

THE STANDARD BEARER'S DILEMMA

**Re-examining Mastery in
Professional Coaching**

A Whitepaper By

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Executive Summary

The global rise of professional coaching is a testament to the power of standardized practices and a shared ethical framework, largely stewarded by the International Coaching Federation (ICF). While these standards have been essential for establishing the profession's credibility, this paper argues that the system now faces a critical inflection point — the Standard Bearer's Dilemma. It puts forth a critique of the current credentialing process at the Master Certified Coach (MCC) level, on two interconnected fronts: the subjective "tunnel vision" inherent in the human assessment of mastery, which risks creating a "methodological echo chamber" and the systemic failures of transparency and accountability that create a "black box" around the evaluation process.

Through an analysis of the assessment BARS, the role of assessors, and the influence on training schools, this paper deconstructs how a system designed to ensure quality may inadvertently stifle diversity and risk the calcification of its own dogma. It then proposes a constructive path forward, centered on evolving assessment to include a professional dialogue (Viva Voce), establishing a Mastery Assessment Council to ensure accountability, and formally bridging the gap between coaching innovation and credentialing. The ultimate goal is to spark a dialogue that ensures professional standards serve as a floor for competence, rather than a ceiling for the rich diversity in which coaching mastery is expressed.

Introduction – The Double-Edged Sword of Professionalization

The rapid ascent of professional coaching over the past several decades stands as a remarkable achievement. From a nascent, unregulated frontier, it has matured into a credible and respected profession, offering immense value to individuals and organizations worldwide. At the heart of this successful professionalization has been the International Coaching Federation (ICF), whose efforts to establish a robust ethical code, a shared language, and a global standard of competence have been instrumental in building the industry's legitimacy. The very existence of a pathway to mastery, culminating in the MCC, has given thousands of practitioners an aspirational goal and clients a benchmark for quality.

Yet, with this successful maturation comes an inherent and complex challenge — the Standard Bearer's Dilemma. The moment a standard is set, a tension is born between the need for conformity to ensure quality and the need for diversity to foster innovation. In training rooms, mentorship sessions, and professional blogs, debates emerge daily about the "right" way to demonstrate a core competency.

This paper puts forth a critical inquiry into this dynamic. It investigates the risk that the very success of a standardized model, perpetuated through training, mentorship, and assessment, may inadvertently create a "methodological echo chamber." It explores the possibility that a specific, successful style of coaching has become conflated with mastery itself, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where adherence to a particular form is rewarded, while other equally potent methods are filtered out.

It is a widely held and valid perspective, particularly among many accomplished MCCs, that the credential is not an end-point but a "floor" for true mastery — a starting line for a lifelong journey of learning. This paper does not dispute the intention behind that belief. Instead, it investigates a more subtle and systemic question: regardless of intent, does the *system* of assessment — the specific, behavior-based markers required to *reach* that floor — inadvertently function as a ceiling, filtering out stylistically different but equally valid forms of mastery before they are even considered?

Through a structural analysis of how coaching methods are taught and how mastery is assessed within the ICF ecosystem, this paper will re-examine the relationship between professional standards and coaching innovation. Ultimately, it seeks to open

a dialogue on how the profession can evolve to ensure its standards continue to serve the rich diversity of coaching excellence.

The Bedrock – Why Standards Became Essential

To critique the current state of professional standards is not to deny their profound necessity. On the contrary, a clear-eyed examination of the future of coaching must begin with an appreciation for the bedrock upon which the entire profession now stands. Before the establishment of a global body like the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the coaching landscape was a fragmented and unregulated "Wild West." While populated by many talented and well-intentioned practitioners, it lacked the foundational structures that define any mature profession, posing risks to clients and limiting the field's potential. The standards introduced by the ICF were not merely helpful additions; they were the essential architecture required for survival and growth.

The first and most vital contribution was the establishment of a baseline of safety and trust. This was achieved through the creation of a common ethical code and a shared professional language. In an environment without a unified set of principles, clients had little recourse against malpractice or incompetence. The ICF's Code of Ethics established a global north star, assuring clients that the professional they were hiring was committed to helping them maximize their potential by honoring the client's agenda and desired outcomes above all else. This ethical foundation, combined with a professional lexicon that drew clear distinctions between coaching, mentoring, and therapy, allowed for a coherent, global professional discourse built on trust.

