

Chapter 9 Cultivates Trust and Coaching Presence: Care and Support

Difficult challenges are difficult to talk about. It can be hard to share one's doubts or challenges with their manager or with someone who might judge them for having a different perspective or life experience. A client might have great friends they can confide in, but many of them will instantly take sides and offer advice. The coach's approach is to provide a space of trust and safety while maintaining their presence as a partner rather than being an expert telling the client what they should think, feel or do. This is the essence of the ICF's Competencies 4 and 5.

These competencies highlight how the coach demonstrates being a present partner who the client can trust. These competencies have more to do with who the coach is for the client rather than the direct actions that the coach does or does not take in a session. This chapter explores the elements and markers of success in being that present partner for our clients with a focus on how coaches can make these less tangible competencies more measurable.

Competency 4 Elements: Cultivates Trust and Safety

“Partners with the client to create a safe, supportive environment that allows the client to share freely. Maintains a relationship of mutual respect and trust.”⁹

- Element 4.1 - “Seeks to understand the client within their context which may include their identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs.”
 - Coaches should recognize that the client's context and identity are separate from their own. This means that as a coach hears the client's agenda, challenge, opportunity, thoughts, emotions and self-perception the coach should avoid understanding their client only through their own lens.

⁹ <https://coachingfederation.org/credentials-and-standards/core-competencies>

- However, the coach should generally avoid asking questions that only further the coach's understanding of the client's context. These are often informational questions that do not provide forward movement for the client's self-reflection. Instead, the coach should incorporate what they learn about their client's context into their questions, observations and reflections.
 - Informational Example: "What does 'jumping the shark' mean?"
 - Explorational Example: "What makes this a 'jumping the shark' situation?"
- Coaches should be very careful when considering prompting exploration around a client's identity, beliefs or other highly personal aspects of the client's context. For instance, if a client has not brought up their race as a factor in their preparation for a job interview, the coach should generally avoid inserting that aspect into the exploration. Consider the following example with the assumption that the client has not mentioned their race previously:
 - How do you want them to perceive you knowing that being [race] is likely different from their normal experience?
 - This question could land well with a client, but involves a high level of risk. It could cause a drop in the client's rapport with the coach or it could insert a level of self-doubt or concern that was not a natural part of the client's thinking in the given situation.
 - The coach might consider offering this question with a bit more framing by asking permission to ask a challenging question and then explaining the purpose and intent of asking the question before asking it.
- The coach should seek to understand their client's context through the natural unfolding of the client's story through the open exploration of coaching. The coach should generally wait to be "invited in" around the client's exploration of their identity, experiences and specific beliefs.
- Element 4.2 - "Demonstrates respect for the client's identity, perceptions, style and language and adapts one's coaching to the client"
 - The coach should have an open, curious mind when helping a client unpack their thinking, beliefs and perspectives. This intention is

more difficult than it might sound, because people (including coaches) tend to think in terms of right perspectives and beliefs and wrong perspectives and beliefs. This element is not advocating for coaches to not hold that some perspectives are right or wrong, but, rather, that the coach should generally demonstrate respect for the client—whatever they are, however they speak and whatever their perspectives. As much as reasonably possible the coach should adapt their own expressions and language to the client's.

- On a side note, some coaches might struggle with using certain words that the client relies on which might not be aligned with the coach's cultural experience or moral values. In these cases coaches should generally hold to their own moral values. If the language crosses a critical boundary, such as bigoted language, the coach should be willing to call out the use of the language as a boundary that may impact the coaching relationship/arrangement.
- This ability for the coach to adapt can be put this way: In terms of skill, a coach should be able to serve anyone. In terms of boundaries, the coach should be able to choose how far they might be willing to go in service of those whose behavior or language might be offensive to the coach.
- One final note, if a coach works with someone whose background is drastically different or even offensive to the coach, the coach can choose to continue to serve their client out of a desire to demonstrate caring empathy and effective exploration for someone who might not receive such treatment from others. In this case, as the coach offers other perspectives and challenging exploration, the client might change their own worldview. However, this form of service is not the responsibility of the coach, it would be a choice—and an uncomfortable one at that.
- Element 4.3 - Acknowledges and respects the client's unique talents, insights and work in the coaching process
- And, Element 4.5 - Acknowledges and supports the client's expression of feelings, perceptions, concerns, beliefs and suggestions
 - Coaches should be looking for the treasure of the client's efforts and insights. The coach should be keeping record successes instead of failures. As the client demonstrates progress towards their overall goals and their individual session goals, the coach should naturally

and authentically demonstrate respect, support and even direct acknowledgement of the character and work of the client.

