Elevating Organizational Change with a Coach Approach

The Coach Approach represents a significant opportunity for change management professionals and coaching professionals to enhance their practice and drive more effective, sustainable organizational change for their clients. By integrating these skills, practitioners can create deeper engagement, stronger commitment, and better outcomes in change initiatives.

Change is never just a process. It is a *human experience*. While change management offers frameworks to guide organizations from one state to another, coaching brings the *presence and partnership* needed to navigate the emotional terrain of transformation. Both disciplines aim to improve performance, overcome resistance, and build accountability, yet they begin from *different orientations*. These definitions of coaching and change management assist in the explanation of the Coach Approach:

Coaching	Change Management
The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires clients to maximize their personal and professional potential. A coaching engagement is a defined relationship with confidentiality agreements. Using the Coach Approach is the use of coaching skills without the specific engagement delineation	The Association of Change Management Professionals (ACMP) defines change management as the practice of applying a structured approach to transitioning an organization from a current state to a future state to achieve expected benefits.
Coaching Professional	**Change Professional**
The Coaching Professional is trained in the coaching competencies and ethics of coaching. They include: individual, group and team coaches, coaching skills trainers and Coach Program Strategists who conduct coaching program design and consultation.	Change Professionals provide expert advice and strategically facilitate organizational alignment and enrollment in a change initiative as well as manage the human collective challenges of change. The work is generally organizationally focused, planned, measured, and monitored.

These professionals reside inside and outside a client organization and are able to pair coaching expertise with a myriad of other specialty areas including management and leadership, consulting, organizational management and human resources. They assist with the human elements and challenges of change.	Change Professionals assist leaders in managing risk and the ongoing stakeholder adoption in change. And they inhabit many different roles inside and outside the organization: change manager, change management consultant, change analyst.

The **Coach Approach bridges these two disciplines**. It equips change practitioners with coaching tools that deepen awareness, foster shared ownership, and increase the likelihood that change will take root and sustain. It integrates the action of change management with the mindset and relational presence of coaching, offering a way to support people, not just systems, through transformation.

This review of the Coach Approach will help to:

- Understand what the Coach Approach is and how it supports effective change
- Distinguish between the Coach Approach and formal coaching engagements
- Identify when and where to apply coaching skills in the change process
- Adopt a coaching mindset that fosters ownership, reflection, and accountability
- Use powerful, coach-like questions to engage stakeholders and drive clarity
- Apply practical tools and examples aligned with the ACMP change model

The Coach Approach, when used by change practitioners, leverages coaching skills and the coaching mindset to enhance change efforts. The definition of the Coach Approach as presented at a 2024 conference by the ICF/ACMP Joint Task Force:

The Coach Approach

The coach approach is the use of coaching mindset and skills by change practitioners to go deeper with our change leaders to empower them to unearth and access their own knowledge to co-create solutions to increase success.

Beyond change management, coach approach can be used in management, leadership and other functions as a style of participative engagement that integrates coaching skills into daily interactions to maximize individual and organizational growth.

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Using the Coach Approach
An increasing number of change professionals are recognizing that integrating coaching skills helps build buy-in, empowerment, and ownership among those leading and experiencing change.   The ICF competencies of coaching include: Ethical Practice, Coaching Mindset, Establishes and Maintains Agreements, Cultivates Trust and Safety, Maintains Presence, Listens Actively, Evokes Awareness, and Facilitates Client Growth. These competencies are in service to building the clients' capacity to move into change with an empowered future focus. While the Coach Approach draws from the same foundations as professional coaching, using the Coach Approach in change work is distinct from entering into a coaching engagement as the Coach Approach utilizes the coaching mindset and skills without the formal delineation of the coaching engagement.

Coaching Mindset versus Consulting Mindset

The "coaching mindset" within the ICF (International Coaching Federation) framework is defined as *open, curious, flexible, and client-centered*. It is characterized by a belief in the client's capacity, resourcefulness, and ability to find their own solutions. Essentially, it's about embodying a way of being that supports the client's own thinking and growth and development.

