

## Chapter 2: Evoking Awareness: Client-Driven Exploration

When there is no map to a moving destination, how do people arrive where they want to be?

Everyone experiences change, and some experience more difficult and drastic uncertainty than others. Human history is a cycle of periods of safety and familiarity leading to change and uncertainty. This cycle is felt in every generation and uniquely for each individual. While everyone is acquainted with what change feels like, no one person can walk the uncertain road of change for another.

When a person is uncertain of where to go next in their individual journey, a coach helps them move forward, not by drawing the map, but by helping the client see themselves and their challenging situation more clearly. Through this deeper understanding they are able to see through the fog and chart their own course. The skill of helping a client navigate change for themselves is known as evoking awareness.

**Evokes Awareness** is the coaching competency that best represents the action the coach takes during a coaching session. To **Evoke Awareness** is to help a client bring to mind their own understanding. This competency informs coaches on the types of questions, direct statements and reflections which help the client find their own way forward.

The ICF's Definition of Evokes Awareness is:

*“Facilitates client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, silence, metaphor or analogy”<sup>3</sup>*

### Unpacking the Elements of Evokes Awareness

The following list of elements is provided by the ICF to help coaches understand how they can use various skills to help evoke awareness. We will take some time to unpack each element, and in the next section we will look at markers of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://coachingfederation.org/credentials-and-standards/core-competencies>

success for Evokes Awareness and examples of questions coaches can ask to help a client learn about themselves and their situation.

- ***Considers client experience when deciding what might be most useful.*** At every pause, the coach makes a decision. Should they ask a question? Should they paraphrase? Should they reflect the client's language back as a prompt? Should they simply offer silence as the client continues to think. At each pause the coach should consider the client's experience and what the client would find most useful in the session. This means the coach should generally avoid asking informational questions that only provide the coach insight. This also means that when a coach is uncertain about what might be useful to the client, the coach should ask the client a question such as "What might be most helpful for us to explore next?" The client's experience and self-expression that matter more than the coach's.
- ***Challenges the client as a way to evoke awareness or insight.*** A coach is not paid to help a client feel comfortable, but rather the coach supports the client's uncomfortable exploration of difficult topics. This helpful discomfort is sometimes supported by challenging questions, observations and direct statements. Particularly challenging moments in a session should be highlighted with bracketing (a skill we will explore further in chapter 7).
- ***Asks questions about the client, such as their way of thinking, values, needs, wants and beliefs.*** A coach's questions are their primary tool for evoking awareness. While asking questions about the situation, the problem to be solved, and the details of the story can sometimes produce insight, the most useful insights come from helping a client explore the depth of themselves in relation to the challenge they want to overcome. While coaches can directly ask questions such as, "What values are associated with \_\_\_\_?" More effective, in-depth questions tend to use the words the client has already shared to describe the way they see themselves and their situation.
- ***Asks questions that help the client explore beyond current thinking.*** A coaching session should not feel like an interview where the coach

focuses on the current state of affairs. Instead, coaches challenge their clients with questions that stretch the client to consider fresh perspectives on the connections between themselves and their situation.

- ***Invites the client to share more about their experience in the moment.*** As a client reflects on the questions and statements a coach offers, they bring their whole body and mind into the exploration. This means that as the client is speaking they are also experiencing a range of thoughts, feelings and physical expressions. A coach can ask questions about the laugh, the sigh, the faster pace, the quieter voice and so on to help the client consider their “in the moment” experience. This exploration tends to deepen the session by bringing up new perspectives on competing values, sense of purpose and meaning, and possible solutions to challenging problems.
- ***Notices what is working to enhance client progress.*** The coach is constantly working to pay attention to the client and then considering what to say next to help the client move forward. This attention should not just be on the problem at hand, but also on the progress a client is making during a session. After setting a clear, measurable outcome for a session (Explored in chapters 4 and 5), the coach to recognize and call out moments in the session where the client has gained insight that is relevant to their desired outcome for the session.
- ***Adjusts the coaching approach in response to the client’s needs.*** The coach’s style should be adaptive. Every coach has their default approach to a coaching relationship and to an individual coaching session. However, as a coach works with a client, particularly over multiple sessions, the coach’s approach should adapt to what the client finds more useful. If a client feels unsafe by a coach calling attention to their body language too often, the coach may focus more on powerful questions. If a client is uncomfortable responding to multiple powerful questions in a series, the coach may offer more reflections and observations to mix up the exploration.

