

Integrating the International Coaching Federation Updated Core Competencies Within Coaching Sessions

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Coaching is a rapidly growing industry. It is also unregulated, meaning that anyone can call themselves a coach regardless of the degree of training, if any, they have received. Global research confirms that one of the largest threats to the integrity of the coaching industry is undertrained coaches. For this reason it will become increasingly important for coaches to be credentialed with one of the major global coaching organisations.

The three most prominent coaching bodies are the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), the Association of Coaching (AC) and the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the latter being the largest and having representation in the greatest number of countries. Most credentialed coaches within Australia are members of the ICF.

Coaches who attain an ICF credential – Associate Certified Coach (ACC), Professional Certified Coach (PCC), or Master Certified Coach (MCC) - must demonstrate proficiency in the ICF Core Competencies. When the ICF was formed in 1995, 11 core competencies were developed and for 25 years they served the coaching industry well. After an extensive and broad-based survey of coaches globally, these competencies were updated at the end of 2019 and are now presented as a list of eight competencies.

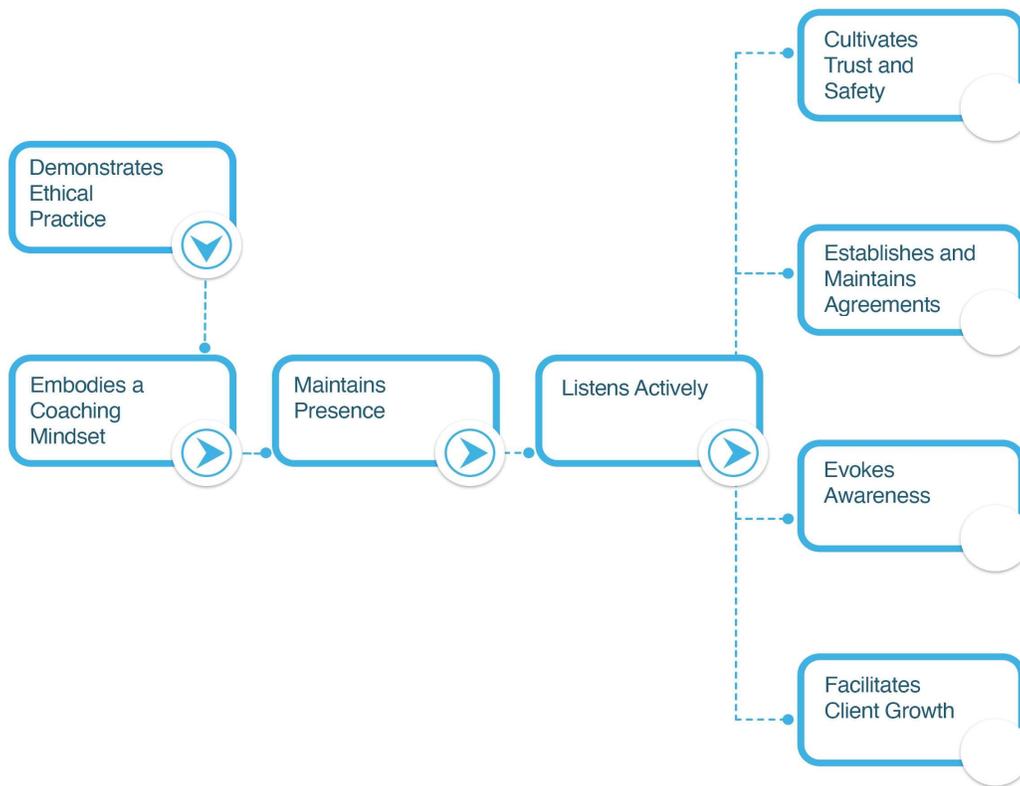
An effective coaching session does not involve ticking off the competencies as you go, especially in the order that they are listed! While all competencies are important, there is a flow to keep in mind to ensure that the competencies are naturally and flexibly integrated into coaching sessions. The Diagram on page 2 reflects my personal view of this flow.

