

We've lost our Way AND our Soul in the Process.

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Would anyone coaching, as a member in the ICF, tell a client that they had to imitate the existing success models in order to thrive? I would hope not. Would they seek to impose a structure for success they'd seen before, studied or been a part of? In fact, the ICF MCC minimum skill requirements would be expressly against that.

A coach will not receive a passing score for establishing trust and intimacy with the client on the MCC exam if the **coach does not treat the client as a full partner choosing not only the agenda**, but also participating in the creation of the coaching process itself. Any indication that the coach is teaching rather than coaching will also create a score below the MCC level.

And yet, the ICF, as an organization, is violating not only our own competencies but the soul of coaching left and right and has been for years. Let me explain. The members are the clients and the organization / leadership is the coach. But a little context first.

Many years ago circa 1992 when I was introduced to coaching by Thomas Leonard, the process went something like this. I'd been told to go to this new workshop by my friend Jay Perry. Now I had been to lots of seminars, with success gurus and invariably, every time I tried something they had to offer and it didn't work, inevitably it came back to the notion that somehow, if I couldn't make their system work, it was my fault and I was not somehow enough...committed, passionate, perseverant, something.

So when he suggested I attend this course on 'coaching' I pushed back but eventually my trust of him said okay, one last time.

I went to the event in an apartment in Greenwich Village, and as part of it, Thomas said, "I want to give a coaching demo, who would like to be coached?" So I raised my hand and volunteered fully expecting to hear his success formula, one I'm sure would somehow fail if I tried it and I'd be once more thrust on the rocks of my own 'limitation'.

I gave him my scenario and he responded after listening attentively to it all..."When you've been successful in the past, what methodology did you use?" I sat there stunned. No one had ever asked me a question like that before. It was a question that contained at least three assumptions: Firstly, that I'd been successful before. Second that I had a methodology and third that I might know something about it.

Engaged I stumbled through a response and then the next question came. "And when you ran into obstacles what character traits did you draw on to keep going?" Again there was silence on my part. And again I fumbled the best answer I could in the moment. It went on for about 15

minutes and at the end, I felt alive, renewed, engaged and most of all...returned to myself. It was one of the more life affirming experiences I'd ever had and I thought..."I want to do this for people."

And that was the start of a 20+ years in coaching career. I joined the ICF which seemed to be an organization that was supporting these principles of honoring people's uniqueness, exploration (the word is all over the competencies) and discovery of something new that would fit uniquely to whom the client was and what they were seeking.

Sadly, we didn't do that same kind of exploration for ourselves. In our quest for legitimacy as a profession, we fell back on the 'tried and true' structures of other organizations, even adopting the Robert's Rules of Order way of meetings. We went all hierarchical with directors, a board, committees etc.

It was as if we had asked a coach how to put together an organization and the coach said ..."Do what already exists." This is something that we wouldn't do for our clients and yet we abandoned the sense of adventure and discovery that is/was the hallmark of our profession. We stepped in a pile of incongruence and never looked back.

It seems we never dared to seek or invent a new form. We never took the moment to say..."if we are a unique organization, honoring a one of a kind membership and we were staying true to those values what would we create?"

We came up with 'competencies'...just like other organizations, to inspire and measure our profession's output. Sidebar here, who actually wants to be 'competent'? We didn't even take the time to seek out new language that would become part of the brand and therefore the distinction we presented to the world.

We were so busy trying to define ourselves as different from therapy or consulting or mentoring that we didn't notice that we were following what was taught about each of those things as to how to have an organization function.

We might have continued the sense of discovery and created something as yet unseen in terms of how an organization could function. And yet we didn't. We copied. And that is the singular most glaring indictment of how we operate that has created many more difficulties as that desire for legitimacy and 'professionalism' compelled us to simply adopt or attempt to adopt other practices for our organization.

In doing so, we gained acceptance in the world at the price of our soul. Our soul of 'not knowing but inquiring', our soul of 'daring to seek something new that fits the unique creature we were' our soul of 'honoring the individual' before simply driving to success. We forgot the 'who' of who we are and went pell mell down the mountain to solidify the 'what'.