Building on this, the ICF's framework provided a valid and transparent learning path for those entering the profession. The scaffolded journey from ACC, to PCC, and ultimately to MCC gave aspiring coaches clear developmental milestones. This structure provided not only a roadmap for skill acquisition but also a sense of progression and achievement, transforming coaching from an ambiguous calling into a tangible career with recognizable stages of development and expertise.

These internal structures — ethics, language, and a learning path — were the prerequisites for gaining external legitimacy. Armed with a unified set of standards, coaching could finally claim a credible seat at the table with other established fields like psychotherapy, business consulting, and law. It gave organizations a framework for vetting and hiring coaches, and it gave the profession the gravitas it needed to be taken seriously in boardrooms and academic institutions alike.

Finally, the ICF's mission has always extended beyond mere regulation to the advancement of the coaching profession as a whole. By sponsoring research, convening global conferences, and periodically updating its own competencies based on industry-wide feedback, the organization has positioned itself as a dynamic force for progress. Its role has been not just to codify what coaching *is*, but to actively explore what coaching *can become*.

It is precisely because these achievements are so vital that the conversation about their future evolution is not just important, but essential. Having built such a strong foundation, the question now turns to the design of the structure that rises upon it.

The Anatomy of a Methodological Echo Chamber

A well-intentioned system of professional standards does not become a dogma overnight, nor through deliberate exclusion. Rather, a "methodological echo chamber" can emerge from a series of interconnected mechanisms, each originally designed to ensure quality and consistency. To understand the Standard Bearer's Dilemma, one must first deconstruct this self-reinforcing cycle. In professional coaching, this structure is upheld by three primary pillars: the codification of the Competency Model for assessment, the influence this system exerts on accredited training schools, and finally, the role of the assessors who evaluate mastery.

The first and most influential pillar is the Competency Model and its method of assessment. To be clear, this critique does not dispute the necessity of foundational, universal behaviors for ethical and effective coaching. A standard that requires a coach to maintain presence, listen actively, and avoid interrupting a client *unless it serves the client's agenda* is a non-negotiable pillar of quality. However, the subjectivity lies in the interpretation of the exception. For example, the phrase "unless there is a clear purpose to do so" seems objective on the surface, but in practice, it is anything but. Who determines if the purpose was "clear"? The answer, inevitably, is the assessor. Here, the assessor's own "tunnel vision," shaped by the style of mastery they are used to, becomes the ultimate arbiter.

This issue of subjectivity becomes magnified when assessing more advanced competencies. The system is built on the assumption that *mastery* manifests in a uniform set of *advanced* behaviors across all effective coaching styles. When an assessment is calibrated to reward a particular behavioral manifestation of a competency — for instance, a specific method of paraphrasing or a certain cadence of questioning or a formulaic phrasing of inquiries — it risks mistaking a coaching *style* for universal skill.

This focus on specific behavioral markers can be highly valuable when training beginner coaches. It provides a clear and necessary scaffold, helping new practitioners build a foundation of competence and understand the basic "shape" of an effective coaching conversation. The systemic flaw arises when this same pedagogical framework — a checklist designed for novices — is used as the ultimate yardstick for assessing mastery. True mastery is not about flawlessly executing a set of prescribed behaviors; it is about transcending them. It involves developing an integrated, intuitive style that responds to the client in the moment with what is most needed, which may

not always align with a predefined behavioral marker. Using a foundational training tool as a summative assessment for the highest level of the profession is, therefore, inherently self-limiting and risks penalizing the very adaptability and uniqueness that are the hallmarks of a master practitioner.

The second pillar is the influence this system exerts on accredited training schools. This standardized model of a "masterful conversation" becomes the de facto curriculum for aspiring coaches. To gain and maintain ICF accreditation, schools must align their programs with the Core Competencies and, crucially, prepare their students to pass the performance evaluations. This powerful incentive means that even schools with unique and profound coaching philosophies must, as a pragmatic matter, ensure their curriculum is also designed to prepare students for the specific behavioral markers of the performance evaluations. Students are trained from day one in the specific models and behavioral styles most likely to be rewarded by the assessment process, ensuring the next generation of certified coaches is fluent in the dominant methodological dialect.

This pipeline of institutionally-aligned coaches, in turn, provides the pool from which the third pillar of the echo chamber is built: the assessors themselves. The assessors are a product of the very system they are meant to objectively evaluate. This creates a powerful, self-perpetuating inertia, ensuring that the standards are interpreted through the lens of the established dogma, regardless of periodic updates to the competencies themselves. This problem is then procedurally locked in by the very methods used to calibrate the assessors, a mechanism we will explore in the following section.