The **coaching mindset** is rooted in the belief that clients already hold valuable insights. The role of the practitioner is to create space for reflection, discovery, and deeper thinking. Rather than offering solutions, a coach supports the client in thinking more clearly and creatively about the challenges they face.

This mindset encourages clients to generate their own strategies. As a result, the plans are more aligned, personalized, and sustainable because they come from the client's own understanding of their organization and context.

This table shows the key differences between advising and coaching.

	Consulting	Coaching
Purpose	To ensure an outcome	To support the client's thinking process in finding their own outcome
Answers	The advisor has the answers	The client can find the answers
Capabilities	Technical expertise Clear communication of ideas Relevant experience	Open-ended inquiry to support the client's thinking Ability to present ideas without attachment

		Listening for what is at play or difficult for the client

A formal coaching engagement involves clear contracting, confidentiality, and ethical guidelines as outlined by the ICF Code of Ethics. For this reason, it is important that change practitioners and professional coaches maintain clear role boundaries to preserve the integrity of both disciplines.

The purpose of using coaching skills in a change context is to help individuals reflect, explore options, develop their own insights, and commit to action. This strengthens their ability to lead and sustain chang

Using the Coach Approach:
- Strengthens leadership sponsorship of change
- Supports the visioning process needed to ground the change initiative
- Builds alignment and commitment of individuals engaged in change
- Encourages diverse views in the change
- Addresses and resolve individual and group barriers to change
- Builds leaders to develop resilience and competence in change
- Motivates and aligns clear action steps, commitment, and ensures accountability

Coaching skills can be used *at any point* in a change conversation by change and coaching professionals. In the ACMP five step change process seen below, it is noted that the Coach Approach is especially valuable in Steps 1, 2, and 3—but it can also enhance engagement in Steps 4 and 5.

Coaching Capabilities in Change

Note: The Coach Program Strategist is the individual who designs the coaching program including selecting coaching types (individual, team, group, training coaching skills), providing support materials (contracts, coaching engagement materials) and overseeing the coaching program and its alignment to the change goals.Examples of how the Coach Approach is used in the change process:

1. **Evaluate Change Impact and Organizational Readiness**
   Use open-ended questions to uncover unspoken concerns or fears, and listen for emotional readiness, not just logistical factors.

Example: "What are people not saying out loud about this change?" or "Where do you sense tension or resistance showing up?"

2. **Develop Change Vision and Strategies**
   Invite stakeholders to co-create ideas and explore multiple perspectives before deciding on a plan.
   Example: "What outcomes matter most to the people affected?" or "If we designed this with them, what would shift?" or "what is the strategic intent of this change?"

3. **Develop Implementation Plans and Build Buy-In and Sponsorship**
   Encourage accountability and alignment by helping individuals reflect on their roles and contributions.

Example: "What part of this plan feels most energizing or doable to you?" or "What support will you need to stay engaged?" "how aligned are you to the current change strategy?" What do you need in order to be more aligned? "How are we meeting our stakeholder's needs, now and in the future?"

4. **Execute Strategies and Plans and Address Barriers**
   Use check-ins and reflective dialogue to support learning in real time.

   Example: "What have you noticed about how people are responding so far?" or "Where do you feel most stuck—or most clear?"

Complete and Design Sustainability Program
Support long-term integration by helping teams name what they've learned and what they want to keep practicing. Sustainability should be built into the design and be a defined endpoint goal from the very beginning.

Example: "What new habits or mindsets have emerged?" or "How will you know the change is truly embedded?"

Inquiry: The Role of Coach-like Questions in Change
As demonstrated in the example above, the use of questions is a powerful way to engage clients in thinking about and engaging in change. Powerful questions assist those engaged in change to see the bigger picture and to explore the deeper resistance to change for themselves and others. Powerful questions are focused on supporting the client thinking about the challenge as opposed to the gathering of facts to solve for the client. That means the questions are more often open ended, evocative, future-oriented and they deepen the client awareness of the meaning and values underlying the challenge. These questions empower the client to better understand the challenge in order to generate possible solutions.

