

What is Mentor Coaching? A Perspective in Practice

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This article aims to define Mentor Coaching and share best practices taking into consideration ICF standards and sharing our personal experiences and practices of six years mentor coaching more than 200 coaches in 15 countries from all continents. ICF generally defines Mentor Coaching as the “professional assistance necessary for the coach to achieve and demonstrate the levels of coaching competency demanded by the desired credential level,” and it explains that “during this process, feedback is provided on the development of the skills demonstrated in a session, and it is deliberately not provided on the general professional practice, the life balance or other topics unrelated to the competencies displayed.” If we look closely at this definition, we spot several elements to consider:

- 1. “Professional assistance necessary for the coach to achieve and demonstrate the levels of coaching competency demanded by the desired credential level.”** The mentor coach has developed expertise to recognize when specific skills are present or absent during the coaching performance so they can provide feedback to the coach. Currently, there are different expectations for different levels of coaching mastery and Mentor Coaches can identify the gap between performance and expectations and work with a coach to develop skills to breach the gap.
- 2. “During this process, feedback is provided on the development of the skills demonstrated in a session, and it is deliberately not provided on the general professional practice, the life balance or other topics unrelated to the competencies displayed.”** Providing feedback is the main task of the mentor coach. The feedback should be provided in a respectful and supportive fashion and facilitated as a dialogue rather than a monologue. We differentiate Mentor Coaching from other practices such as Coaching Supervision, focused on the reflection on the professional work of a coach.

Mentor Coaching and Coaching Supervision

ICF has developed some guidelines to differentiate these two complementary practices that are essential parts of the educational path of any coach during his development as such. One of the important differences between both activities is the depth of the work on the coach as a person.

In Mentor Coaching, the professional's skills are analyzed (either face-to-face or by listening to the recordings of the sessions) along with their ability to demonstrate the skills during a session with a client. All the work is focalized into the recognition of the presence—or absence—of the skills demonstrated on that session and the comparison to the expectations set for each level of accreditation acknowledged by the ICF: ACC, PCC or MCC.

In Coaching Supervision, on the other hand, the analysis is more profound because the focus goes beyond the coach's skills, in an attempt to explore the field around the coach's “who.” This work implies going deeper on their own personal fears, difficulties and challenges they will have to accept and those they impose on themselves, the objections to themselves, the identifications that might undermine their optimal performance and any potential projection into clients such as the identification of the coach with client.

The Hawkins Model, known as “Seven-eyed Model,” allows us to see clearly the differences between Mentor Coaching and Supervision. This methodology explores three systems of relationships: Between the client and their coach, between the coach and their supervisor and the general context system. In order to get to know, in depth, the relationship between the client and their coach, Hawkins says it is

necessary to explore the client's characteristics, the coach's interventions and the peculiarities of the relationship between them. With regards to the work of the coach-supervisor system, the Seven-eyed Model suggests that we should analyze the emotional responses of the coach to what the client brings forwards, what is known as the "parallel process;" i.e., the repetition in the stage of supervision of elements of the Coaching session; and the responses of the supervisor to the content presented by the coach. In the analysis of the third system, or general context, several variables are explored, among them the organizational context, the financial, social and political conditions that affect the interaction between the other two systems.

Individual and Group Mentor Coaching

Mentor Coaching can be effectively provided using both modalities. According to ICF, it is expected that in coach training and the process of renewing credentials, there is a minimum of 10 hours of mentor coaching from which at least three should be individual sessions. In Individual Mentor Coaching, coaches may submit the following in advance to the mentor coach: a recorded session (between 20 minutes and one hour long), the transcription of the session and a self-assessment reflection. This is a very useful practice, as the self-analysis promotes awareness, the consolidation of the strengths and the recognition of those skills that need to be polished to optimize the operation. This is not an ICF requirement, but rather a strong recommendation by us, the authors.

This allows the mentor coach to evaluate the material against the different levels of the ICF Competencies before meeting with the coach. The objective of this pedagogical resource is the development of coaching skills based on the provision of feedback for specific work, performed with a specific client in a particular circumstance.

In Group Mentor Coaching, participants learn not only from the mentor coach but also from their peers. The process may consist of discussion of recordings or of a coaching session in which one of the group participants performs as a client and another one as the coach. The remaining members attend to the session silently and, later, provide feedback. The aim of this approach is for every member to get the chance to learn from each other and require that the Mentor Coach facilitates the discussion effectively.