The Black Box of Assessment: A Crisis of Transparency and Accountability

Beyond the structural and stylistic biases, the integrity of the MCC assessment process is further challenged by a profound lack of transparency and a seeming vacuum of accountability. The system operates as a "black box," leaving practitioners with a series of unanswered questions about its internal quality control:

Who assesses the assessors themselves? And are the assessors subject to continuous direct supervision on the quality and consistency of their assessments?

What concrete safeguards are in place to confidently and fully eliminate bias or tunnel vision based on the assessors own preferred coaching style or training background? And how is the success of these safeguards measured?

The operational gaps that create this "black box" are not merely theoretical. Recent correspondence with the ICF reveals specific procedural weaknesses that reinforce a lack of accountability. The ICF confirms that assessors are asked to review a single recorded coaching session with **"no additional context about the coach, client, coaching style or their background."** While intended to ensure impartiality, this context-blind approach forces assessors to rely more heavily on their own stylistic biases and a rigid yet subjectively informed interpretation of behavioral markers, as they have no other information to guide their understanding of the coach's choices.

Furthermore, the system's capacity for quality control is fundamentally undermined by its policy on external feedback. When asked if detailed feedback from applicants on perceived assessment errors could be used for quality assurance and assessor calibration, the official response stated, **"...at this time we do not use feedback from applicants to inform the recordings we choose for these calibrations."**

Further clarification from the ICF reveals that the recordings used to train and calibrate assessors are not chosen at random either. One of the primary criteria is that they must have already **"met passing standard amongst a majority of the assessors."**

This procedure, while on the surface seems like a quality control measure, functions as a perfect self-reinforcing loop. It is a system designed to study its own successes, ensuring the echo chamber remains sealed. By training its assessors exclusively on recordings the system already approves of, the ICF ensures that the dominant interpretation of mastery is perpetuated. The process actively excludes the most

valuable data for systemic improvement: *recordings that failed, were disputed, or showcase a masterful but stylistically diverse approach.*

This omission is not an oversight, but a direct result of a foundational vulnerability within the institution itself. Because the ICF's internal staff is not formally qualified to assess coaching mastery, it must defer the entire responsibility of quality control to its existing pool of assessors.

This necessary delegation, however, creates a profound conflict of interest and a self-referential loop, effectively preventing any external or challenging data from informing the evolution of the credential. The system, therefore, has no choice but to trust its own products to validate its process, sealing the echo chamber shut.

In addition, when questioned about the specific guidance given to assessors on navigating the critical *therapy vs. coaching* boundary, the response pointed only to the general Code of Ethics and a resource guide **"not specifically tied to identifying the line between therapy and coaching."** This leaves the interpretation of one of the most important professional boundaries to the individual assessor's discretion, without a clear, shared standard for this complex issue.

Contradictory Ratings and Factual Errors

The full extent of this subjectivity is revealed by the ICF's own rescore process. When an applicant applies for a rescore, it creates two official, and sometimes profoundly contradictory evaluations for the exact same performance. Analysis of these documented cases reveals that the diagnosis of mastery can change dramatically from one assessor to the next.

A competency like "Establishes and Maintains Agreements," praised by one assessor as a key "Area of Strength," can be re-categorized by a second assessor as a primary "Area for Development" for the *exact same interaction*. A coaching approach praised by one assessor for creating a "warm, safe, and supportive environment" can be simultaneously critiqued by another for bordering on possible therapy issues.

Adding to this inconsistency, multiple core competencies in the same recordings can be upgraded from "Below Passing Standard" to "Meets Passing Standard," while others are concurrently downgraded to the more severe "Needs Improvement", based on who happens to assess the same recording in that particular instance.

This crisis of subjectivity extends beyond inter-assessor reliability into the realm of basic observational accuracy.

The official reports contain demonstrable factual errors. Reports show that assessors have noted key behaviors as "not found," such as 'acknowledging client progress', when the transcript clearly shows multiple instances of the coach doing exactly that. A coach can be critiqued for failing to establish a clear session outcome, even when the transcript documents the client explicitly confirming the outcome back to the coach.

