

Coaching Mindset: Overview of Coaching

2. Embodies a Coaching Mindset

Who is a coach?

A coach is someone helpful to talk to—not for what the coach tells the client to do and not for the advice they may offer. The coach is helpful because they see the client as capable. A coach is someone who empathetically serves their client while believing that the coaching approach itself, or the coaching mindset, can help the client grow.

The International Coaching Federation is the most well known credentialing body for professional coaching. They have helped define what coaching is today, helping coaches better articulate who they are for their clients. The ICF's Core Competencies have been crafted and refined over the years in order to create a more consistent understanding of coaching. Plenty of coaches question aspects of the ICF's Core Competencies and their approach to credentialing coaches; however, the ability for coaches to debate the topic has been partially enabled by the ICF's work in cultivating a more consistent and expanding field. Coaches are who they are for their clients, in part, because of the way the ICF has helped define the field. This work seeks to create further measurability and refinement to our understanding of who the coach is for their clients. We begin this process by looking at the second Core Competency: Embodies a Coaching Mindset.

The Mind of a Coach

The International Coaching Federation's first Core Competency is "Demonstrates Ethical Practice," and a full exploration of coaching ethics falls outside the scope of this work because of how difficult it is to measure ethics. When assessing coach performance, coaching ethics tend to be hard to measure unless an ethical guideline is breached. In some ways assessing Ethics is the most "check the box" element being considered, though we coaches don't want any ethical concern to have it's "box checked." Ethical concerns are best found "absent" from the session.

Core Competency 2, Embodies a Coaching Mindset, is also a particularly difficult competency to measure. Not because these elements should be found “absent” in the session, but rather a coach’s mindset should permeate the entire session, an entire agreement, and even an entire coaching brand. Our coaching mindset influences every interaction between coaches and their clients—from marketing and sales to wrapping up a final session.

The ICF’s definition of a coaching mindset is one that is “open, curious, flexible and client-centered.”

Open

A coach who is open is one who demonstrates a willingness for the other person to share their perspectives, to have their opinions, and to express themselves in a way that is natural to the client without demanding that the client adapt themselves to the coach’s way of thinking and expressing themselves. As we will see with other competencies, the coach should use client’s language and expressions to influence the questions and reflections they offer, the coach should avoid judgemental approaches to the conversation and the coach should help the client to feel that this is a space where they can freely express themselves to their coach.

Curious

Curiosity is at the root of the coach’s ability to serve their clients. This curiosity isn’t to be primarily focused on the details of the situation, but rather rather be focused on the language, expression, perspectives, values, beliefs and other parts of the client—the things that make the client who they are within their given situation. While this may sound aspirational only, there is a very practical purpose to demonstrating curiosity around who the client is.

As the coach reflects the client’s language and supports the client around their own agenda and potential solutions using the expressions and perspective of the client, the client’s thinking is synthesized, sharpened, speed up and becomes more strategic and transformational. The client's thinking is the key to solving their problem. Curiosity is where the coach simply picks up that key,

hands it to the client, and encourages the client to turn the key and unlock the solution.

Flexible

Sometimes it is scary to think that the coach's work is fully focused on the client's work using an open, curious approach. However, the coach is also trained to recognize moments to lean in and offer more guidance as well as see opportunities to step back and allow a client to feel effective pressure and struggle longer than normal. The coach is adaptive, responsive and flexible with their approach.

Starting from the basis that the client tends to have the ability to solve their own problems for themselves, if a coach recognizes that the client lacks easily accessed information, the coach may pivot to the side of a pure coaching approach to offer a perspective or information then offer this openly back to the client for the client's own interpretation and reflection. This approach allows for the coach to provide tools, resources, perspectives, observations, challenges or whatever else might be called for without fully becoming expert or advisor by breaking the partnership they have established through an effective coaching approach.

