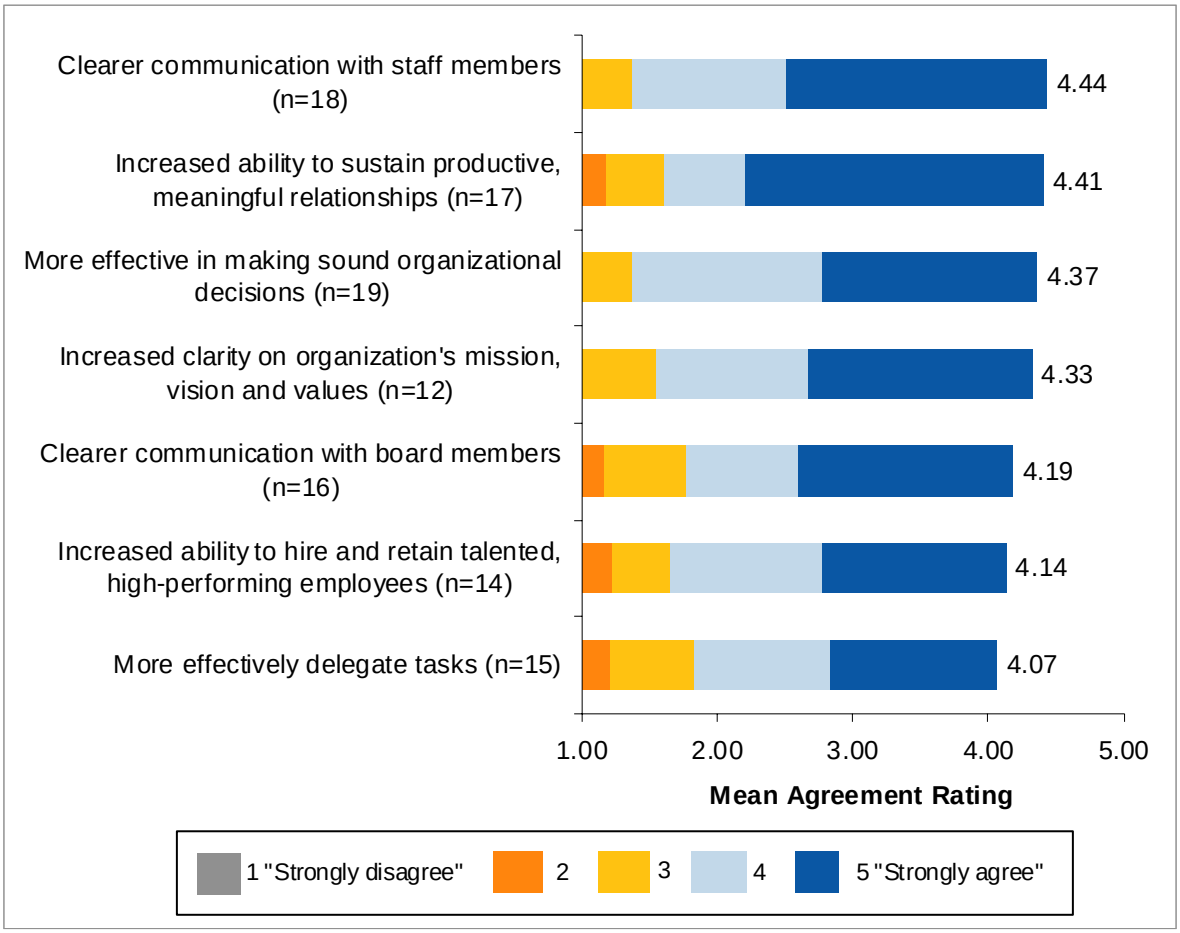
Below we highlight the most significant organizational impacts that have already resulted from the coaching through LeaderSpring's ECP.[8]

- **Clearer communications with staff and board members**. Fellows report improved communication with staff and board members. As a result, they have an easier time garnering support and buy-in for their ideas and decisions. Conversely, they note that they are better able to listen to others within the organization and entertain different perspectives on issues.

[8] At the time of survey responses, fellows had received a maximum of six months (approximately ten hours) of coaching.

Exhibit 7

Organizational Impacts as a Result of the Coaching Through LeaderSpring's ECP



"My LeaderSpring coach questions not only my personal assumptions, but the organization's as well. Her ability to help me see my work objectively empowers me to make decisions that can otherwise seem confusing or overwhelming. As a result of my LeaderSpring coaching, I have become more decisive in making 'real–time' decisions, increasing efficiency for both myself and others at my agency."