Within this paper I will present what I believe to be an order of flow of the core competencies within a coaching session that would potentially enable maximum effectiveness and transformation for the client. I will also describe each of the competencies based on the ICF definition and elaborate as to how they are integrated within a coaching session or series of sessions.²

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² Based on the ICF Updated Core Competency Model October 2019, and the ICF Professional Certified Coach (PCC) Markers Revised September 2020.

The Flow of Core Competencies Within a Coaching Session



Demonstrates Ethical Practice (CC1)

Understands and consistently applies coaching ethics and standards of coaching.

This first core competency is about maintaining honesty and integrity in all our dealings with clients and other relevant parties. It is also about being sensitive to the client: who they are, their background, values, and beliefs.

It is about understanding coaching ethics and standards and applying them appropriately in all coaching interactions. To this end coaches who hold an ICF credential must familiarise themselves with the ICF Code of Ethics. This also includes ensuring that the way in which coaching is conducted reflects the ICF definition of coaching:

Partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential.

To fully integrate the core competencies within a coaching session or series of sessions, the coaching relationship must be one of **partnering**.

Partnering is what distinguishes coaching for consulting and mentoring. A consultant provides expert advice on a specific topic. A mentor also provides counsel based on knowledge and experience, but with more of an ongoing relational focus. Both consultants and mentors are perceived to be experts in some way or another. Within a coaching relationship, the coach is the expert on coaching skills and practice, but the **client** is the expert on his/her life. The role of the coach is to partner with the client to bring out the best in the client – personally and professionally.

A metaphor that I have often heard used to describe partnering within a coaching relationship is that of a driver and a passenger. With coaching, the client is always in the driver's seat. As a front seat passenger, the coach will observe the client as they drive and listen to why they are travelling in a particular direction. The coach may:

- comment on the terrain;
- assist the driver in deciding which way to go when there is a fork in the road;
- bring awareness to the driver of the greatness of his/her driving skill;
- unpack the reason they lack confidence to navigate certain roads;
- assist in clarifying what needs to change to embrace a new level of confidence and take their driving skill to a new level.

However, the client is in the driver's seat, ultimately choosing where and how to drive.

Many clients may have previously experienced counselling, mentoring and/or consulting, and will not be aware of the distinctives of coaching. At the commencement of the coaching relationship it is therefore imperative for the coach to define coaching, and particularly the concept of partnering. If the coaching relationship includes multiple sessions, this may need to be reiterated and reinforced in subsequent sessions.

Maintaining the distinction between coaching and other support professions, and in particular the concept of **partnering**, is critical to **embodying a coaching mindset**.

Embodies a Coaching Mindset (CC2)

Develops and maintains a mindset that is open, curious, flexible and client-centred.

Within the updated core competencies this is the only entirely new one, not directly appearing in any form within the former core competencies. According to the ICF, this competency reflects the following:

- acknowledges that clients are responsible for their own choices.
- engages in ongoing learning and development as a coach.
- develops an ongoing reflective practice to enhance one's coaching.
- remains aware of and open to the influence of context and culture on self and others.
- uses awareness of self and one's intuition to benefit clients.
- develops and maintains the ability to regulate one's emotions.
- mentally and emotionally prepares for sessions.
- seeks help from outside sources where necessary.

To fully engage with clients in ongoing partnering conversations, coaches must be committed to their own personal growth. One of my personal mantras is that **coaching is most powerful when it happens out of the overflow of the coach's own personal transformation and growth**.

Our commitment to mentally and emotionally prepare for sessions will reflect our capacity to be fully present for and with our clients. The more present we are with our clients, the more the sense of partnering with them will be strengthened.