Client-centered

At the root of many, if not most, ethical issues in coaching, is the understanding of the approach a coach takes in service of their clients. The ICF's definition of coaching assumes a Rogerian approach to coaching. The Rogerian, or client-driven, approach to helping conversations comes from the work of Carl Rogers who helped define this approach:

“...The individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behavior.”¹

¹ Rogers, Carl R. (1980). *Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

According to Carl Rogers, 6 elements are required for effective client-driven therapy, which I will summarize here with adaptations towards the work of the coach:

1. Coach-Client Interaction: The ability for the coach and client to meet in a safe and mutually respectful environment.
2. The Client's Desire for Change or Growth: When the client recognizes an area of desired change or growth, they will be able to "drive themselves" forward with the coach's support rather than having the coach drive, direct and advise the client towards the coach's ideal solution.
3. The Coach's Authentic, Adaptive Presence: The coach doesn't put on an act, but authentically practices their skills and maintains their presence in service of the client.
4. The Coach's "Unconditional Positive Regard": It is hard to use language than unconditional positive regard to translate Carl Rogers' work into the field of coaching. This phrase is well recognized in the field of therapy and coaching being used to help define the care a therapist or coach has for their client. The coach should have a positive regard for the person on the other end of the table or call without wavering based on differences of opinion (aside from breaches of ethical boundaries). The coach should avoid taking sides for the client or the client's ideas, but rather see the client as someone fully capable of moving themselves forward.
5. "Cultivates Trust and Safety": This element of the Rogerian approach has been well translated into the ICF's 4th competency focused on cultivating the sense of trust and an environment of safety in service of the client. As will be explored around competency 4 in a later chapter, the coach should generally avoid a sympathetic approach in favor of a more effective and partnering empathetic approach allowing the client to walk their road for themselves with the coach demonstrating care and consideration.
6. Client Recognition of the Coach's Role: The coaching relationship is a partnership, and in order for the Rogerian, or client-driven, approach to coaching to exist, the client must recognize their role and the role of their coach. They should be able to perceive their coach believes in the client's ability to move forward and the client should recognize the safe, trust-filled environment which supports their creative and strategic thinking.

With these elements, this coaching mindset, in place, the work of a coach can begin as the coach articulates their belief in the client's brilliance from the beginning to end of the coaching relationship.

Guidelines for the Mind

Below are the key elements of the ICF's Core Competency 2: Embodies a Coaching Mindset. With each element I include reflections on how these elements apply to everyday for and performance as coaches.

- Acknowledges that clients are responsible for their own choices
 - At the end of the day, the coach's performance and sense of value should not be directly linked to the client's decisions. If the coach takes responsibility for the client's choice, then the coach seeks the position of owner rather than partner. It is important from the very beginning for the client to be shown the value of seeing themselves as owners of their decisions while being provided support and guidance by their coach.

- Engages in ongoing learning and development as a coach
 - Practically speaking, a coach is learning from every conversation they have. So much of coach training is focused on habit formation, and the best way habits form is by regular practice. Therefore, the more we speak with people, the more ingrained our habits become. Unfortunately, this means that coaches regularly engage in conversations that might be amplifying habits that are less helpful in coaching their clients. Over time, coaches might find they begin to speak to their clients much like they speak to their friends and family. Also, the longer coaches go without being provided feedback on their coaching the more likely they will build skills around what seems to be more effective, easier or more enjoyable. This "work in a vacuum" can lead to taking unnecessary risks and taking on more responsibility for the client's decisions as the coach begins to rely on their own way of thinking and their own ideas for potential solutions—this is the natural flow of coaching without development and learning. Because of this, it is important for coaches to regularly engage in learning, assessment and open discussion around

coaching skills. Coaches should regularly take classes, seek out mentor coaching, and even create new ways of articulating coaching skills as part of their development. The ICF requires this ongoing development as part of maintaining a coaching credential, and for good reason. Without growth, the tree begins to fall.

- Develops an ongoing reflective practice to enhance one's coaching
 - Coaches should regularly reflect on the effectiveness of their coaching sessions and how well they are embodying a coaching mindset. Sometimes coaches base their effectiveness only on the feedback from their clients. However, listening to recorded sessions, journaling after a coaching session, or coaching in a small group environment are ways a coach can take a more holistic look at their work.