—Renee Heider, Executive Director

- **Better relationships with staff and board members at the organization**. Fellows report that, as a result of their coaching and their abilities to communicate more clearly, they are better able to deal with organizational conflict and facilitate more effective working relationships. As a result, some fellows report better functioning of their board and/or their senior management team.
- **Increased clarity on organizational mission and vision**. Coaching has helped fellows become clearer about their organization's direction, which to different degrees, has led to greater clarity among other staff or board members in the organization. In some cases, it has resulted in tangible activities, such as engaging the board and staff in a strategic planning process to develop a shared organizational vision.
- **More effective delegation of tasks to other staff and board members**. Fellows report that they are better able to share responsibility and delegate tasks to other staff and board members at their organization, thus decreasing some of the burden and time constraints

of the executive director position. Some fellows report that greater delegation, coupled with clearer communication, has helped empower senior managers and board members, which has led them to take greater ownership of specific programs and organizational tasks.

Impacts of LeaderSpring's ECP on Coaches

While fellows report a wide range of personal and organizational improvements as a result of the coaching they received, coaches also report positive impacts from their ECP participation (See Appendix B). Impacts resulting from their coaching relationships with fellows, as well as their participation in a learning community of coaches, include:

- Satisfaction from being able to donate their time and utilize their coaching experience and skills to benefit committed community leaders;
- Inspiration from the fellows' work and learning more about leadership development and the nonprofit sector;
- Gaining more nonprofit coaching experience and obtaining hours toward coaching certification;
- Marketing their coaching services on the LeaderSpring web site, which has led to new business opportunities; and
- Networking, learning and receiving support from other coaches in the LeaderSpring network.

REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSPRING'S ECP MODEL

This evaluation provides an opportunity to reflect on the ECP after its first three years of implementation.[9] Since coaching in the nonprofit sector is relatively new and not widely used at this time, it is important to document and share the lessons from LeaderSpring's experience and key implications for this type of coaching support. Such documentation and reflection is important not only for LeaderSpring's future fellows but for the wider field of nonprofit leadership development. In this section we describe the strengths of the ECP model and considerations for LeaderSpring as it continues to implement the project, as well as for others who wish to replicate it.

Overall LeaderSpring's ECP is very successful and highly espoused by its participants. Both coaches and fellows express appreciation for the project and describe a variety of positive impacts as a result of their participation. Eighty percent of fellows report that they would be interested in continuing with their coach on a fee-for-service basis. Almost all coaches (89%) feel

[9] LeaderSpring has provided coaching services for fellows since 2005 through a joint project with Coaches Alliance for Social Action (CASA). The ECP began with LeaderSpring's San Francisco 2007 cohort.

supported and appreciated by LeaderSpring staff for their contributions and more than two-thirds (68%) of coaches report that, if invited, they would continue to offer their services to the ECP. Among the remaining 32% of coaches, most of them express a desire to continue their participation if their schedule and timing permits.

Success Factors

Certain aspects of LeaderSpring's ECP model stand out as particularly important contributors to the project's successes:

Since **coaching is a part of a broader leadership program**, fellows are able to work with their coaches to apply what they learn from the other fellowship components (e.g., monthly trainings, retreats and study trips). This enhances the positive impacts of the fellowship on participants' leadership and on their organizations.

The **customized and tailored nature of coaching** enables coaches and fellows to address timely and pertinent topics, sensitive issues that fellows may not want to share with other fellows (e.g., ingrained fears, family barriers, and power issues) as well as behaviors that have proven to be ongoing challenges (e.g., achieving a better work-life balance). This tailoring also provides the flexibility to shift the focus of coaching as new needs arise or are identified.

The multiple stage process of **identifying, vetting and matching coaches with fellows** helps to ensure an increased potential for an effective coaching relationship. LeaderSpring takes into account a variety of factors including gender and ethnic background, personality, style and approach, expertise and content area. LeaderSpring's staff-intensive matching process and guidelines for the coaching have been critical for setting up coaching relationships that achieve success.

The strategy of **bringing coaches together into a peer community** is effective for helping coaches understand the LeaderSpring fellowship program and promoting more effective coaching. This peer network also provides a rare opportunity for peer learning and support to coaches who can be fairly isolated professionally. Some LeaderSpring coaches have been inspired to self-organize (e.g., additional conference calls, listservs) thus extending this peer community further for those who have available time and have a desire for more connection.