This issue is compounded when an assessor's claim is in direct contradiction to the transcript evidence. An assessor claimed that the coach demonstrated a **"limited range of coaching skills beyond inquiring about feelings,"** when the recording contains clear evidence of the coach using a variety of other techniques, including summarizing conflicting values, challenging the client's perspective, and offering empowering reframes.

Another assessor asserts there is a **"lack of curiosity -- with exception of a few questions -- about deeper meanings of what the client shares."** This assertion is demonstrably false, as the transcript contains numerous instances of the coach asking questions aimed specifically at exploring deeper meaning.

Misinterpretation of Skill and Unsubstantiated Claims

Beyond factual errors, the subjectivity deepens when core coaching skills are mischaracterized as flaws, revealing significant stylistic and cultural biases. In one report, an assessor notes as a weakness that, **"The coach makes statements and doesn't ask questions based on those statements."** The issue is not a general lack of inquiry; the transcripts show ample questioning throughout the sessions. Rather, what the assessor frames as a flaw is the specific and intentional choice to use a different and often more masterful technique: *sharing a direct, unadorned observation to allow the client to generate their own insight without being led.* That this foundational skill which demonstrates immense trust in the client's resourcefulness could be interpreted as a negative by an assessor is alarming.

Perhaps most concerning is when assessors make claims of negative behavior for which there is no evidence. In one rescore report, an assessor alleges, **"...there are some judgments and a suggestion (without asking permission) that are being expressed by the coach."**

A meticulous review, however, not only fails to substantiate this assertion but finds the opposite: the interventions in question are standard, non-judgmental coaching techniques, such as sharing observations or open-ended questions to explore possibilities.

These discrepancies are so stark, they raise the question of diligence: was the assessment based on a pre-conceived narrative driven by bias, or was the recording even listened to at all?

When an official assessment can both contradict other official assessments of the same recordings, and also contain factually inaccurate observations alongside unsubstantiated claims about what occurred in a session, it ceases to be a reliable measure.

These are not subtle grading differences; they represent fundamental disagreements and observational failures that reveal a profound lack of reliability, where the specific "tunnel vision" of the individual assessor, not a universal standard, becomes the primary determinant of the outcome.

The Illusion of a Second Chance

This demonstrated inconsistency also creates a procedural paradox. Since both the original and rescore reports are considered "official," it raises an unavoidable question:

On what basis does the ICF decide which assessment is accurate? It leaves the practitioner questioning who is qualified to make such a determination, and by what standard their qualification is judged.

This leads to the ultimate question of institutional responsibility. While comprehensive data on assessor error rates or successful appeal statistics is not made public by the ICF, the documented procedural gaps and inconsistencies are significant enough to warrant a structural review.

The ICF positions the 'Rescore' as its sole appeals process, a mechanism intended to ensure fairness. However, as the documented inconsistencies reveal, this process often functions as the primary vehicle for *exposing* the system's lack of reliability, rather than correcting it. An applicant's work is simply re-submitted to the same methodological echo chamber—evaluated by another assessor from the same philosophically-aligned pool, who is subject to the same systemic biases. This cannot address the fundamental issue; it merely provides a second, sometimes equally flawed or contradictory, opinion.

This creates a paradox that goes to the heart of the rescore's validity. A subsequent "pass" on a rescore does not prove the initial assessment was flawed; it merely proves the system's subjectivity by revealing that two assessors can hold opposing views of the same performance. Similarly, a subsequent "fail" on a rescore does not prove that

the second assessment is any more accurate than the first; it simply provides another subjective data point.

The process, therefore, is effectively a coin toss and fails to establish a 'ground truth' in either direction. It leaves the candidate with two conflicting reports, with no way to know which assessment more accurately reflects their performance or how to use the feedback for genuine development.

This fundamental issue is often overlooked for a simple human reason: candidates who receive a "pass" on the rescore have no incentive to question the validity of the process that ultimately favored them. They are statistically less likely to report the inconsistency, creating a survivorship bias where the full scope of the system's unreliability remains perpetually under-reported. It is a system where a positive outcome for an individual serves to mask a deeper systemic failure.

This extends beyond a single recording to the entire credentialing journey. If the standard itself is applied with demonstrable error, a future "pass" on a *new* submission cannot be reliably attributed to a candidate's growth in skill either. It may equally reflect the candidate's successful adaptation to the system's stylistic dogma or simply the luck of drawing a more aligned assessor.