- Remains aware of and open to the influence of context and culture on self and others
 - Coaches should be careful to not hold too tightly to their assumptions, biases and heuristics.² A coach sees the world in their own way, and a client sees the world in theirs. Those who are involved in the client's life will also see the world somewhat differently. It isn't for the coach to push against assumptions, but to recognize their place in the dance of interpersonal communication and exploration. A coach should be ready to reflect on thoughts that pass through their minds which are based on belief, bias and assumption. At the same time, the coach should allow some of these thoughts to pass by without bringing them into the coaching session. At times a coach may provide their view, but the majority of work a coach does should be focused on the view of the client—their context, their culture, and their interpretation of their world. Much of the coach's work is to help the client reflect on the way they see the world to help a client recognize their own path forward.

- Uses awareness of self and one's intuition to benefit clients
 - If a coach offers an observation, experience, perspective, assumption, or even a suggestion, the coach should only do so for

² Thinking Fast and Slow

the client's benefit. The term benefit might be better clarified in this way: If a coach offers anything based on their intuition, they should only offer it if it helps a client grow and build their capacity to move forward for themselves. The coach's perspectives, assumptions and (possibly) suggestions should not be offered in a way to replace the work a client does for themselves.

- Develops and maintains the ability to regulate one's emotions
 - Ideally, a coach does not experience emotions of frustration at a client's lack of follow through, anger at a client's use of inappropriate language, or relief when a client makes the choice the coach hoped they would make. This is the ideal, but not always the reality. A coach should recognize the importance of maintaining professional boundaries emotionally, and expect these boundaries to be tested. When (not if) a coach experiences emotions around a client's agenda or self-expression, the coach should have a way of recovering in the moment. Breathing, calling for a pause, letting unhelpful thoughts pass by, or even professionally choosing to end a coaching session or engagement are all ways a coach may demonstrate this emotional regulation. A coach should be reflective rather than reactive when experiencing these emotions so that the needs of the client and the safety of the client and coach can be maintained effectively.

- Mentally and emotionally prepares for sessions
 - The ICF recognizes that coaching comes at a mental and emotional cost. Coaches should be careful embracing a fixed mindset about how many sessions they can do (e.g. I can never do more than 2 sessions a day or I feel too tired to coach). However, coaches do have limits. Every coach should have a way to take care of their emotional and mental needs, though there is no one right approach to doing so. Coaches may consider meditation, deep breathing techniques, regular exercise, and reflection on one's own work to help refresh their capacity for effective coaching. Reflecting on our work as coaches and our internal capacity for coaching allows a coach to approach each session with more consistency and care.

- Seeks help from outside sources when necessary
 - At times, the coach will recognize that the coaching process or the coach themselves will not be able to provide the services the client needs to move forward. Perhaps the client might benefit more from therapy. At times the client might need to discontinue coaching in favor of seeking medical support. At times the client may need a mentor or sponsor from within their company in addition to their coaching. It is up to the coach to recognize these needs and support the client in an ethical way knowing that the ultimate goal is the client's growth and wellbeing.

Help the client learn, then they solve.

The field of coaching is full of concepts that seem contradictory:

- A client comes to the coach to find a solution, and the coach comes expecting the client to find their own solution.
- A coach spends hours, months and years becoming an expert in their field by demonstrating greater reliance on the client as the expert.
- The most impactful coaches tend to speak the least.
- The more coaches learn about themselves, the more they recognize the importance of stepping back and allowing the client to be on the stage.

It is challenging to do this work, which is why the work of a coach can only be done from the foundation of a healthy, professional coaching mindset. As a coach embodies this mindset they are able to navigate the client's agenda and adapt to the client's needs.

The world needs more coaches, and we need more coaches coaching well. The rest of this work will focus on further refining the ICF's definition of coaching and the coaching competencies. We will take a look at the remaining competencies looking for ways to bring them into more focus helping coaching find more consistency in their core skills while also considering how to best iterate, bend and adapt towards their clients depending on their needs. As we

continue to build this field together, we grow our skills in helping people create their own solutions. The world has plenty of problems, we need more coaches.