- ***Helps the client identify factors that influence current and future patterns of behavior, thinking or emotion.*** Coaches should help a client consider the connection between their behaviors, thinking and emotions and how these inform what they are experiencing now and what they want to experience in the future. Coaches can combine any two of these factors to create a question that helps the client look beyond the details of the situation so they can experience a more transformational outcome from coaching.
- ***Invites the client to generate ideas about how they can move forward and what they are willing or able to do.*** This element is further explored in Facilitates Client Growth (Chapter 11). It is important to note that, in most cases, this should not be the focus of the coach's questions and reflections immediately after setting the session agenda. It is through exploring the other elements of Evokes Awareness that the client can see new and better possibilities to help them move forward.
- ***Supports the client in reframing perspectives.*** Every person has a starting perspective for every problem, challenge and decisions they face. Oftentimes the reason a client is stuck is that their initial perspective is not as broad or clear as it could be. The questions, observations and direct statements a coach offers a client should help the client see their situation in a new light.
- ***Shares observations, insights and feelings, without attachment, that have the potential to create new learning for the client.*** This skill will also be unpacked further in chapter 7. For now, keep in mind that whether it is a question observation or direct statement, the coach's perspective is not more important than the client's. Coach's prompt the client to redefine questions, respond to questions and observations openly, and adapt and suggested tools or perspectives to make it their own. This way the outcome of a session is truly the client's resolution rather than the coach's.

## Chapter 3

### Evoking Awareness: Markers of Success and Examples

Throughout the remainder of this book, we will be unpacking the individual markers of success for each competency with an eye on the distinctions between Associate (ACC), Professional (PCC) and Master (MCC) certified coaching. Keep in mind that these markers may not be present in every session, but coaches should seek to demonstrate each marker when appropriate. This chapter will have an extensive list of examples for some of the markers to help illustrate how a coach can best support a client in evoking awareness.

#### **7.1: Coach asks questions about the client, such as their current way of thinking, feeling, values, needs, wants, beliefs or behavior.**

The ICF intentionally begins outlining the Evokes Awareness markers of success by highlighting the importance of helping the client look inward before solving the problem in front of them. The list of elements the ICF provides here is by no means exhaustive. However, the first marker of success here is that the coach is willing to help a client consider who they are, what they think, what they experience, what they care about, and how they see their world. Exploration about who the client is helps inform exploration about their behavior and any potential changes to their behavior.

Take note of what is missing from the list of elements in marker 7.1: What others should do, what others did to the client, what they think of great suggestions and ideas found outside of them, etc. While coaches may offer questions about what is outside of the client, the focus of exploration in coaching is on how the client's identity informs the client's growth.

#### Examples

- How is this challenge different from what you have experienced before?
- What makes you care about this situation more than the rest of the team?
- What do you really need/want?
- What are you hoping will happen if you make this change?

- What might be some of your assumptions when it comes to this presentation?
- What emotions do you imagine you will experience when you walk through that door?
- You mentioned you were a ship in a storm at sea. What is the storm?
- As you spoke about your peer, your eyes lit up. What were you thinking? (Fact based observation with open invitation question. Thinking could be replaced by “feeling,” “experiencing,” etc.)
- I get the sense that you might be nervous about this decision. What’s happening on your end? (Interpretive observation with open invitation question)

**7.2: Coach asks questions to help the client explore beyond the client’s current thinking or feeling to new or expanded ways of thinking or feeling about themselves (the who).**

With the foundation of exploration focused on who the client is, the coach should help the client explore who they are becoming. Coaching is not about unpacking or venting just for the sake of unpacking and venting. Coaches challenge their clients to look beyond the current state and towards a possible future where the client has grown and risen to the challenge.