It is important to note that according to ICF policies, Group Mentor Coaching processes should not include more than 10 people, and that both, Individual and Group Mentor Coaching processes must last a duration of at least three months.

Individual Mentor Coaching Process

In our own approach to Mentor Coaching, we separate the process into five components. In the first part, the "agreement" is set: It entails the Mentor Coach asking the coach about which competencies they would like to review during the session in order to receive feedback. In the second part, the Mentor Coach listens to the coach while they demonstrate their skills based on a recording or a live session. During the third part, the coach reflects on their performance and elaborates a self-assessment before receiving the comments and the feedback from the Mentor Coach. The fourth moment is devoted to feedback provided by the Mentor Coach, which is offered in a conversational way. It should be a dialogue, not a monologue. During the fifth instance of the process, the coach shares their learning and decides what they will be addressing in the future.

The recording must be submitted in advance providing the Mentor Coach enough time to consider the material and formulate what they see as strengths and development areas.

Group Mentor Coaching Process

When the work takes place within a group, a recording may be listened to in advance of said session or

one of the participating coaches may perform as the client and another one as the coach. During the session, the Mentor Coach and the remaining peers observe and note their reflections of how the session mapped against targeted skill development areas.

When the group moves to the feedback stage, the Mentor Coach first asks the client to share their impressions, then they ask so to the coach, and finally the Mentor Coach provides their comments. To conclude, the coach shares what they learned in the process and how they plan to apply such learning in subsequent sessions. This participative mechanism will result in every member of the group learning from all of their peers and being enriched beyond the experience levels any one individual might offer. The expected final result is that each coach may introduce all the knowledge they collected in these sessions into their daily practice.

COMPETENCIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A MENTOR COACH

Responsibilities of a Mentor Coach

In its official webpage, the ICF lists suggested behaviors that are desirable and expected from a Mentor Coach. There is also a list of responsibilities a Mentor Coach needs to consider in their professional work. Among them, we call attention to the following:

- 1. “Model effective initiation and contracting of coach relationship.”** The Mentor Coach is a model for the coach, so they need to be extremely clear and specific in the stage of the process devoted to the contracting of the services that will be rendered. In this moment of the relationship, the Mentor Coach must fully explain to the potential client what Mentor Coaching is, how it operates, what potential expectations the client may hold and how financial aspects will be handled. Many of these tasks are similar to the ones conveyed at the beginning of a coaching process. The main difference is that the Mentor Coach is expected to be absolutely clear and effective, as they are modeling the professional behavior of the coach from the very beginning of the relationship.
- 2. “Explore fully with the coach what is aimed at achieving in the Mentor Coaching process.”** This exploration comprises two levels. On the one hand, the Mentor Coach wants to acknowledge the specific objectives driving the coach into this learning process. But also, each session is a potential opportunity to focus on the specific competencies that may be chosen by the coach at the beginning of the relationship.
- 3. “Ensure both are clear about the purpose of the Mentor Coaching.”** Such behavior reinforces the coach-Mentor Coach contract. During the clarification of the purpose of the Mentor Coaching process, it is also possible to include an exploration on the way of learning preferred by the coach, in order to determine how they prefer to receive feedback and what they expect from the learning process and the Mentor Coach.
- 4. “Establish measures of success in partnership with the coach.”** Generally speaking, these success measures are closely related to the achievement of the ICF Credential exam; yet they may also refer to the acquisition of a higher ability in the performance of the Coaching Competencies.
- 5. “Fully discuss fees, time frame and other aspects of a Mentor Coaching relationship.”** Completely clarifying these initial aspects, which may seem auxiliary, ensures a field work that is free from obstacles and the avoidance of potential misunderstandings on aspects as simple as when the session is to be paid for or what would happen if the coach needs to cancel an individual session too close to the time scheduled.
- 6. “Inform the coach regarding all aspects of the ICF Code of Ethics and the availability of the Ethical Conduct Review Board.”** Given the Mentor Coach is a role model and a professional guide, they are expected not only to adhere to the ICF’s Code of Ethics, but also to know it deeply enough to be able to explain it to the coaches whom they work. For example, a client may want to explore an issue that is not

appropriate for coaching with their coach. If this happens within the frame of a Mentor Coaching process, with the client present and the coach does not realize it and starts exploring the issue, the Mentor Coach will interrupt the session and explain that the issue is not appropriate for a coaching session. Even when participants in a Mentor Coaching group are expected to be familiarized with the definition of coaching endorsed by ICF, coaches may, in their first stage of training, inadvertently accept exploring issues that require the attention of other professionals—for instance, those related to depression, anxiety or other issues that demand a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist.