LeaderSpring is starting to **extend the impact of coaching to others** and to help cultivate a culture of coaching within the nonprofit sector in a number of small but important ways. The coach training during the fellowship gives executive directors coaching skills and opportunities to practice coaching techniques with their peers; fellows also can bring those skills back to their organizations in their work with staff, board members and clients (e.g., utilizing

coaching techniques when approaching difficult conversations, asking provocative questions, challenging assumptions and sharing coaching tools with their senior team members). As fellows return to their organizations, some have utilized coaching techniques with their senior management teams and others have discussed the value of coaching with nonprofit peers. This can help to reduce stigmas around accepting leadership assistance and to promote the use of coaching as an effective tool for nonprofit leadership development.

Considerations for Strengthening the ECP & Implications for the Field

Within the field there have been concerns whether the quality and perceived value of coaching is lessened when it is pro bono. The **pro bono nature of coaching,** delivered within the larger context of LeaderSpring's fellowship program, does not seem to diminish the quality of the process or its impacts. Initial acceptance into the LeaderSpring fellowship requires a high level of commitment from participants, and the coaching is offered as an integral, component of the fellowship, not an added-on service. Fellows agree, viewing coaching as an integral component of their fellowship and not a stand-alone, additional option. While the coaches provide their services free of charge, LeaderSpring receives funding to administer the project. This helps to ensure a high quality coaching process, from the initial selection of a pool of coaches to the matching. To contribute to fellows placing a high value on coaching, a few coaches suggested that the costs of coaching be made more transparent (e.g., monthly invoice to fellows that indicates the market rate for coaching and notes the pro bono nature of coaching services provided) or that contributions be requested (e.g., a nominal fee paid by the fellow or their organization or covered by a grant). The framing of pro bono coaching can also be important (e.g., volunteer coach vs. professional coach who is donating time).

Given the positive experiences from coaching, it is not surprising that most coaches and fellows would like the **coaching relationship lengthened**. Some recommend starting the coaching relationship earlier in the fellowship, which LeaderSpring has implemented with the most recent cohort. Among those fellows who report they would be interested in continuing with their coach (about 80%), most cite financial reasons as a major barrier.[10] Almost all (95%) of the coaches are interested in continuing to work with their fellow at the individual's or his/her organization's expense; it is unclear how many coaches are willing to continue the coaching relationship on a reduced-fee or pro bono basis. As nonprofit interest in coaching grows, it will be important for the ECP and other projects to find ways to transition costs for coaching to individuals and/or their organizations; it was suggested that this could include organizational coaching that involves other staff in addition to the executive director. Concerns exist that coaches may be expected to provide their services in-kind too frequently.

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[10] Other barriers to continuing the coaching are organizational priorities and inadequate time to commit for a high-quality coaching relationship.

While the coaches appreciate the benefits that they received from being a part of the ECP, they also desire **additional opportunities to interact and learn from one another.** Although many coaches recognize that logistics and schedules can create barriers to participation, they would like more regular venues to learn from one another and share experiences. Specifically, they request more topic-based discussions or case studies to enhance their strategies for addressing issues that nonprofit leaders encounter. Below, we offer some specific suggestions to further enhance coaches' perceived value of donating their time and to enhance coaches' skills, techniques and networks. To different extents, LeaderSpring has already implemented some of these program improvements. The suggestions include:

- Scheduling more informal and optional meetings (e.g., dinners, happy hours, lunches);
- Providing opportunities for the group to share case studies about their coaching strategies and experiences;
- Appointing a heavily involved or interested coach to facilitate or moderate the self-organized coaches' listserv or regular topic-based discussions; consider LeaderSpring staff providing pointed questions to keep coaches engaged;
- Sharing more information with coaches about the fellows' training topics and resources; one suggestion is a password-protected Web site page to provide coaches with the training schedule, tools, resources or podcasts. Training sessions that deliver proprietary information can be addressed by requesting explicit permission to share training session resources with fellows' coaches or to provide a summary of the training to coaches; and
- Providing coaches interested in nonprofit executive coaching with other types of relevant information and support, such as what is available on the Coaching and Philanthropy Project Web site (www.coachingnonprofits.org) where coaches can post discussions, questions, access resources and further connect with one another.

While the coaching in the ECP seems strong overall, the fellows and coaches suggested a few minor adjustments to the coaching process:

- Select current coaches or alumni to participate in the fellows' coaching orientation; through a panel or a presentation, they could help fellows become more aware of the benefits, challenges and process of coaching and share real-life lessons from their own experiences (e.g., how to make the time and mental space for coaching).
- Encourage each coach-fellow pair to hold a more formal mid-point check-in to assess the coaching process and their progress to date; a specific tool could be used to prompt this assessment and help the pair determine whether any mid-course adjustments need to be made.