- Acknowledgements should not be simple validation statements (often called cheerleading). Coaches should especially avoid consistent use of validating statements where the client can easily see a pattern or habit. For example, if the coach regularly responds to the client with a “Great, I love that!” then this statement will quickly lose its power and possibly become obnoxious. Worse, when these validation statements are too frequent, when the coach fails to deliver the validation the client might take this as a sign of disagreement on the coach’s part.
- When a client is sharing their emotions, beliefs and perspectives, the coach should be careful in their exploration.
 - Often, I have seen coaches immediately confront the use of the word “challenge” with the line, “What if you saw this challenge as an opportunity?” While this might be a helpful question, it also can come across as setting aside the client’s concerns or perspective.
 - When a client begins to demonstrate frustration at their manager, and a coach immediately asks the client what they are grateful for when it comes to this manager, the client may easily take offense to the question—or at least have cognitive dissonance with the question. Often, it is better to acknowledge the client’s experience and/or to allow a moment of “looking under the rock” of the negative emotion and then offering exploration around other perspectives.
 - When a client shares how their beliefs relate to their agenda or possible ideas for how they might move forward (suggestions as the ICF puts it in element 4.5), the coach should generally allow the client to explore these openly. How does their belief inform their perspective on the situation? How might their idea go well? What might get in the way of their idea? Coaches should avoid too quickly dismissing the client’s ideas and beliefs, even if they are different from the coach’s.
- What is most important about this element is that the coach demonstrates true respect and honor towards the client. This should

be done thoughtfully and, if possible, should be offered along with the client's language to demonstrate an additional level of empathy.

- Element 4.4 - Shows support, empathy and concern for the client
- And Element 4.6 - Demonstrates openness and transparency as a way to display vulnerability and build trust with the client.
 - It is not the coach's role to experience what the client is experiencing (sympathy), but rather the coach is one who walks alongside their client (empathy). The coach demonstrates concern, not because the coach has experienced similar challenges and obstacles. Instead, the coach demonstrates support for their client simply because they believe the client is someone who ought to be supported.
 - Coach's demonstrate support through
 - Warm tones in the face of discouragement
 - Authentic encouragement pointing to the qualities of the client
 - Space and silence in order to honor moments of vulnerability
 - Use of meaningful client language to inform questions and reflections
 - Sharing personally, at times, while openly inviting the client to respond to what the coach shares.
 - Avoiding a corrective approach to their own work as a coach in order to avoid creating a space where the client might be concerned with their own performance during the session.

Competency 4: Cultivates Trust and Safety, PCC Markers

4.1: Coach acknowledges and respects the client's unique talents, insights and work in the coaching process.

4.2: Coach shows support, empathy or concern for the client.

4.3: Coach acknowledges and supports the client's expression of feelings, perceptions, concerns, beliefs or suggestions.

- As shared in the commentary above on Competency 4's elements, PCC Markers 4.1-4.3 focus on the coach's ability to demonstrate care and empathy through the use of acknowledgements, statements of support and empathetic expression. Here we find examples of a coach proactively demonstrating understanding, respect and empathetic support for their clients.

- “Really good work this past week. You followed through with your commitment to yourself.”
- “Like you said last session, this was going to take a great deal of courage on your part, and here you are having said what you wanted to say!”
- “What is it like to see how creative you have become through overcoming these challenges?”
- “No need for apologies, ‘tissue time’ is welcome here. What are you learning through the tears?”
- After the client shares an emotional statement, the client offers a few seconds of silence while gently nodding. Then, before the next question, the coach offers, “Thank you for being willing to share...”
- At the beginning of a session, an executive client shares they are having trouble delegating a particular task. The coach offers, “I see you as someone near the very top of their career journey. What about this situation is making delegation a challenge for you?” (In doing so the coach acknowledges the client’s success while exploring the obstacles around the agenda topic—Marker 3.4)
- When should a coach acknowledge their client? Here are some considerations:
 - If the client has come up with a novel idea, acknowledge the client’s ability to create for themselves.
 - If the client has arrived at their desired outcome through an aha moment (a shift), acknowledge their insight and determination to push through.
 - If the client is willing to be open and vulnerable with their emotions, beliefs and perspectives, acknowledge their openness.
 - When the client has seen success between sessions (even if the success is only that they tried but failed), consider acknowledging the effort and personal qualities they had to rely on in order to move forward.
 - When the client is willing to demonstrate empathy towards others, particularly those with whom the client disagrees, acknowledge the client’s empathy.
 - When the client arrives at a difficult decision, consider acknowledging their courage to commit.