7. “Encourage the coach to meet other potential Mentor Coaches in order to find the best suited professional to match their needs.” This is a practice that ICF also encourages among those clients seeking a coaching service. The idea is that once the client has the chance to choose between several options, they may be able to find the professional best suited to address their needs. There are clients who feel more comfortable working with coaches who bear some characteristics they feel familiar with, while others prefer to work with professionals with diverse styles and experiences because they consider these differences as a chance to learn.

8. “Make no guarantee that as a result of the Mentor Coaching process, the coach will obtain the credential level they are seeking.” This is extremely important, as each person’s learning process relies on multiple variables—for instance, their own capacity to incorporate new learning as well as their attitude to interpret information and deploy the new learnings. Sometimes, it is observed that experienced coaches who seek the ICF MCC Credential find out they need to “unlearn” some behaviors more associated to the work of a consultant than to a coach. To ICF, the coach is expected to be a “full” collaborator during the coaching process. Many times, this presumes letting the client “take control of the wheel,” which entails a hard challenge to overcome for those who tend to lead the way in their professional arena.

9. “Guarantee coaching sessions are individually analyzed, that the coach gets the relevant feedback between sessions, and that there is enough time between Mentor Coaching sessions to allow for the incorporation of learning and personal development.” The coach develops their skills along a process that enables them to deploy what they have learned in the Mentor Coaching sessions. That is why ICF recommends that the 10-hour process of sessions spans over at least three months, as the deployment of the new learning derived from the feedback is essential for that process.

10. “Provide specific oral and written feedback using material examples from the sessions, in such a way that (a) the coach knows precisely what is correctly being done; and (b) the coach is able to understand what needs to be done to develop a deeper level in the mastering of the Art of Coaching.” The specificity of the examples allows the coach to gain clarity on how their skills are demonstrated during the analyzed coaching session. This why it is important that the Mentor Coach takes notes while observing the coach, so they will then be able to provide the most thorough feedback they can, providing as many examples of behaviors displayed during the session as possible, illustrating the Coaching Competencies deployed.

According to ICF guidelines, the Mentor Coach is expected to demonstrate these personal traits:

- “Is trustworthy and has the ability to develop empathy with the coach.”
- “Is someone who encourages the learner to reach beyond what the coach initially feels is possible. Assists the coach contracting the services in broadening his creative process.”
- “Demonstrates equal partnership by being open, vulnerable and willing to take appropriate risks; for example, in providing feedback that may feel uncomfortable.”
- “Has the ability to be supportive and authentic in celebrating the learner’s achievements and growth throughout the process.”
- “Is secure in their own work and is able to demonstrate appreciation and respect for the unique style of each mentee.”
- “Encourages the development of the learner’s own coaching style.”
- “Is willing to encourage regular and mutual assessment of the effectiveness of the relationship.”

To summarize, the Mentor Coach is expected to demonstrate a higher level in the behaviors an effective professional coach should deploy. It is worth recalling that the Mentor Coach is a role model for the coach and needs to exhibit the deployment of ethical and professional parameters defined by ICF. For example, they must be effective in the development of the coach-Mentor Coach agreement. Also, they need to display effectiveness when establishing trust and intimacy, when creating the special empathy needed for coaches and when offering them support to help them open and show their vulnerability and willingness to explore both their weak and strong aspects in regards to the deployment of the competencies.

The Mentor Coach needs to be self-confident and needs to trust the coach and the Mentor Coaching process, and they also needs to be an expert at providing feedback, as this is one of their most important activities. It is worth pointing out that a coach may be utterly effective with his clients and ineffective in the role as Mentor Coach. This is because the competencies required for each role are different. This is why we consider it is relevant for mentor coaches to receive training and to participate in programs in which they get the chance to develop and enhance these specific skills.

References

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