This perpetual cycle of chance and conformity persists because the system fails to answer the most basic questions of professional accountability: Does the ICF formally accept responsibility for assessor error? Where does accountability lie when assessments demonstrably fail to meet basic standards of consistency and fairness?

True accountability — a documented mechanism for redress that steps *outside* the echo chamber to evaluate a claim of systemic bias — remains absent, undermining the very trust a credentialing body is meant to foster.

The Consequences: The Pruning of Rich Diversity

The creation of a methodological echo chamber, however well-intentioned, is not a benign academic phenomenon. It has tangible and detrimental consequences for the vitality, effectiveness, and future of the coaching profession. When a single, narrow method of *demonstrating* mastery is elevated to the "gold standard" through an assessment process, it inevitably devalues other approaches, creating a professional monoculture.

The most immediate consequence is the marginalization of any coaching approach whose specific manifestation of the Core Competencies does not align with the behaviors privileged by the assessment process. A coach's effectiveness can be rendered invisible to an evaluation based on the subjective interpretation of their behaviors. Consider the masterful use of silence. A coach might intentionally maintain silence to allow the client a powerful, reflective space. However, an assessor might interpret this same silence not as masterful presence, but as a missed opportunity. In that moment, the coach's intentionality in choice is rendered invisible, and their mastery is judged not on its impact, but on whether the observable behavior matched the assessor's stylistic expectations.

The Cultural Blind Spot & The Challenge of a Truly Global Standard

The challenge of a standardized assessment model is exponentially magnified when applied across a globe of diverse cultures. For a global standard to possess true integrity and legitimacy, it must be sophisticated enough to recognize and validate mastery across the vast spectrum of human cultures. The goal is not to abandon a global standard, but to create one that is genuinely universal. The current challenge, however, lies in an assessment system that can inadvertently mistake cultural difference for a lack of skill, because its behavioral markers were developed within one dominant cultural context.

This paper's critique is not aimed at the Core Competencies themselves, which stand as valuable, high-level principles for the profession. The systemic flaw emerges at the next layer down: in the **specific, behavioral markers (BARS) used to assess these competencies, and most critically, in the subjective interpretation of those behaviors.**

A truly global standard must be flexible enough to account for the vast diversity of human interaction. The current BARS, however, can inadvertently privilege one cultural communication style over another. Consider the MCC BARS for Competency 3, "Establishes and Maintains Agreements." Marker 3.1 states, **"Coach partners with the client to explore the topic or focus of the session at a level that is meaningful to the client."** What defines "partnering" or a "meaningful" exploration is deeply cultural. In some cultures, partnership is demonstrated through direct, explicit questioning. In others, a coach might build trust and arrive at a meaningful topic through a more indirect, relational, and narrative-driven process.

An assessor from a direct-communication culture might view this indirect approach as hesitant, unfocused, or failing to "partner" effectively. They may inadvertently penalize a coach who is demonstrating profound respect and creating deep safety according to the norms of the culture of their client, simply because it does not "look" like the behavioral markers they were trained to recognize.

This subjectivity continues with marker 3.2, which requires the coach to keep the outcome as a guide **"in a flexible, gentle and natural manner."** The definitions of "gentle" and "natural" are entirely dependent on cultural context. A "gentle" reminder in one culture might be perceived as weak or passive in another. A "natural" conversational flow for a coach from a high-context culture might seem meandering to an assessor expecting a more linear progression. Conversely, a more direct, explicit questioning style, which might be considered "natural" in a low-context culture, could be perceived by an assessor from a high-context background as overly forceful, rigid, or performative. There is no universally correct way to be "natural"; there is only the assessor's subjective preference, which is mistaken for an objective standard.

This same bias extends to the very definition of agreeing on a successful outcome for a coaching conversation. Official feedback often reveals a systemic preference for tangible, externally verifiable "measures of success" over the profound, internal "being-level" shifts that are central to cutting-edge coaching approaches such as transformational and ontological coaching. In its search for what is easily measured, the system fails to value what can be most meaningful for the client.

This institutional preference for external markers is often justified as a necessary pursuit of objectivity. Yet, this may be a misguided endeavor. A more robust and honest approach would be for the profession's standard-bearer to openly accept that coaching assessment is, and always will be, an inherently subjective art. Only by embracing this reality can we begin to build systems that manage subjectivity with wisdom, rather than pretending it can be eliminated through checklists.