In the appendix there is a comprehensive set of "high- impact questions to support change", authored by John, Bennett., Mary, Wayne Bush, Impact Coaching for Organizational Change, 2010. Below are the the kinds of powerful questions that assist different stakeholders in building vision around change.

Topic	Sponsor	Advocate	Agent	Target
Articulating the Vision	▪ What do you wish to accomplish? ▪ To what extent does the vision articulate what is in it for customers and employees?	What is needed that is different?	▪ What is the change you are leading? ▪ Is the appeal of the vision emotional as well as intellectual?	▪ What are you being asked to change? ▪ Can you clearly see your role or function in this future vision?

Change is difficult. It is costly, complex, complicated, and lengthy. Research shows the largest impediments to successful change are leadership, communications, and employee resilience. If these obstacles are addressed both at the individual level and the system level through the Coach Approach, chances of success increase dramatically. The benefits to clients include better adherence to deadlines, budgets, and improved productivity.

Training Leaders in the Coach Approach and Coaching Mindset
Training leaders in the Coach Approach is one of the most effective ways to build lasting change capability within an organization. When coaching skills are embedded across all levels of management, organizations strengthen both their short- and long-term ability to navigate change. Leaders who apply these skills in real-time are able to accelerate implementation, reduce rework and cost, and intentionally cultivate the mindsets and behaviors essential for success. A coaching mindset also brings greater empathy and awareness to the human impact of change, which helps people stay engaged throughout the process.

Recommendations:
To lead change more effectively and humanely, organizations and change professionals should actively integrate the Coach Approach into their work. The following recommendations offer a path forward:

1. **Integrate coaching skills early.**
   Embed the Coach Approach as a core part of your change methodology. Begin using coaching skills at the earliest stages of the change process to build trust, ownership, and alignment.
2. **Maintain clear role boundaries.**
   Distinguish between the Coach Approach and formal coaching engagements. Preserving the integrity of both roles ensures ethical practice and clarity for everyone involved.
3. **Expand where and how the Coach Approach is used.**
   Look for opportunities to apply coaching mindsets across individuals, groups, and teams—early, often, and at multiple levels of the organization.
4. **Promote awareness across communities.**
   Continue building education and advocacy for the Coach Approach in change management. Strengthen networks across professional communities to share learning and expand its reach.
5. **Invest in coaching skills training.**
   Support client leaders and managers in developing coaching skills. Doing so builds both immediate traction and long-term capacity for leading effective, people-centered change.
6. **For coaches the opportunities to expand their practice are numerous**.
   Coaches can bring a coach approach role to the change initiative where confidentiality is not required. They can serve as teachers of the coach approach across change initiative team leaders and change agents. And they can co-

facilitate change initiative events such as Town Halls, large group meetings, and focus groups to bring a coach approach dialogue to the mix.

7. **Change management professionals can gain coaching certification with** ICF accredited programs and expand their breadth of expertise.

Appendix

Questions in the Change Process

From The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2010, High-Impact Coaching for Organizational Change. John, Bennett., Mary, Wayne Bush., pp114-123.

Table 2. The sponsor and agent roles of change (adapted from Conner, 1992)

Role	Responsibility or Contribution	Critical Phases for Involvement	Potential Coaching Topics
Sponsor	• Sanctions or legitimizes the change • Considers potential changes and assesses the impact, risks and opportunities • Decides which changes will happen • Communicates new priorities to the organization • Provides reinforcement to enable the change to be made	• Creating the vision • Engaging others • Sustaining the change	• Developing an inspiring vision • Influencing through communication skills • Presenting ideas effectively • Networking • Making a compelling business case for the change • Identifying the right agent • Identifying key stakeholders for the change, both formal and informal leaders who will help drive the change • Rewarding and recognition employees
Agent	• Executes the change—an individual or group • Diagnoses potential problems, develops a plan to deal with these issues, and deploys the change effectively	• Engaging others • Strategizing and planning • Sustaining the change	• Understanding and using the change process • Identifying key stakeholders for the change, both formal and informal leaders who will help drive the change • Creating the deployment strategy • Understanding the psychology of change – how people react, how to mitigate resistance • Creating a plan of action • Networking • Managing change projects • Identifying and reporting metrics • Identifying ways to sustain the change after the project is successful • Rewarding and recognizing employees