4.4: Coach partners with the client by inviting the client to respond in any way to the coach's contributions and accepts the client's response. - Covered in the previous chapter.

Competency 5 Elements: Maintains Presence

Definition: Is fully conscious and present with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible, grounded and confident

5.1 - Remains focused, observant, empathetic and responsive to the client

And 5.2 - Demonstrates curiosity during the coaching process

- These elements are connected to the work of evoking awareness, building trust and safety and listening actively. The important detail to keep in mind with these elements of coaching has to do with how the coach acts as witness to the client. While AI and other programs might be able to systematize much of coaching, what will always be missing in humanless coaching is the human presence. Not only should the client be supportive in their expression of themselves and their situation, but the coach should demonstrate care in how they maintain a curious, responsive presence during the session.
- With this being the case, coaches should make it their focus to appear adaptive and responsive with all of their questions and reflections. If the coach asks questions that might represent some form of coaching structure, or when the coach employs a reliable coaching question, the coach should always try to adapt these movements towards the client's agenda, language and expression.
- If the question a coach offers doesn't sound responsive to what the client has recently shared, there should be a reason given, or the client might think the coach does not care or wasn't attentive to what they were expressing.
- Sometimes the elements of being observant, empathetic, responsive and curious might seem less productive than other elements (such as those found in Maintaining Agreements or Facilitating Client Growth). However, the effectiveness of the other elements depends on the responsiveness and empathetic curiosity the coach expresses. These elements bring the warmth of life into the coaching process.

5.3 - Manages one's emotions to stay present with the client

And 5.4 - Demonstrates confidence in working with strong client emotions during the coaching process

- A coach should not consider their role to be that of a fully unattached observer; however, the coach should maintain a measure of professional emotional control. The coach avoids the sympathetic approach in favor of allowing the client space to process their own perspectives and emotions.
- This applies to even very strong emotions, knowing that the emotions of the client are expressions of values, beliefs and perspectives. Allowing space for strong emotions allows a coach to offer open exploration around these emotions towards the client's stated agenda.
 - With this being said, a coach should generally avoid asking too many questions that might amplify the client's emotional state. Questions should avoid probing too deep into the past or into the source of strong emotions (perhaps 1-2 questions in this vein, but otherwise the coach should focus on the present and future with an eye on the client's desired outcome).
 - Instead, the coach should offer questions that allow the client to reflect on the meaning and message behind their emotions and how this introspection might help inform new learning and ideas for how to move forward with their desired outcome.

5.5 - Is comfortable working in a space of not knowing

- The coach's ability to help a client process should not be wholly reliant on the coach's understanding of the client's situation. In fact, coaching is more effective than other helping approaches because the coach is willing to offer open exploration around topics the coach might not fully understand.
- Some topics a client might bring up will be more easily explored with a little background information. In these cases, the coach should avoid asking too many informational questions knowing that these slow down the client's processing. Instead, the coach might ask a question such as, "What details would be helpful for me to know about as we begin to explore this topic?"
- When a coach mis-hears a client, or when the call drops for some reason causing the coach to miss part of what the client is saying, the coach should attempt to continue to prompt the client's processing rather than making it a habit to ask the client to repeat what they have said. Oftentimes the coach will have enough to work with in these moments, and can even rely on the somewhat lazy question of, "What is it like hearing yourself say

all of that out loud?” Of course, at times, the coach will need to ask the client to repeat themselves, but if possible and if the client seems to be in a state of flow, the coach should attempt to prompt further exploration even without knowing everything that was said by their client.

- In some unique cases, often in executive or corporate coaching, the coach may need to work with a client who cannot divulge much information at all around their topic. The client may need to speak in code even. In these cases, the coach must rely on the client’s understanding of the situation while using the client’s language (even if in code) to help drive the open exploration.

5.6 - Creates or allows space for silence, pause or reflection

- The coaching conversation should be a different experience when compared to other conversations. The pacing of the session should be used in a way that supports the client’s thinking and reflection.
- Since one of the primary purposes of coaching is to stimulate effective processing, the coach should generally avoid interrupting the client. This not only involves avoiding interrupting the client’s speech, but also other forms of processing such as note taking and thoughtful reflection.
- When a client is in a space of thoughtful reflection they will often be looking around with their eyes in the air “looking for their thoughts.” In these moments, coaches should generally stay silent and not “interrupt the eyes.”
- Measuring effective space is a challenge, and will be explored later in the chapter with marker 5.5.

Competency 5: Maintains Presence, PCC Markers

5.1: Coach acts in response to the whole person of the client (the who).