We cannot be present with our clients unless we are present with ourselves – to be very self-aware of our own strengths, growth areas, values, and biases. It means consciously disengaging from what is happening in our world to be fully focused on our clients and what they bring to the coaching conversations. Ideally coaches should take some time to stop, reflect, and be present with themselves prior to a coaching session. If they rush into a session preoccupied with what has been happening within their world they will not be fully present for and with their clients. This self-reflection and engaging in mindfulness in a manner authentic to oneself will directly impact our ability to be fully present with our clients.

Embodying a coaching mindset, and in especially developing intentional reflective practice, determines our capacity to **maintain presence** with our clients.

Maintains Presence (CC 5)

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

While all competencies are of equal importance, the effectiveness of the other competencies will be diminished if our capacity to maintain presence is compromised. Coaching presence means being fully aware of the client – focused on the client’s words, body language, tone of voice, and emotions. It means remaining fully focused on the client’s agenda and not our own. There are times when a client will say something, and it triggers something within our own experience that we may be itching to share with the client. There may be great insights that we want to share, or questions to ask. However, the minute we allow our mind to focusing on this, we are no longer fully present with our clients – it becomes about us, and not our client.

Trust the process! Remain focused on your client, listening to her or him. They may be about to share even more gems to unpack, and if you are thinking ahead to the next question you wish to ask or comment to make, you will miss it! If your questions and insights are valuable, they will flow at the right time.

The ability of coaches to be **fully present** directly affects their capacity to **actively listen** to their clients. Without being fully present coaches are likely to miss hearing key information that may serve the client, or hear it through their own agendas, world view, biases, etc.

Listens Actively (CC6)

Focuses on what the client is and is not saying to fully understand what is being communicated in the context of the client systems and to support client self-expression.

To hear what is said and not said, the coach is not only listening to words, but also the tone of voice and inflections, shifts in emotional energy and body language.

Coaches should not only be listening to the ‘what’, but also listening for the ‘who’. As clients share, what are we hearing about who they are? What strengths and great qualities are we hearing? What limiting beliefs are we hearing?

As coaches we are learners, and when we train ourselves to intentionally listen on multiple levels, we will learn about our clients – how they think, what’s important to them, what they believe, how they feel – all things which are critical to coaching at a transformational level.

Actively listening is critical to **cultivating trust and safety, establishing and maintaining agreements, evoking awareness, and facilitating client growth.**

When these Core Competencies of *demonstrating ethical practice, embodying a coaching mindset, maintaining presence, and listening actively* are present in this order and flow, there is a very strong foundation for the remaining competencies to be reflected in the coaching conversation.

Cultivates Trust and Safety (CC 4)

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.

Cultivating trust and safety takes time. When clients sense that coaches are fully present in the session and have heard what they are saying and not saying and have asked questions and shared insights that create new awareness for them, their trust in the coach will increase. This usually results in clients disclosing even more fully, providing the opportunity for greater exploration, more awareness, and deeper transformation.

While this takes time, coaches should begin to establish this trust and safety from the very first words uttered within the coaching session. The level of trust and safety will be in direct correlation to the coach's capacity to convey genuine concern for the client. The creation of trust is also dependent on the coach allowing the client to remain in the driver's seat. For example, a coach's questions may result in a client disclosing something deep and personal. Rather than just powering on and going deeper, a wise and "present" coach will acknowledge the depth of the client's sharing and ask whether they would like to explore this more or go in another direction. This kind of partnering will strengthen trust in the coach and enable the client to feel safe in sharing at a deeper level.

Trust and safety are also strengthened when the coach invites the client to respond in any way to the coach's contributions. Tagging our observations with phrases such as "would you agree?"; "does that sit with you?"; "what's your thoughts?" etc., conveys to the client the value of their opinion on what we are sharing.

Establishes and Maintains Agreements (CC3)

Partners with the client and relevant stakeholders to create clear agreements about the coaching relationship, process, plans and goals. Establishes agreements for the overall coaching engagement as well as those for each coaching session.