Examples:

- If you were to stretch yourself through this challenge, what might be possible?
- What are you willing to share with your team?
- What more might you need in 6 months from now?
- What would the future [client’s name] want to have changed?
- If I could challenge you: Those feel like smaller hopes and dreams than I am used to hearing from you. What is your bigger dream?
- Hearing yourself say these assumptions out loud, what might also be true?
- Who will you be as you experience confidence walking through that door?
- How is this storm preparing you for the future?

- Last session we worked on how you share your core beliefs with your friends, how might those core beliefs impact this interaction with your manager?
- You get on the call, see their face, you hear your voice get quiet. What do you want to choose at that moment? (Simulation question with prompting question)

**7.3: Coach asks questions to help the client explore beyond the client's current thinking or feeling to new or expanded ways of thinking or feeling about their situation (the what).**

Explanation: Now the ICF highlights the importance of the coach helping the client think about what needs to change about the situation they have in mind as the session begins. The situation (the what) is explored within the context of the client's identity (the who). As the client better understands themselves, they can better identify what needs to change about the situation from a space of motivation and creativity. As the client explores the who and the what, when the session moves towards action planning, the client is able to have a holistic perspective as they consider their next steps.

Note: Many of the questions shared here demonstrate an overlap between markers 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3. Coaches should recognize that powerful questioning often explores multiple aspects of the client and their situation as the coach uses the client's language about the topic and what is significant about the topic. To illustrate marker 7.3, the following questions are a little more focused on the client's situation.

Examples:

- How could you approach this challenge differently today?
- What are you recognizing needs to happen next time you meet with your team?
- How do you see the situation today differently from the perspective of what you need 6 months from now?
- What possible changes do you see now?
- How could you approach the presentation with these alternative perspectives in mind?

- What could get in the way of that confidence as you walk through the door?
- Knowing what is beyond the storm, how do you want to manage the ship this week?

**7.4: Coach asks questions to help the client explore beyond current thinking, feeling or behaving toward the outcome the client desires.**

This marker is very similar to markers 7.1 and 7.2. The additional element is that coaches should consider how their questions help the client move towards the client's desired outcome for the session. In other words, exploration should generally "stay on topic," and when the client is exploring off or beyond the original topic, the coach should check in on the client's desired direction of the session going forward.

Examples:

- How is this [new insight] related to [agenda's measurable result]?
- Quick observation: At the beginning of the session you said you wanted to focus on [session topic], and now you are focusing more on [new topic]. Where would you like to take the conversation from here?
- How important is making this decision in comparison to the meeting plan you wanted at the beginning of the session?

**7.5: Coach shares—with no attachment—observations, intuitions, comments, thoughts or feelings, and invites the client's exploration through verbal or tonal invitation.**

The explanation and examples for this measure of success is explored in detail in a later chapter.

**7.6: Coach asks clear, direct, primarily open-ended questions, one at a time, at a pace that allows for thinking, feeling or reflection by the client.**

Exploration is best supported by a coach who takes their time to formulate a question that is easy to follow and allows a client to respond without a sense of "needing to answer correctly." To the end, coaches should avoid over-explaining



their questions, having too many “moving parts” to their questions, or offering questions where the coach has a sense of how the client should respond in order to get the coach’s preconceived insight. Coaches should trust the coaching process and the client knowing that coaching is about the client’s processing—not the coach’s clever questions.

Coaches should almost never ask more than one question at a time unless it is intentionally a part of an exercise or tool (e.g. “What if we explore these two questions together: ‘What do you need?’, and ‘What do you want?’”). Similarly, closed questions should be used intentionally and sparingly in order to offer a decision point or a sharp challenge (e.g. Will you commit to sending this message on Friday?). While some debate this next point, many believe using the imperative is a form of closed questioning that should generally be avoided (tell me, explain to me, can you tell me, etc.). This imperative tone might offer a subtle signal that the coach is in a position of power instead of a position of full partnership.

