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choice

the magazine of professional coaching

**Breaking
the Rules!**

Is it time
for the
coaching
paradigm
to expand?

Shattering
the Myths

A Roadmap for
Rule Breaking

Is it Time to
Change Course?

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Breaking the Rules!

We all do it. It's that secret conversation where we admit to a colleague that we also give clients advice, regularly teach or train them, or even tell our own stories. How do we manage the balance between standard descriptions of coaching and what our clients are asking us for? How does an understanding of the brain help us expand what we do as coaches? How are we limiting ourselves and not offering everything we have when we refrain from these things? Why are we afraid to challenge the convention that is only 20 years old? Join us as we explore expanding the coaching paradigm.



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By Madeleine Homan Blanchard, MSc, MCC

“**O**ne of the clients wants a new coach. She says her coach barely says anything and is not adding value,” says one of my teammates, a Coaching Solutions partner who manages the delivery of coaching on a large scale in multinational organizations.

“Have you talked to the coach?” I ask. “Not yet,” she sighs, “but I will.”

This is a conversation we have to have fairly often, particularly with our newest coaches who have often been cowed into silent submission by their passage through the ICF certification process and have forgotten what their actual job is. This conversation is important and necessary because at high levels in organizations, coaches are *expected* to have opinions, to generate ideas, to *know things* the client doesn’t and to leverage that knowledge when appropriate.

The leadership development professionals who hire my organization to provide coaching to their employees choose us because our coaches are certified and competent, and also because our brand represents some of the finest, most useful

leadership content in the world. Why on earth would we withhold simple truths, brilliant models or effective rules of thumb from people who are in desperate need of them? Well, because the ICF says we shouldn't ... at least, that's what many coaches believe.

I have grown up as a coach along with the coaching profession. I was on the very first committee at the ICF to examine the need for certification with Laura Berman Fortgang and Stephen Cluney. What did we know? It turned out, not the first thing about professional certification, other than the fact that we probably needed it. We quickly turned the task over to Margaret Krigbaum et al, who were much better equipped than we were to nail down in detail what certification might look like.

Certification for fundamental competence and a commitment to ethical behavior has vastly improved the confidence of the public, as we hoped it would. Coaches desperately needed to get clear amongst ourselves about how coaching was different from therapy, analysis, counseling, psychiatric care, and consulting.

After 20 years or so of work, the distinctions are more clear than ever before. The coaching profession is successful enough that we are at this very moment under fire from the

psych world, whose practitioners perceive coaches as a threat to their livelihoods. Many would say that we are practicing without a licence, when in fact adherence to the ICF competencies and code of ethics ensures that this is not the case. Coaches who are ICF certified understand how the practice of coaching is distinct from other professional interventions and can be trusted to stay within those boundaries.



Blending coaching skill with deep experience and content knowledge is the kind of mastery needed.

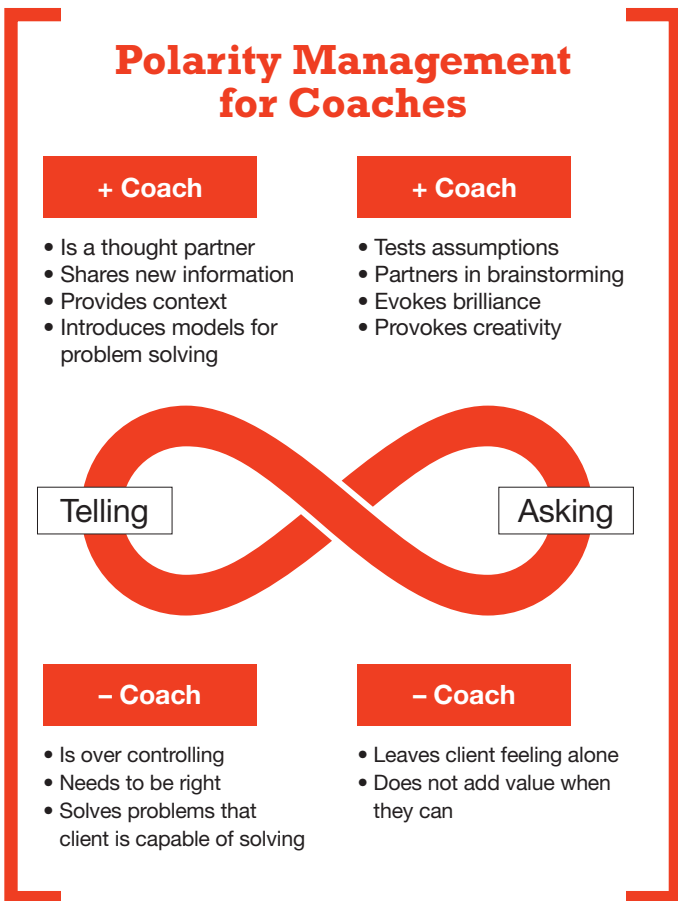
Perhaps, however, we have swung a little too far in our efforts to distinguish ourselves from other forms of help, and we have left coaches seeking certification a little at sea about when and how a coach *should* add a pinch of consulting or teaching into the mix.