If, as is most commonly the case, coaching is offered as a package of three, four, six or more sessions, then a significant amount of time within the first session may be spent on determining the client's proposed overall goal for the coaching. Inexperienced coaches can

rush this process and try to establish the outcome at the very commencement of the first session. The problem with this is that the client will only be able to articulate what they are consciously aware of at that time. Whereas if the coach allows time for listening, questioning, exploring and thereby creating deeper awareness, the client will now have greater conscious understanding around the issue, and this will most likely affect how the outcome will be expressed.

In addition to an overall outcome, it is critical for the coach to partner with the client in establishing what they wish to accomplish within each individual coaching session. This is not to be rushed, as it is common for up to one third of the session to be taken with establishing the outcome and measures of success. Coaching is still taking place during this time, as the coach is creating awareness and hearing information which may be explored further with the client in pursuing the outcome. There is no preamble to coaching – **coaching begins from the very first words uttered within the session.**

Whether establishing the overall outcome, or the outcome of an individual session, it is critical to also establish the **measure(s) of success: how will the client know that the outcome has been achieved?** The more specific the measure, the greater the awareness for the client on the extent to which the outcome has been achieved. Having said this, it is important for coaches to ensure they are seeking a measure that is congruent with the client's primary modality. For example, a very kinesthetic client may not be looking for a concrete list of 6 consecutive steps as a measure. When coaches ask, "how will you know that you have achieved this outcome?", they may say "I'll feel it." That is fine, but explore further to gain greater specificity: "And where will you feel it?" They may say in my chest, or gut, etc. The client and the coach now have a specific measure!

Evokes Awareness (CC 7)

The ability to integrate and accurately evaluate multiple sources of information and to make interpretations that help the client to gain awareness and thereby achieve agreed-upon results.

This awareness is essentially evoked in many ways, including asking simple yet powerful questions, sharing insights, allowing space for the client to process, and exploring metaphors.

The questions coaches ask and the insights/observations/tools they share can create 'aha' moments for clients. These moments may be noticed in what the client shares, as well as in the tone of their voice and their body language. However, it is important not to presume what this awareness is. Some coaches who are in the early phases of their training and experience tend to rush in and summarise what they perceive to be the client's learning when they hear the 'aha' moment in their client's voice. However, it will be so much more powerful for the client when the coach responds with something like "that sounds like an 'aha' moment, what are you learning?" or "what have you discovered?" etc. By asking questions

such as these, the client then must articulate their new awareness. This helps to reinforce the transformation for the client, and it also may determine the direction for the remainder of the coaching session. For example, the coach may ask: “In moving towards what you wish to accomplish, would it be helpful to explore this new learning more, or would you like to go in another direction?” This clearly keeps the client in the driver’s seat (*partnering* with the client). Whereas if the coach summarises what s/he perceives to be the new learning, the risk is that the session continues in the direction as determined by the coach rather than the client, and opportunities to create even more and even deeper awareness may be compromised.

Powerful questions

Questions which are mostly open-ended, succinct, and responsive to what the client has shared will not only strengthen rapport but challenge the client to reflect and respond at a deeper level, taking them beyond the boundaries of their conscious awareness. Powerful questions are not necessarily eloquently constructed and grammatically correct literary masterpieces. Sometimes the most evocative questions are very simple: what’s happening for you?; what are you feeling?; what does that mean to you?; what is the evidence for that?, etc. Double-barreled questions should be avoided. Sometimes coaches are halfway through asking a question and realise a better way of reflecting it and thus ask another question before the client has had the chance to respond to the first question. It is better to give the client the opportunity to respond to the first question. A follow up question can always be asked if necessary.

The gift of silence

When clients respond with “that’s a great question!”, and then takes some time to answer, coaches know that they have taken them beyond the boundary of their conscious thinking, and that is where the gold is! **Allow for silence!** Give them time to think, reflect and answer before rushing in with the next question or observation. Great awareness is often evoked when the coach says nothing, allowing the client to verbally process their thoughts.