Because the Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale (BARS) provides no guidance on these nuanced differences in style and philosophy, the assessor's own background — be it cultural or methodological — becomes the default benchmark. This creates an impossible dilemma for any coach whose work deviates from the established orthodoxy, whether that deviation is due to cultural background or an evolution in coaching methodology: either perform a version of coaching that is culturally legible to the assessor, or coach in the way that is most authentic and effective for their client and risk being misunderstood. The system, therefore, does not assess mastery in a vacuum; it assesses conformity to a culturally specific way of *demonstrating* mastery.

The solution is not to discard the ideal of a global standard, but to evolve its application, creating a more culturally intelligent assessment process capable of honoring mastery in all its diverse expressions.

This operational "center of gravity" is no accident; it is a direct result of the profession's historical development. The foundational philosophies, research, and models that define modern professional coaching were predominantly developed and popularized in the United States. This initial dominance has had a cascading effect across the entire ecosystem: the most influential research is published in Western journals, the most widespread training programs are based on these models, and critically, the global credentialing and assessment process was built to validate this specific paradigm.

While a growing number of coaching schools around the world now offer training based on more culturally nuanced philosophies, they face a significant hurdle. To achieve global recognition and offer their students a viable path towards an ICF credential, they must align their programs and teachings with what passes the assessment. Recognizing this historical lineage is not a critique of the profession's origins, but a crucial diagnostic step. It explains *why* the current standards have an inherent cultural bias and clarifies the work that must now be done to evolve the framework from its initial blueprint into the truly global standard the profession deserves.

By rewarding conformity, the system inadvertently slows the natural evolution of the profession. A risk-averse culture is created where coaches and schools are incentivized to focus on "what will pass the assessment?" over the more vital question of "what is most effective for this unique client?"

The Coming Demographic Shift & The Risk of Calcified Dogma

The consequences of this echo chamber are set to be amplified by a significant and measurable demographic shift. According to the 2023 ICF Global Coaching Study, **52% of coaches in the United States are aged 55 or older**, and across North America, Baby Boomers represent the single largest generational group of practitioners at 49%. This heavy concentration of senior practitioners in the very regions that historically shaped the global standards points to a looming transition.

The risk of this impending retirement wave is not simply the loss of experience. The true threat is that the profession will be left with nothing but their dogma. A system created by dynamic individuals who held the original context and "spirit of the law" is different from the system they leave behind. The next generation inherits only the "letter of the law" — the codified procedures and BARS — without the nuanced understanding of the creators who knew when and why to bend the rules.

Without this founding generation to challenge or evolve their own creations, the system risks becoming calcified. The echo chamber, no longer moderated by its originators, hardens into an unthinking set of rules. The statistics make this clear: the urgency to re-examine the standards is paramount *now*, while this large, experienced generation is still active and can participate in building a more flexible and inclusive future. To wait is to risk being left with a system whose powerful inertia has become an unbreakable dogma.

The Path Forward – From a Ceiling to a Floor

A critique of a system is incomplete without a thoughtful exploration of a path forward. In light of the demographic realities and the risk of a "calcified dogma" established in the previous section, the need for this evolution is not merely philosophical, but is a strategic necessity. The coaching industry currently enjoys the privilege of self-regulation, but the systemic flaws identified in this paper, particularly the "black box" assessment process and lack of transparent accountability, represent a significant liability. In an era of increasing scrutiny of professional bodies, these weaknesses could invite unwanted government intervention, threatening the autonomy of the entire profession. The goal is clear, anchored in the guiding principle:

The critical question for the future of our profession is not *if* we need standards, but *how* we ensure our standards serve as a floor for competence, not a ceiling for mastery that inadvertently prunes the rich diversity of coaching.

Achieving this requires a conscious evolution in three key areas:

Evolving Assessment: From Monologue to Dialogue

The assessment itself must evolve to see the whole coach, not just a sliver of their performance. This is critical for capturing the nuanced mastery of the senior generation of coaches whose styles may not fit neatly into the BARS, and for validating the diverse approaches of the next generation.

- **Introduce a Professional Dialogue (Viva Voce):** To complement the performance recording, a structured, panelled interview with the credential applicant would allow them to articulate the reasoning and intent behind their in-session choices. This allows the profession to understand and learn from a master's "why," not just their "what," creating a richer, more diverse picture of excellence.
- **Focus on Principle-Based Evaluation:** This dialogue would support a shift away from rigid behavioral checklists. The focus would become: "Did the coach's unique intervention, and their reasoning behind it, demonstrate a masterful application of the *principles* of the Core Competencies?"