And 5.2: Coach acts in response to what the client wants to accomplish throughout this session (the what).

- These markers are expressed in conjunction with other markers such as Evokes Awareness 7.1-7.4. The coach should offer exploration that is responsive to the client’s desired outcome and their personal development. This exploration should avoid a systematic approach that does not take into account the client’s own language they use to express themselves. Instead, the Who and the What should be explored by helping the client reflect on their own words and perspectives they share during the session.

- When a coach tries to offer deep, meaningful exploration without using responsive, meaningful client language, the questions tend to fall flat (these are the 2 out of 5 questions explored in Evoking Awareness)

5.3: Coach partners with the client by supporting the client to choose what happens in this session.

- This marker is a reminder for the coach to maintain their approach as coach by regularly checking in with the client to measure the client's progress through the session. Check-ins should be offered roughly every 4-7 questions or reflections. Check-ins are particularly important to help the client reflect on significant progress since the agenda.
- These check in moments can be supported a few different ways:
 - Direction Check - This is the most simple check. The coach might simply ask, "Where should we go next?" It is more impactful for the coach to reflect on the original agenda and/or the remaining time and then help the client consider how to use the rest of the session.
 - Learning Check - Here the coach could ask "What are you learning about [agenda topic]?" However, learning checks can be more meaningful by using recent client language and reflecting it back against the original agenda language: "How is this ___ perspective related to the ___ you wanted to explore at the beginning of the session?"
 - Progress Check - Here the coach offers a moment for the client to consider how far they have come from the original agenda. The coach should avoid closed, validating progress check questions such as, "At the beginning you wanted ___. Are we on the right track?" Instead, the coach should invite the client to reflect on progress using client language with a truly open question. This allows the client to adjust the direction a bit to help inform the coach's upcoming questions and reflections.

5.4: Coach demonstrates curiosity to learn more about the client.

- This marker should not be seen as an encouragement for the coach to rely on informational questions based upon the coach's own curiosity. The coach's curiosity should always be in service of the client's agenda and development. The coach should consider their questions as a way for the coach and client to mutually learn more about the client (the person) and not just about the problem.

5.5: Coach allows for silence, pause or reflection.

- Here we arrive at the marker that is often hard to measure effectively. How does a coach know they are allowing for the appropriate level of silence for the space to be empathetic and reflective? In one way, coaches should regularly offer extended moments of reflective pause after the client is finished sharing because this space allows the client to continue to reflect a moment on what they have shared (internal processing). This space also allows the coach to think about their next question or reflection in the silence rather than being distracted by what to say next while the client is talking.
- Over the past 7 years, I have spent time measure the raw metric of silence in this way:
 - 1 out of 5 - Coach interrupts the client
 - 2 out of 5 - 1-2 seconds of silence—immediate response after the client has stopped sharing.
 - 3 out of 5 - 3-4 seconds of silence offered after the client has stopped sharing.
 - 4 out of 5 - 4 or more seconds of silence
 - 5 out of 5 - Consistent, extended silence (a string of 4's) offered in response to a client who is utilizing the space for reflection
- This approach to assessing coach performance has been helpful in identifying the coach's default approach to silence, and recognizing moments of divergence from their default.
 - Coaches who regularly offer 1-2 seconds of pause are encouraged to expand their default to 3-4 seconds of pause to allow the client more time to process what they have recently shared.
 - Coaches who regularly offer 4 or more seconds of silence are encouraged to reflect on offering space that is responsive to the clients needs. For instance, a coach may consistently use 4 seconds of silence when the client is expecting immediate responses.
- After years of assessing silence, I have found some additional insights that are helpful to consider here:
 - If a coach regularly offers longer pause but the client seems to expect less space, it can be a signal for the coach to:
 - Clarify the purpose of the pause (for both the coach and the client's reflection)

- It can be helpful for the coach to offer briefer moments of pause—at least for a time to help the client become more comfortable with the approach.
- Offer more impactful questions using more meaningful client language. For instance, if a coach asks an informational question such as “When is the meeting?” the client will not have much to reflect on after they are done answering the question. They will often maintain eye contact and expect the coach to immediately respond with the next question. For a coach to offer 4 seconds pause in this case is highly unresponsive.
- Oftentimes the reason coaches fail to offer space has to do with their own comfort with the silence. If the coach is demonstrating discomfort and rigidity during the pause, the client will likely feel less safe and demonstrate more discomfort on their part. When the coach treats the silence with warm calm, the client will often demonstrate a bit more willingness to reflect during these moments of silence.