Examples:

- Avoid the Stack: Coaches tend to ask multiple questions at a time because they want to avoid confusion or capture as much meaning as possible when it is their turn to contribute to the conversation. However, when coaches ask multiple questions it tends to decrease clarity and can confuse clients. It is better to take a little more time in the silence between the client’s words and your own to think about a single, concise question.

*Avoid: When will you book? What time will it take? How soon do you, you want to set this on your calendar to hold yourself accountable? Does this make sense?*

*Embrace: When will you take this first step?*

- Let the First Fly: Instead of the stack, even if your first question is a “lesser” question, allow it to fly on its own. Even if it is not the most clear question, trust your client to make sense of it. If they need, they will ask you to clarify the question further.

### **7.7: Coach uses language that is generally clear and concise.**

If a coach is brief, the client can have more space to think. At times, the coach may need to explain or offer a longer summary; however, these behaviors tend to be done out of habit rather than choice.

Examples:

- Avoid the Big Head: Coaches should avoid asking questions that have an extended “head” or setup:

*Avoid: As you think about your manager and his boss talking to you about the project and how you said that you felt a bit nervous and even a bit afraid and it made me think to ask you what's at stake?*

*Embrace: What's at stake?*

- Avoid the Long Tail: Similar to the big head, questions should not trail off with a long explanation. Allow the question to stand on its own.

*Avoid: How will you show up to the dinner given that your uncle might be rude, your aunt might be aloof, your mother might be cold, and your father might fall asleep?*

*Embrace: How will you show up?*

### **7.8: Coach allows the client to do most of the talking.**

This marker is fairly straightforward. While there is no exact amount of time a coach should talk during a session, generally coaches should speak less about 20-40% of the time in a normal coaching session. This means the coach will need to minimize their explanations and summaries while using questions that help the client openly express their own learning and insight. If a coach speaks

more than the client, it usually indicates that the client is not sure how to utilize the coaching,

## **Evaluating Powerful Questions**

The exploration of who the client is (the who) in relation to their situation (the what) is at the core of the coaching experience and deserves a book all on its own. This final section of this chapter is dedicated to building a coach's sense of the quality of questions they use to evoke awareness. The examples below are graded from 1 (poor) to 5 (masterful). The factors that make a higher score are brevity, openness, use of client language, the depth of client language used (favoring meaningful language over details and tactical language), and connective use of client language.

### **1 out of 5: Directive, Dismissive and Disrespectful**

- This question carries a sense of judgment. The coach could instead offer an open question that helps strengthen the plan.
  - Doesn't this plan feel flimsy to you?
  
- This question offers the coach's perspective, which carries a sense of judgment. The coach closes with a closed question that requires the client to respond in agreement or directly contradict the coach.
  - I don't think that this is the best idea really. I believe you should avoid directly confronting your manager. Otherwise you could put the project at risk. Don't you think?
  
- This question uses language that is often associated with putting a person into an "other" category from the speaker. Even if it isn't the coach's intent, the coach should avoid any language that could belittle or discriminate against the client.
  - Given your background, you should probably consider how people like you would be perceived by your team members. I want you to take some time to think about your approach, ok?
  
- This question features derision and an ineffective use of "why":

- Actually, people who are expecting to receive a promotion should avoid \_\_\_\_\_. I am surprised you didn't know this already. Why is that?

### **2 out of 5: Less Responsive, Concise and Clear**

- The client shares that their plan is to book some time in their calendar and the coach's question seems disconnected from the previous question. For example:
  - What values are related to this given all the factors involved?
- The client has been using a metaphor about being on a plane that is experiencing turbulence. Here the coach changes the metaphor without reason:
  - What makes this experience such a trainwreck?
- In this question, the focus of the question is "create a plan," but it gets lost in the long summary:
  - How could you create a plan that takes into account this insight about your need for measurable progress and how that might be tied to the rest of the team's need for being recognized with executive leaders?
- Sometimes closed questions can be useful, but generally should be avoided:
  - Do you think that you figure out why the plane is experiencing turbulence? (Instead of a simple: "Why is the plane experiencing turbulence?")