- Although LeaderSpring's expectations for the coaching sessions are laid out in the Coach-Fellow Agreement Form, consider reviewing this more explicitly with coaches and fellows. A more explicit review of a typical coaching process (e.g., who brings up issues, role of coach to challenge and question, when to assess coaching progress) as well as some guidance on how to deal with challenges (e.g., logistics, making time to come prepared to sessions) could help both fellows and coaches.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the East Bay 2008 and San Francisco 2009 cohorts indicates that, overall, the ECP is a unique and effective model for supporting nonprofit leaders as they engage in the LeaderSpring fellowship program. The evaluation indicates four unique features of the model which are important to review as LeaderSpring moves forward with the ECP and as other leadership programs consider replicating this coaching model. First, the ECP and the broader fellowship program employ different learning modalities which effectively complement each other. The fellowship program addresses fellows' needs for general skills training and peer input, while the coaching project complements these learnings with customized, confidential supports. Second, fellows and coaches both recognize and appreciate LeaderSpring's comprehensive coach matching service. The time intensive process and commitment to achieving a diverse pool of coaches have proven to be an investment that contributes to successful coaching relationships and greater results for the fellow and their organizations. Third, coaches are willing to voluntarily contribute their time in large part due to the fellows' strong commitment to their social justice work. Fourth, throughout the ECP, fellows are encouraged to learn and practice coaching skills, which helps to expand the use of coaching techniques in their own organizations. Overtime, this application of coaching techniques can lead to more widespread awareness, understanding and adoption of coaching as a leadership support in the broader nonprofit field.

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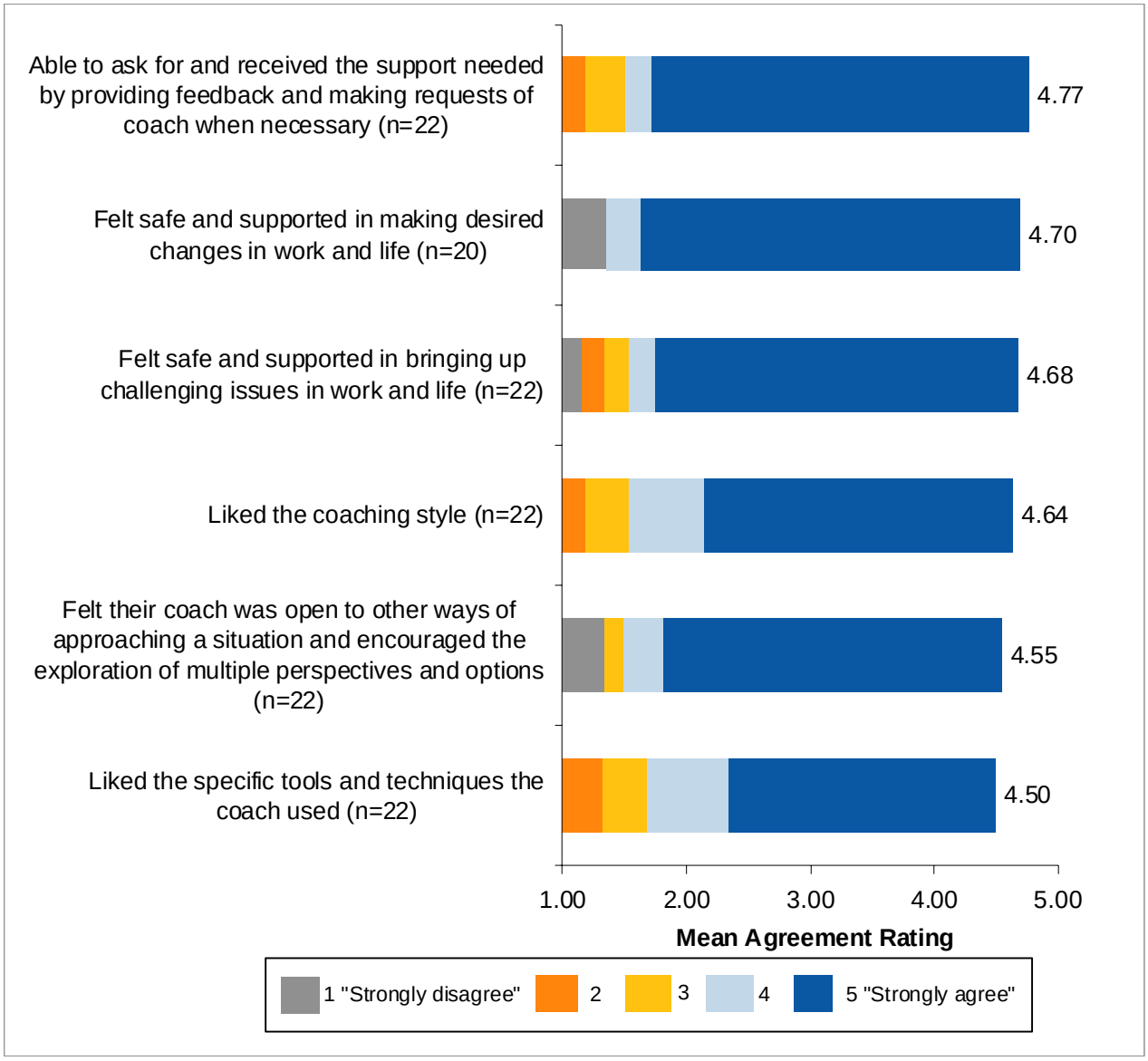
For more information about this evaluation, please contact Kim Ammann Howard at kahoward@btw.informingchange.com. For more information about LeaderSpring or the Executive Coaching Project, please contact Cynthia Chavez at cynthia@leaderspring.org. We would like to give special thanks to those who participated in this evaluation, including coaches, fellows, LeaderSpring staff and program funders.