Sharing insights

While asking powerful questions is a critical means of evoking awareness, the contributions from the coach cannot be underestimated, provided they are offered without any attachment to being correct. One of the ICF PCC Markers for evoking awareness expresses it so well: *The coach shares – with no attachment – observations, intuitions, comments, thoughts, or feelings, and invites the client’s exploration through verbal or tonal invitation.*

Some coaches are hesitant to share their own insights out of a concern they may be leading the client or imposing their own agenda. So long as the client is invited to respond, and the coach accepts the client’s response, this is not only appropriate within the coaching space, but may be immensely helpful in evoking awareness.

The power of metaphor

Observing clients' metaphors and exploring them in partnership with the client can be a very effective means of evoking awareness. Some experts believe that metaphors sit at the boundary between our conscious and non-conscious mind. Therefore, if we partner with the client in exploring the metaphor, it may transform the client's thinking, actions, and the results they are getting. For example, within the coaching conversation a client may say, "I feel like I'm hitting a brick wall." Some possible responses from the coach: "What's that brick wall like?"; "What's on the other side of the brick wall?" "What would you like to have happen to the brick wall?" "What resources do you need to remove the brick wall?"; "When steps do you need to take to remove the wall?" In "listening actively" (Core Competency 6), do not underestimate the power in listening for and exploring clients' metaphors.

Facilitates Client Growth (CC8)

Partners with the client to transform learning and insight into action. Promotes client autonomy in the coaching process.

When the coach has partnered with the client in evoking new awareness through questions, observations, silence, and/or exploring metaphors, the next and final phase of the coaching conversation is partnering with the client in anchoring and integrating this new awareness within their life.

This can happen in a number of ways:

Exploring progress toward what the client wanted to accomplish.

During the session it is helpful to check in with the client to ensure they are happy with the direction of the session or whether they wish to explore something different. This is beneficial for both the client and the coach. It is helpful for the client because it again affirms that they are in the driver's seat and thus strengthens trust and safety (Core Competency 4). It is also beneficial for the coach because it affirms the direction of the conversation or confirms the need to change. There are times when we may not be able to gauge if our exploration is serving the client, and so rather than second guess, we ask!

Towards the conclusion of the session, the coach will check in again to ascertain whether the client believes they have achieved their stated outcome for the session. Revisiting the measure(s) of success will help bring to the client's conscious awareness the extent to which they have achieved what they hoped to accomplish within the session.

Exploring the client's learning within the session

Reiterating what I have previously stated, I do not precis or recap what I believe has been accomplished in the session. My perception may differ from that of my client, and given it is

not about me, but about my client, I ask them what has been valuable in the session.

Examples of how we may do this:

- what have you learned during our conversation (the 'what')?
- what have you learned about yourself (the 'who')?
- what new insights have you gained within this session?
- what have been the key 'aha' moments for you?

The wording is not important but should reflect expression that is authentic to both the coach and client. Verbally articulating what they have learned in the session – about their situation and about themselves – enables conscious awareness of the growth that has occurred. This may therefore increase the confidence and motivation to take action which will further facilitate change and growth.

Designing action, goals, ongoing reflection, and accountability

This is about partnering with the client in deciding how this new learning will be applied in a manner to facilitate further growth.

- *what action can you take to reinforce this new awareness?*
- *what goals may you need to set to make this change?*
- *what may you need to continue to reflect on to expand this awareness?*
- *who might support you in following through on this (accountability)?*
- (and, if the client chooses to hold themselves accountable) *how will you do this?*

These are but examples of questions the coach may ask in partnering with their client to encourage them to continue to act and further reflect, change, and grow in maximising their personal and professional potential.

Conclusion

This is not intended to be a comprehensive explanation of each of the ICF Core Competencies, as this can readily be found on the ICF Website. What I have sought to do is to create some awareness of how the order and flow of the core competencies within a coaching session or series of sessions can result in deeper awareness and transformation within clients. With practice and persistence, coaches will learn to integrate these core competencies within their coaching in a seamless manner that is congruent with their own unique style of coaching.

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June 2021