### **3 out of 5: Generally Responsive and Often Using Tactical or Detail**

#### **Language**

- The following questions demonstrate responsiveness in that they all offer client language; however, the underlined client language is more detail-focused and tactics-based.
  - How difficult will it be to avoid directly interacting with Paul during the meeting?
  - What makes 6am so challenging?

- What could you do differently to make this an efficient plan?
- You just mentioned that this decision needs to be made by tomorrow. How is that impacting your nerves?

#### **4 out of 5: Meaningfully Responsive**

- If we take the same questions that were scored at a 3, and included more meaningful language, the question would be more impactful. The questions below assume that the coach uses more meaningful client language to help craft more powerful and responsive questions for the client's exploration.
  - How difficult will it be to avoid having the collision with Paul during the meeting?
  - What makes the crack of dawn a death sentence for your routine?
  - What would make the plan foolproof?
  - What about tomorrow's meeting led you to have such a deep sigh just now?

#### **4.5-5 out of 5: Meaningful Connections**

Not every question needs to be considered a "perfect" question. However, some of the most impactful moments in a coaching session are a result of simple, meaningful connections a coach makes through observations and open questions. Consider some of the following scenarios and possible questions.

- As part of the initial session agreement, the client mentioned that they feel a great deal of pressure to come up with a final decision. As they said this they were looking down and spoke quietly. Later in the session, the client responds to the coach's question with a laugh and loudly says, "That's it!" Some 4.5-5/5 options might be:
  - The coach prompts the client to connect the current learning to the desired outcome for the session:
    - "What is this laugh teaching you about your decision?"
  - Simple observation with a question that ties the current learning to the meaningful language of the original agreement:
    - "You just laughed, where is the pressure now with your decision?"

- Observation that connects the behavior before to the behavior now to help the client consider what has changed internally from the beginning of the session:
  - “You began the session quietly talking about the pressure and now it’s ‘That’s it!’ What are you learning about the decision?”
- The client had been working with the coach on a difficult issue that is impacting their relationship with a friend, Sonia. During today’s session the client is recognizing the importance of taking their time preparing for a challenging conversation with their manager. The coach might offer:
  - How might your lessons learned with Sonia apply to how you bring yourself into the conversation with your manager?
- The client mentioned that this upcoming quarter’s expectations will be a traffic jam. The coach remembers that one of the client’s long term goals was to “build a better alliance” with their peers, Kathleen and Jon. The coach asks:
  - Kathleen and Jon are in the cars beside you this quarter. How could the traffic jam help you build the alliance?

## **Exercising Powerful Questioning**

As mentioned before, coach training and mentor coaching are critical to your growth as a coach. However, an exercise that can be done outside of the classroom can make a dramatic impact on your ability to ask more powerful questions. Most coaches are familiar with the process of recording certain coaching sessions with permission from their clients for the coach’s growth and development. These are often shared with a mentor coach, but a coach benefits from listening and reflecting on these sessions themselves.

Consider taking a coaching recording and/or its transcript and reviewing each question you offer during the session. Consider how it might be scored on the 1-5 scale outlined above. Then, reviewing the client’s language before the question, consider 2-4 other questions that you could have asked. Take time to

write out questions that would be likely to score a 3, 4 or even 5 out of 5 based on the above examples.

You will quickly recognize a general coaching principle: At every pause, there are hundreds of questions that could be asked. Many are great options, and our goal as coaches is to become more effective at naturally offering more responsive and impactful questions for our clients. Regularly reflecting on our own performance, and some of the alternative questions we could have asked, helps us exercise the “mental muscles” of creativity a coach needs for powerful questioning.