Appendix A: Fellows' Perspectives on the Coaching Relationship in LeaderSpring's ECP



Appendix B: Coaches' Perspectives on their Experience with LeaderSpring's ECP

Exhibit 1
Coaches' Agreement with Statements About Their Relationship with Fellows in LeaderSpring's ECP

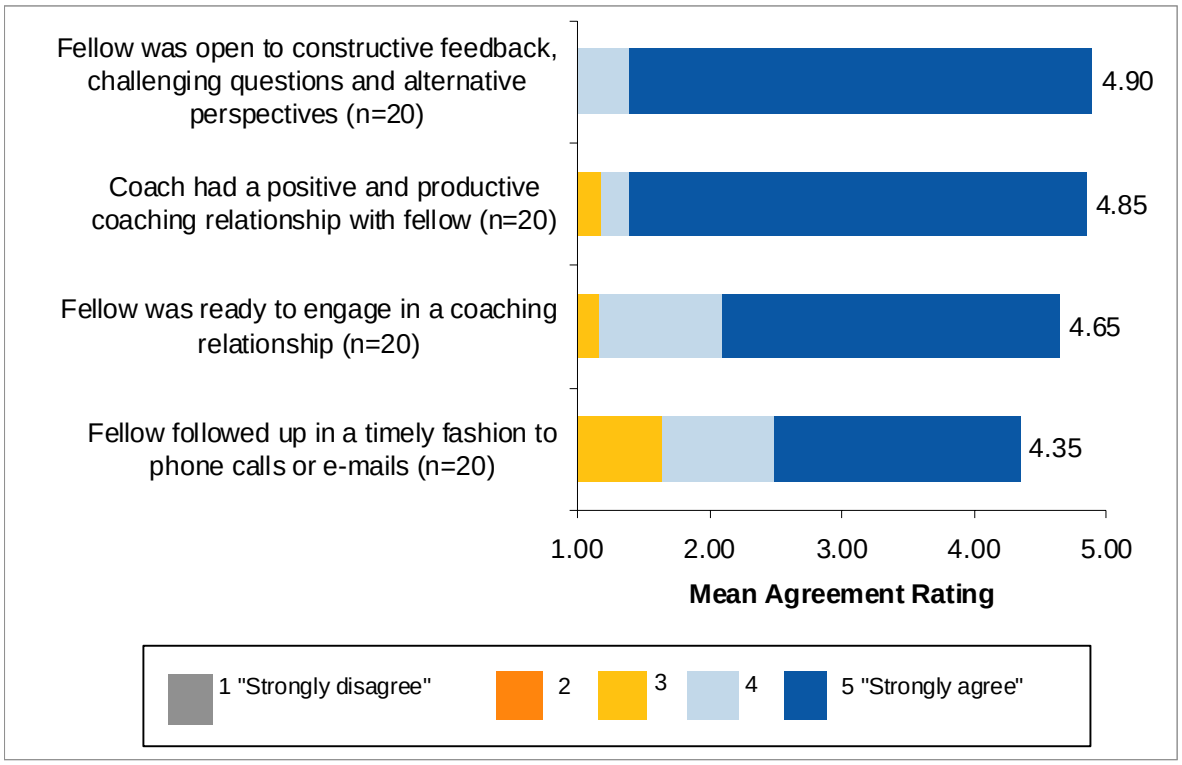
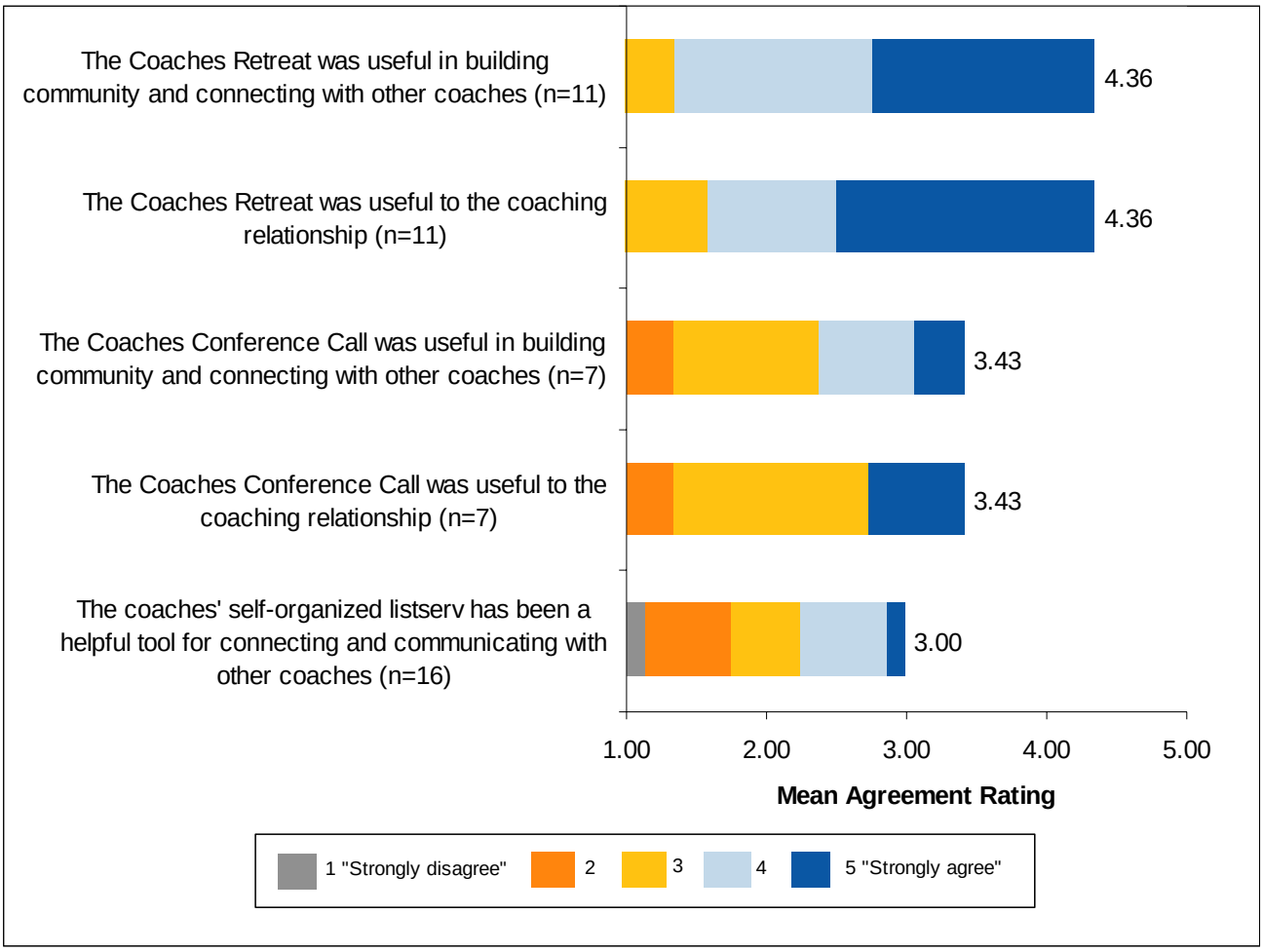


Exhibit 2

Coaches' Agreement with Statements About LeaderSpring's ECP Learning Community Activities