



The Future of Coaching as a Profession The Next 5 Years (2005-2010) A Thought Paper

written by
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Context and the Evolution

This paper originates from the 2004 International Coach Federation (ICF) Strategic Planning Retreat, which requested that a study (white paper) be conducted of what needs to be in place for coaching to be recognized as a self-regulating profession by the public and regulators.

As we discussed this project, we shifted the perspective from writing a white paper on coaching as a self-regulated profession, to a thought paper focusing on the key issues facing coaching as a profession. We contacted some of the leading and representative thinkers in the coaching field, within and outside of ICF, and asked them to share their views on the future of the profession.

The Participants

The participants interviewed are thought leaders from a cross section of recognized coaching associations, organizations and academic institutions. Note: The majority of those invited replied; there were a smaller number of invitees who either declined participation or did not reply to our invitation. A complete listing of all Thought Paper Participants can be found at the conclusion of this document.

We conducted most interviews by telephone; a few participants responded via email. The answers were collected, reviewed, summarized and appear in a bulleted format, detailing common themes and divergent thinking. In order to allow the greatest freedom of thought, all interviewees were assured the confidentiality of their individual responses to provide a more objective collaboration. The paper was simultaneously released to the ICF Board of Directors and all interviewees.

Questions and Answers

All respondents were asked to hold the context of looking at the next 5 years of the coaching profession in answering the following questions:

1. How do we address the challenge of having a universal definition of coaching?

- The majority of those interviewed saw a focus on a singular - universal definition of coaching as a futile effort and not the most productive use of time.

- Defining coaching is similar to how people define leadership. There are skill areas, schools of thought, and there may not be agreement. We would not want to become immobilized by a process of trying to build a consensus around a universal definition.
- Coaching has evolved significantly over the past ten to fifteen years and it will continue to do so. Research and academic involvement are producing more explicit links to the fields of Organizational Development, Psychology, Human Resources and Management Theory. As coaching evolves, new ideas are reflected which may change the definition.
- If we examine the definitions of coaching around the world, we will likely find common elements. These elements could be gathered by a skilled researcher. The purpose may not be to forge a universal definition but rather clarify the common elements to create a broad definition of coaching.
- Rather than focus on a universal definition, we need a worldwide concentration on defining the different types of coaching such as Executive, Corporate, Life/Personal, 360 Feedback, Business, etc. and the standards, education and experience required for each.
- We need to distinguish between (a) informally using coaching skills within the practice of some other pursuit, i.e., “little ‘c’ coaching”; and (b) the formalized practice of Coaching as a profession, i.e., “big ‘C’ Coaching”. The definition should focus on Coaching with a capital “C”.
- In defining coaching, it depends on to what extent we desire a definition that is prescriptive vs. descriptive. A prescriptive definition lends to tightening the field and limited practice. This benefits those who are already established in the work and creates barriers to entrance. It also begins the process of clarifying for purchasers what it is they are purchasing. A descriptive definition seeks to capture the rich and expansive set of practices and services that now co-exist uneasily under the coaching umbrella.
- If we are to create a more prevalent definition of coaching, we need to begin a dialogue with the multitude of divergent constituencies and thought leaders within and outside of the coaching field to come to a common understanding. The goal may not be full agreement but rather alignment. This dialogue should include established coaching organizations, coach training programs, academics, research, clients and leaders from other professions who are not coaches.

2. What is the next step in establishing universal standards for professional coaches?

- There are recognized competencies and standards accepted by many in the coaching community. There are also questions that limit acceptance across associations. If we are to build a profession and claim shared knowledge, we need empirical research that grounds the competencies and ties them to more than collective wisdom. We need to subject the competencies and standards to serious academic research. Associations might partner together to sponsor research and bring more credibility to the field.
- There is a problem with the idea of “universal standards” given the variety of practices that are called coaching at the present time. Establishing universal standards implies a regulatory framework such as in law or medicine. Even in these established professions, training and standards can vary. If we are able to define an appropriate and useful classification of different types of coaching, the standards, education and experience requirements will follow.
- We need to move past the perception that everyone can be a coach.

- If coaching is to become a profession, there needs to be broad global research and involvement with the academic community.
- Focus on why coaching is different and how to recognize someone who is committed to becoming or being a professional coach.
- Collaborate with each other across the field, not just within an organization. Move past the bias that one is better than the other. Be open to divergent opinions and engage in dialogue to create collaborative relationships that advance coaching to a profession.
- There are several organizations with defined standards. Bring key leaders of these groups together to find common ground and create consensus.