This shows itself in many ways not the least of which is the current thrust toward copying one more profession's system....'supervision'. I'm just curious, but haven't we spent decades trying

almost desperately at times, to provide a distinction between coaching and therapy, only to adopt one of their ways of going about things and thereby blurring the lines even more?

And who is crying for this supervision? Certainly NOT the general membership. I've seen no hue and cry over the lack of this being present in the ICF. Yes, there have been some advocates - ironically though, from members who also seem to have a conflict of interest in that some from a company that would provide this service.

I get it. We need something that supports what new coaches go through. I agree, and yet looking for it outside ourselves in existing models denies the level of creativity that is within the membership of this organization. This is a service that used to be fulfilled by mentors before the ICF narrowed the definition of mentoring to something that even the general world doesn't subscribe to. My coach mentored me in a full range of topics regarding my success. Challenges I was facing with clients, growing my business, my mastery of skills. That's what I brought to him, after all, I'd hired him as my coach and I allegedly could bring anything I wanted to because I was paying.

We did this with the ISO initiative (the movement by ICF staff to one credential level in 2008) when we sought to measure ourselves more on a professional level as compared to other organizations. When did comparing ourselves to another become part of the ICF soul?

And the members are where stuff lives. If members are the 'clients' of the ICF then we are sorely being abused at present by the 'coach' having all this research, dialogue and meetings investigating 'Coaching Supervision' without first having consulted the client.

"The coach, through a **partnering** discussion, ensures that **both** the coach and client are clear about the agenda, the measures of success, and the issues to be discussed. The coach attends to that agenda and those measures throughout the coaching, **unless redirected** by the client. **Any potential change in direction of the coaching session is thoroughly explored in partnership** with the client and **the client is the ultimate decision maker** as to whether a change in direction will occur. The coach regularly checks with the client throughout the session to make sure that the client's goals for the session are in fact being achieved and that the direction and process chosen are forwarding the client's thinking and/or action about their desired goals".

For anyone who might say...'but this is how leadership functions in an organization'. That's exactly the problem. Who says we have to be like every, or even ANY other organization? We're not operating as a coaching organization. We're operating as a copy of others. Something we wouldn't advocate for a minute that we do with clients, and something for which we'd get hammered in applying for a credential.

Either our competencies and the philosophy of coaching mean something across the board or it's as meaningless as all the 'these are our values' placards I've seen in companies that don't live by them.

“Lack of full partnership will be demonstrated if the coach exhibits an interest in the coach’s view of the situation rather than the client’s view of the situation, does not seek information from the client about the client’s thinking around the situation, does not seek information about the client’s goals regarding the situation, or any attention seems to be on the coach’s own performance or demonstration of knowledge about the topic. In addition, the evaluation will be negatively impacted *if the coach* does not invite the client **to share his/her thinking on an equal level with the coach and/or chooses the direction and tools in the session without significant input from the client.”**

Bottom line...you can’t have one code for the members of the organization and another for the leaders and how the organization functions and pretend any level of congruence. As for me...we’ve lost our way and a magnificent grand adventure is gone. We’re now looking at the detritus of what we have wrought. Anyone anywhere can label themselves a coach, thereby either polluting the environment with untrained behavior (“I’m a tarot coach”) or confusing the marketplace by diluting the brand.

Perhaps we brought this all on ourselves when we started by co-opting someone else’s word for what we do...coach. It had different meanings before and still does, hence the question that is still out there “What sport?” The word comes with baggage because the association with existing definitions creates preconditioned expectations. We’ve spent a lot of time and effort by the membership trying to clear up muddy waters. Waters that were inadvertently muddied by us stepping into the stream with the dirt from other professions on our shoes.

Here’s the reminder of what we’re allegedly about:

ICF defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and **creative process** that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential, which is particularly important in today’s uncertain and complex environment. Coaches honor the client as the expert in his or her life and work and believe every client is creative, resourceful and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:

- **Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve**
- **Encourage client self-discovery**
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
- Hold the client responsible and accountable

This process helps clients dramatically improve their outlook on work and life, while improving their leadership skills and unlocking their potential.

I haven’t counted how many times the words discover, explore and create are in our literature but I’m betting the number of times the word ‘imitate’ is 0.

