



Coaching + AI:

A Partnership to Unleash Potential

*How Responsible AI Implementation
Can Empower Coaches & Clients*

coachingfederation.org

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From the earliest days of coaching, the profession has centered on human connections that heighten awareness, strengthen communication and accelerate people and organizations toward their goals. This has been a steadfast core to coaching even as it has evolved through the years. Now, as advancements in AI bring transformation across essentially every industry, and create new ways for individuals to explore ideas and pursue development, coaches must find balance between protecting that coach-client human connection and leveraging tools that can advance their mastery of ICF core competencies as well as their businesses.

The question is not simply what AI can do. The question is what only humans can give.

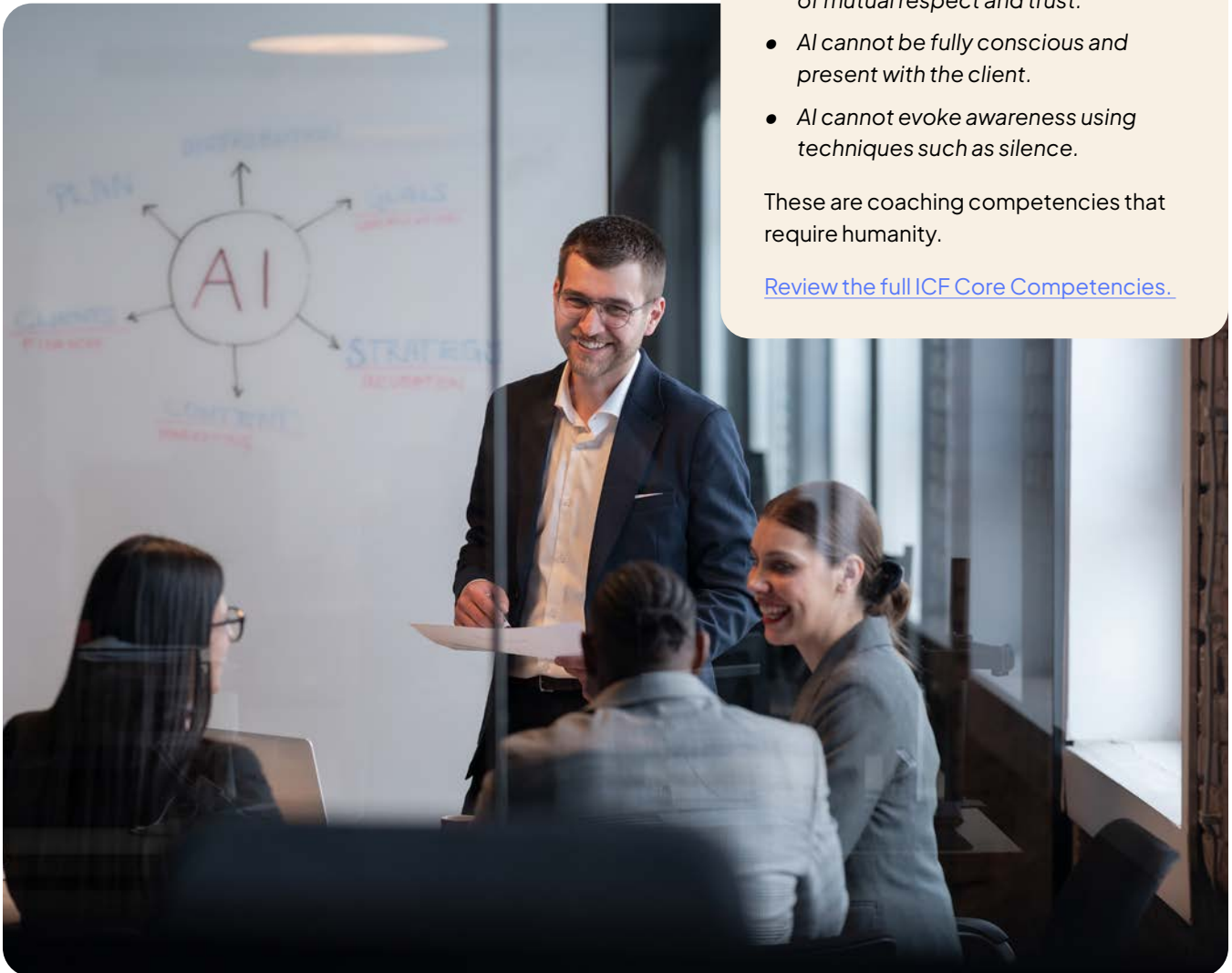
ICF Core Competencies

ICF has advanced coaching with research-backed core competencies and a mission to empower people and societies to thrive. These competencies define the standard for professional coach conduct. Within these competencies, there are many skills and behaviors that AI cannot achieve:

- *AI cannot be held accountable.*
- *AI cannot embody a coaching mindset.*
- *AI cannot maintain a relationship of mutual respect and trust.*
- *AI cannot be fully conscious and present with the client.*
- *AI cannot evoke awareness using techniques such as silence.*

These are coaching competencies that require humanity.