3. What is the greatest danger to the coaching profession right now?

- Coaching is not a profession as long as anyone who wants to can call their work with individuals or organizations “coaching”, and no one is in a position to contradict them. The distinction between the activity of coaching and the profession is not clear either.
- Incorrect labeling, promotion and marketing about what coaching is for the public. Coaching is a hot commodity. Everyone is calling themselves a coach and there are no quality controls. Reality TV adds to confusion and creates anxiety around coaching in the business/corporate world.
- “Coaches” who are not very good, or who are incompetent are diluting coaching’s effectiveness and creating a bad experience and backlash for the profession.
- Coaching clichés, fads, hype and commercialism rather than substance about coaching; Book titles that promote coaching as the answer to everything. While the self-help market is here today, a long-term profession cannot be built on this kind of thinking.
- Failure to enroll adequate coach buy-in and support for standards, practices, training and credentialing for the purpose of a self-regulated profession.
- People promoting themselves or their brand as a coach and not really doing coaching; especially of concern are those who border on therapy.
- Coaches defining and setting standards before there is adequate research to ground the standards.
- Confusion within and outside of the coaching community regarding the distinction between coaching and therapy.
- Not building alliances with other organizations and professions such as psychologists, therapists, and HR professionals.
- A coaching community that does not have a sufficient understanding of what it really takes to be a coach which results in annoying the public and other professions. This could prevent a self-regulated coaching profession.
- Proliferation of unaccredited training programs that confuse potential coaches and coaching clients.

- Over promising and over promoting in coaching and coach training, with coaches thinking they will make a lot of money.
- The word about coaching grew as coaches started the industry and promoted coaching to potential coaches. The industry is like a child at adolescence, running around making lots of noise. Coaches cannot continue to feed off each other. It's time to mature into a young adult and move toward a profession.
- Intervention by government if bad coaching proliferates and we don't come to consensus as a professional body.

4. How do we create greater clarity for the public about what constitutes a qualified professional coach?

Most of the answers we received to this question addressed two common themes.

Primary Theme: Marketing, Public Relations and Education

- A marketing/public relations campaign needs to be established in such a manner so that businesses and corporations describe how coaching is being used in the organizational setting while providing specific examples of its positive effects and impact
- Recognized and respected business print and television media that publicize *high profile* clients and organizations who endorse coaching
- Mass education to Fortune 1000 companies
- Educating corporations is a lot easier than educating the public
- Educating internally to coaches and externally to the public consumer must be a priority
- Provide coaches and their clients with well positioned stories encompassing 5-7 key points for media
- A one-page document for the consumer spelling out guidelines on how to properly select the right coach

Secondary Theme: Professional Certification and Credentialing

- Simplify all of the coaching certifications into one branded credential (for qualification and level of competence) and educate the public as to these standards. This step will require that coaches buy into a universally accepted certification standard. Clarity must reach the public.
- One representative body (professional association) for coaching to which everyone subscribes; one organization worldwide that governs coaching
- Getting the governmental backing of standards
- Greater emphasis on scientifically-based research and tying that to coaching competence, as well as demonstrating what kinds of coaching practices can reliably result in agreed upon improvement

5. Who should be paying for professional review and oversight in the following areas: an ethical conduct review process, individual coach credentialing and coaching school accreditation?

There was a clear consensus as to *who* should be funding professional review and oversight. In coach certification, coach credentialing, and school accreditation, it was universally agreed that the applicant should be the bearer of the cost.

In the area of ethical conduct review, it was agreed that the professional association or organization that does the review should bear the cost, which would be funded by member dues. There were a few interviewees who suggested that part of the ethical conduct review costs could be covered by a fee assessment to coaches who were officially found in breach of the professional code of ethics.

There was less consensus as to *who should be the lead organizational body* to oversee professional review. Some felt that coach certification, coach credentialing, school accreditation and professional ethics oversight should be handled by an independent body that was either separate from, or an umbrella organization of, the lead professional coaching association.

6. What other questions should we be asking?

- How do we define and improve professional excellence?
- When will the coaching profession adopt a more professional tone versus an enthusiastic tone?
- How about calling a coaching summit that includes business schools, graduate schools of psychology, major firms involved in coaching, significant organizational purchasers of coaching, current schools of coaching, and the research community?
- Are professional coaching associations responsible for making coaches successful?
- How does coaching go from a formally accepted body of knowledge to a widely accepted philosophy and style of communication in our society?
- How do we expand the funding for research?
- How do we differentiate between different kinds of coaching?
- How can professional bodies and key players work together to do something that none of them can do individually?

Summary Points

- A singular - universal definition of coaching may be the wrong focus. It may be more beneficial to agree upon coaching definitions for the specific type of coaching (e.g., executive, life, etc.) offered to the client.
- Current standards of coaching competence and skill sets need to be tied to serious academic research.
- The greatest danger to the coaching profession seems to be a lack of quality control and sufficient barriers to entry.

- A concentrated and strategic marketing/public relations campaign that reaches the business world would improve the professional acceptance and recognition of coaching in the marketplace.
- Coaches need to unite behind one professional designation that will allow the public to be clear about the industry standard designation for a professional coach.
- There was agreement that there needs to be a unifying body to provide professional review and oversight in the areas of certification, credentialing and ethical conduct review. There was not agreement as to who that lead body should be.

Authors' Discovery

As we began the interview process and listened to the participants, we realized our questions were just a beginning for conversation and discussion. We stayed firm in adhering to our original questions in order to complete the project with consistency and timeliness. We were surprised at the commonality of answers and themes that emerged from the interviews given the diverse experience and background of the participants. We personally acknowledge all of the participants for joining us in this endeavor as they willingly shared their insight and expertise. The Future of Coaching as a Profession is calling for the continuance of a collaborative conversation.

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