At my company the only way we can assess coach competence is by having a prospective coach actually coach us. It is extremely apparent when someone who claims to be a coach has not been properly trained. They do not create rapport, they listen for the wrong things, they interrupt, they are attached to being right and they talk more than the client.

It is my experience that the ICF certification process is seeking to assess understanding and integration of pure coaching skill and that for a coach to be certified they must be able to demonstrate these. This shows that the coach has acquired the self-regulation that is required to judge when to stay quiet vs. when to ask the hard question, when to evoke the client's wisdom vs. sharing a perspective or information that might cause the shift, how to use our coaching competencies to create the ideal environment for the client to grow. Appropriately blending coaching skill with deep experience and content knowledge is the kind of mastery needed when working with our clients.

I wonder if we have somehow lost the notion of partnership – the idea that coaches need to bring all of themselves to the table to be successful, not just coaching skill. What are we so afraid of? Well, I know what we are afraid of.

I recently heard a story on the wonderful podcast *The Moth* [Tracy Rowland, *Eye of The Beholder*, April 22, 2013] about a woman whose boyfriend has a "life coach" who is our worst



nightmare. This “coach” was not trained or certified but he advised his client on diet, daily activities and business decisions, all for extortionate sums. We are afraid every time someone on a TV show starts a sentence with, “my life coach told me to ...”

I personally become nervous about the new fashion of former senior executives hanging up a shingle to “coach” with no training or certification. What are we afraid of? We are afraid of Svengalis or Rasputins who are driven by their own egos, who seek to control and manipulate clients, who seek to exert power rather than work with the client to access their own power.

We *should* be afraid of this. A couple of bad apples can ruin it for all of us and make all of us look bad. It is this terrible behavior that makes it easy for people to mock coaching and coaches. And we should be able to demonstrate pure coaching skills. But we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater, either.

To be successful with our brilliant, educated, hardworking, dedicated clients, our masterful coaches should have an opinion, *when it is relevant*. They should share a *short* story when it provides context or perspective. They should share a model that will help the client think through their situation in a new way. They should offer some ideas on what a client might do, based on what they have seen others do, and what made it work. They can discuss the pros and cons of any decision. And they can – and should, on very rare occasions – call the truth as they see it, especially if it might keep a client from making a terrible mistake.

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We have left coaches a little at sea about when and how a coach *should* add a pinch of consulting or teaching into the mix.

The great Shirley Anderson coined the term “edge” and described it as telling the truth with love. I think we must admit that to be a great coach means constantly managing a polarity.

On one side we have asking and on the other side we have telling. The downside of asking can be bad questions or worse, asking questions to satisfy the coach’s curiosity. The other downside of asking is an insistence that the clients always have a useful answer, when in fact they have reached

A Coach Should Never Say:

You should
I think
Why don’t you try...
You need to....

A Coach Can Sometimes Say:

You might consider
In my experience
May I share some ideas?
Would it be helpful if I shared a model that will help you think this through?

the outer limits of their current knowledge. The downside of telling is pushing information that is not wanted or needed.

I would submit that the coach should share information *if it is requested* or if the coach asks permission. The coach can make recommendations and offer an opinion as long as it is made clear that what is shared is merely one person’s opinion, and that the client really should seek other ideas and opinions to make the best decision. It is all in the language:

A masterful coach will always:

- Ascertain interest of the client to receiving some input (and know when the client is just being polite!)
- Ask for permission to share a new concept or model
- Share books (or even better, summaries), articles, links or other content *only* upon request of client
- Be extremely selective and *brief* when sharing a personal story
- Make sure that all “homework” is self-assigned by the client or negotiated
- Ask a question instead of answering when the client asks: “What would you do?” or “What do you think I should do?”
- Listen more than they talk
- When in doubt, keep their mouths shut

Where does this leave us? Pretty much where all professional certification leaves us. When you go to a board certified physician, you can be reasonably certain of a level of skill in the specific area of certification, but it tells you nothing about communication skills, artistry, commitment to service or ability to hire and work with high-quality associates. There are simply terrible certified professionals everywhere – just regular, vaguely competent folks who happen to be egotists, lazy, greedy, or self-serving.

We ultimately have to trust that coaches who have passed the ICF exam process and have signed on to the ICF code of ethics will be good judges of when to color outside the lines to deliver the highest quality environment for growth for the client. After all, the client only cares about the value they receive from the investment of their precious time, and their results.