Table 3. The target and advocate roles of change (adapted from Conner, 1992)

Role	Responsibility or Contribution	Critical Phases for Involvement	Potential Coaching Topics
Target	• Undergoes change—the individual or group that is the focus of the change effort • Understand the change and what is expected • Participates in the implementation process	• Engaging others • Taking action • Achieving measurable results • Sustaining the change	• Clarifying the point of the change and what it mean to them as individuals or groups • Understanding the psychology of the change process • Identifying and reporting metrics • Identifying key areas in their own work and behavior that need to change in order for the project to be successful
Advocate	• Individual or group who wants to achieve a change, but lacks the power to sanction it	• Engaging others • Sustaining the change	• Identifying key stakeholders, both formal and informal leaders who will help drive the change • Understanding and applying the psychology of change – how people react, how to mitigate resistance • Facilitating the new actions and behaviors required • Sustaining the change

Table 4. High-impact questions to support change – Articulating the vision, Engaging others, and Developing strategy/planning examples

Topic	Sponsor	Advocate	Agent	Target
Articulating the Vision	▪ What do you wish to accomplish? ▪ To what extent does the vision articulate what is in it for customers and employees?	What is needed that is different?	▪ What is the change you are leading? ▪ Is the appeal of the vision emotional as well as intellectual?	▪ What are you being asked to change? ▪ Can you clearly see your role or function in this future vision?
Engaging Others	▪ Who needs to be involved to sustain this change initiative? ▪ How will you help others know you support this change? ▪ How will you let others know what is needed of them?	▪ How can you help the sponsor see the value in sponsoring it? ▪ What are you asking the sponsor to do?	▪ Who needs to be involved? ▪ Why will others consider this change important to them? ▪ Who may resist or oppose this change, and why?	▪ What support system do you have that will enable this change? ▪ How well will our employees and customers say we are currently doing on the issue we want to change?
Developing Strategy/ Planning	▪ What will you do to ensure competing priorities do not distract the organization from this change? ▪ How will you show the progress that is being made?	▪ What is your plan for demonstrating to the potential sponsor the importance of the change you seek? ▪ How will you address risk?	▪ How will you implement the change? ▪ What barriers or resistance are you likely to face? ▪ What is your plan for addressing resistance?	▪ What are you willing to do? ▪ What are you expected to do differently? ▪ How will you know that you are "on track"?

Table 5. High-impact questions to support change – Taking action, Getting measurable results, and Sustaining the change examples

Topic	Sponsor	Advocate	Agent	Target
Taking Action	▪ What are you willing to "let go of" in order for this change to occur?	▪ What will you do to influence the sponsor? ▪ How will you demonstrate that you are using the feedback you receive?	▪ What will you do to implement this change? ▪ How will you identify early "wins" to show progress?	▪ What is inhibiting you from taking the next step toward this change? ▪ Who among your teammates is managing the change well?
Getting Measurable Results	▪ How will you know this change was successful? ▪ How are you communicating progress, and to whom?	▪ What progress are you making?	▪ What results have your achieved? ▪ Who are you rewarding? And how?	▪ What are the results of the changes you have made?
Sustaining the Change	▪ How has the change become embedded in other business processes?	▪ How will you support the sponsor's efforts to initiate and sustain this change?	▪ What will you do to keep Targets aware of the importance of this change? ▪ How are you documenting the "lessons learned"?	▪ What will you do to avoid returning to the "old way"? ▪ Has this change impacted the way you do business in any other areas?

Research Sources Supporting the Coach Approach in Change Management:

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