[Review the full ICF Core Competencies.](#)



AI can offer meaningful value to both coaches and clients. It may support preparation, reflection, learning, pattern recognition, and access to resources. But its role must be clearly and carefully defined.

The opportunity before the coaching profession is not to reject AI, nor to treat it as a replacement for coaching, but to define how to appropriately apply AI tools to the profession.

Coaching can evolve with technology while remaining grounded in what makes it distinct: ethical practice, mutual respect and trust, deep listening, presence, and belief in the client's capacity to grow.

Advancing Coaching in the AI Age

As AI tools became more common in coaching the past few years, ICF has set clear ways guidance for its safe and fair use:

- In 2024, ICF formed the [AI Coaching Standards Working Group](#) to help shape how coaches use AI in line with core ethics and human-led practice. This Group included experts and thought leaders for the purpose of exploring ICF's role in further understanding the impact of technology on coaching with a specific focus on Artificial Intelligence.
- [ICF's credentialing process](#) helps protecting the field by tying coach skill, ethics, and conduct to clear standards, which now include guidance for the sound use of AI.
- ICF's [Artificial Intelligence Coaching Framework](#) builds on this work by setting guidance for AI standards, risk, and ethical use in coaching. The framework provides structured guidelines to foster ethical, effective, and accessible AI coaching practices.
- In 2025, ICF established its AI Council to help keep all the existing work around AI current as tools and client needs constant change. Together, the existing groups and guides support a common goal: AI can help coaching, but it should not replace trust, choice, privacy, or the human element at the heart of the work. The establishment of ICF's AI Council is one of the organization's permanent part of its approach towards AI.
- The [2025 Code of Ethics](#) now explicitly addresses use of AI and technology tools. Coaching professionals should be transparent with clients about what tech they use, how data is handled, and how they ensure confidentiality (I:2.5):
"Fulfill my ethical and legal obligations to my coaching client(s), sponsor(s), colleagues, and to the public at large directly and through any technology systems I may utilize (i.e. technology-assisted coaching tools, databases, platforms, software, and artificial intelligence)."
- In July 2026 ICF convened experts in coaching ethics and ethical AI to form an Ethical AI Standards & Governance Initiative working group.

Powered by Human Connection

No matter how coaching or technology evolve, ICF's definition for coaching, built upon the gold standard for the profession, remains centered on human-to-human connection. AI tools can support coaching and human development, but should not be represented as equivalent to a professional credentialed coach. Ethical accountability, relational presence, discernment, care, and professional responsibility are necessary, uniquely human elements of the partnership.

Coaching is a partnership between coach and client in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires clients to maximize their personal and professional potential.

- ICF Coaching Definition

The Human-to-Human Difference

Though AI is young, studies are already emerging that demonstrate the distinct power of human-to-human connection for coaching.

A 2026 study (Nam & Choi, PLOS ONE, 2026) that examined clients' perceptions of AI coaching compared to human coaching found that while AI coaching reliably delivered procedural clarity for actions such goal structuring, task suggestions, and consistent followup, only human coaching could offer true "coaching presence," the researchers' term for the embodied, attuned, responsive quality of full human engagement. This key difference led clients to describe AI coaching as transactional, rather than relational. Without this emotional bond and engagement, clients reported less internalized motivation.

This reinforces the findings of a 2023 meta-analysis of 37 randomized controlled trials (de Haan & Nilsson, 2023) that found in human coaching, the relationship between client and coach was in itself a major contributor to coaching outcomes—coaching amounted to much more than the sequence of pattern recognitions, utility, or the coaching techniques applied.

People crave connection to other people. Research from neuroscientist Dr. Annika Walter has demonstrated that we need human connection for psychological and physical well-being—and these interactions offer neurological growth that cannot be gained by other means. It serves individuals, organizations, and societies for coaching to keep human relationship at the center.

3 Modalities Across the Coaching and AI Landscape

ICF recognizes three distinct modalities across the coaching and AI landscape:

- **Coach-led modality:** A professional coach partners directly with the client. AI does not participate in or influence the coaching relationship.
- **Hybrid modality:** A professional coach remains accountable for the coaching relationship, while AI supports aspects of the coaching practice. The coach is responsible for defining the operating procedures including disclosure, client consent, and oversight of how AI is used.
- **AI-led modality:** A user interacts directly with an AI system designed to provide coaching-related interactions, with no professional coach present or accountable for the interaction.

These modules do not include the use of non-coaching AI tools for coaching purposes. While many have started to turn to LLM models such as ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini as go-to sources, which sometimes includes treating the LLM as a coach, these tools are not designed to align to ICF coaching standards and code of ethics. Tools are most effective when ICF standards for coaching are met, and studies have demonstrated that human-to-human

engagements are the most impactful. LLMs are not developed to follow best practices to ensure effectiveness; indeed, they are designed to deliver a pleasing output to the user, which is contrary to the challenge necessary for personal growth. Already there are unfortunate documented cases where LLMs have led users seeking coaching or other counsel down harmful paths.

AI capabilities hold real promise for the coaching community, and may help coaches to run their businesses, complete admin tasks, reinforce client relationships between sessions, and more. The gap between AI-only tools and a real coaching relationship shows up in how a client's transformation is supported.

Consider: A fitness app can track your reps, remind you to do your daily workout, offer guidance on what to do at the gym, and monitor your progress. But an app can't spot you on a heavy lift, read the doubt in your expression and support you through it, or adapt a program to meet personalized challenges or goals. Likewise, human coaching offers crucial relationship and presence that an AI-only tool can't: it builds the motivation, trust, and emotional connection that drive people to keep going and grow. Both have value, but they are not the same.

Coaches are encouraged to explore and implement AI tools with curiosity, discernment, transparency, and collaboration with the client.



Principles for Human-Centered Developmental AI

Regardless of how AI might be implemented into a client's coaching experience, that client is entitled to certain professional standards and quality of experience. These standards for AI development were built upon the ICF Code of Ethics and the ICF AI Coaching Framework and Standards into commitments that apply wherever AI touches a coaching experience. ICF has also convened a working group comprised of coaching ethics experts and AI ethics experts to investigate and define what the organization means by ethical AI.

Transparency

People must clearly understand when they are interacting with AI, what the system is designed to do, its limitations, how data is used, and where human oversight exists. AI systems should never imply human consciousness, empathy, wisdom, or professional accountability where none exists.

Psychological Safety

Developmental AI systems should be designed to avoid manipulation, emotional dependency, exploitative persuasion, unsafe attachment dynamics, and harmful reinforcement loops. Particular attention should be given to known risks such as anthropomorphic attachment, sycophancy, authority inflation, and emotional over-reliance.

Human Accountability by Design

Human governance of developmental AI is not a corrective fallback for when something goes wrong — it is a structural requirement from the outset. Coaches and organizations deploying AI in developmental contexts bear professional responsibility for the tools they use: their outputs, their limitations, and their potential to cause harm. Systems operating in emotionally sensitive or developmental contexts must include built-in pathways to human support, ethical review, mental health escalation, or professional intervention. Responsibility for developmental outcomes cannot be delegated to an algorithm.

Developmental Integrity & Bias Mitigation

AI systems may facilitate reflection without possessing human understanding. Systems should not falsely imply wisdom, discernment, empathy, moral judgment, or lived understanding. Clients deserve clarity about the nature of the system they are engaging with and the limits of its capabilities.

While these principles were developed for coaching, they hold significant implications for how AI tools impact diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging; human cognitive processes, ensure access and belonging, inclusion, development, and psyche; psychological safety, and safeguards for vulnerable individuals as AI becomes more widespread in its implementation.

The Future ICF Supports

Coaching: A Human-Driven Future with AI-Supported Opportunity

The future of coaching is not a choice between innovation and humanity. It is the responsible integration of technology by credentialed coaching practitioners, governed by clear standards that preserve coaching's uniquely human foundations.

The ultimate question is not whether AI can support human development; rather, the question is whether the future we create with AI strengthens the human relationships, communities, institutions, and sources of meaning upon which human flourishing depends.

ICF is committed to a future that upholds best-in-class coaching standards, and is leading the way to define standards for how AI can support and advance coaching to make it more accessible than ever—while protecting trust, transparency, and research-backed best practices.