Establishing a Transparent Framework of Accountability

To prevent the "letter of the law" from hardening into dogma, the system that interprets those laws must be transparent and accountable.

- **Establishing a Mastery Assessment Council:** This Council would not simply be more assessors from the same philosophically-aligned pool. Its members would need to be selected based on published, rigorous criteria that go beyond a simple MCC designation. Qualifications must include not only deep coaching experience but also across divergent coaching modalities, demonstrable training in assessment science and bias mitigation, and a transparent nomination process designed specifically to ensure representation from a wide spectrum of coaching traditions.
- **A Clear Mandate for the Council:** This Council's primary mandate would be to serve as a **true appeals body**, replacing the flawed rescore process. Its purpose would not be to simply provide another subjective opinion, but to investigate claims of assessment failure, including procedural errors, factual inaccuracies, and potential assessor bias. Crucially, its rulings would then be used (anonymously) as calibration and training tools for the entire assessor pool, creating a living library of case law that refines the standards in real-time. Establishing this Council now allows the profession to capture the deep, contextual wisdom of its senior members, using their expertise before institutional memory is lost to retirement.

Diversifying the Guardians and Bridging the Innovation Gap

A system cannot evolve if it remains a closed loop. To counteract the demographic concentration and prepare for the future, the profession must:

- **Diversify the Assessor Pool:** A strategic effort to recruit and train assessors from a wider range of cultural backgrounds and coaching philosophies is essential for a smooth and healthy transition.
- **Bridge the Gap Between Innovation and Credentialing:** Finally, the most effective way to break an echo chamber is to ensure that new ideas can penetrate its walls. While the ICF already champions innovation through journals and conferences, this vital work often exists in a silo, separate from the credentialing process. The path forward is to create a formal bridge between innovation and credentialing.

This would involve a dedicated initiative to regularly review emerging methodologies and insights from the profession's innovative platforms. These

learnings must then be used to continuously challenge and evolve the Core Competency model and, most importantly, be integrated into the training and calibration of all credentialing assessors.

Doing so would transform the credentialing system from a static gatekeeper into a living, learning ecosystem. It ensures that the definition of an assessable "masterful performance" is constantly updated by the reality of what creates client impact, preventing the "letter of the law" from calcifying into a dogma that is disconnected from the evolving "spirit" of the profession.

Conclusion

The journey of professional coaching from an unregulated frontier to a respected global profession is a story of remarkable success, built on the sturdy foundation of standardization. The ICF, as the primary standard-bearer, deserves immense credit for this achievement. But as with any maturing field, the very structures that created stability can begin to limit potential if they are not consciously and courageously evolved.

This paper has argued that the current system, while well-intentioned, risks creating a methodological echo chamber where a specific interpretation of mastery is perpetuated through its assessment rubrics and processes. We have explored how this can lead to a crisis of transparency, a marginalization of diverse styles, and the profound risk of the profession's wisdom calcifying into dogma.

When the assessment process is a "black box" that lacks transparency and accountability; when it is judged by assessors with an inherent "tunnel vision"; when its standards are applied through culturally-biased behavioral markers, and when it actively reinforces its own biases by training assessors exclusively on a pre-filtered set of 'successful' recordings, then we are left with the most difficult question of all: **What does the MCC credential, as it stands today, truly signify?**

Does it represent an objective, universal standard of coaching mastery? Or does it signify a practitioner's successful navigation of a specific, culturally-biased, and procedurally flawed institutional system?

When a credential's validity can be reasonably questioned, it undermines not only the standing of those who hold it, but the very foundation of the professional standards it is meant to represent. Until these systemic flaws are addressed, the burden of proof lies not with the practitioner, but with the institution itself.

The path forward is not to abandon standards, but to enrich them. It is a call to evolve our methods of assessment to see the "why" behind the "what"; to build systems of accountability that are as rigorous as our ethics; and to actively champion the diversity that will fuel our future growth.

This is the Standard Bearer's Dilemma: to hold the line on quality while simultaneously opening the gates to innovation. Navigating this dilemma is the critical work of our time, ensuring the coaching profession remains a dynamic, resilient, and truly global force for human potential for generations to come.

About the Author



Rishi Rongala, PCC, is a globally recognized executive coach and thought partner to corporate leaders and entrepreneurs. With extensive experience in the coaching profession, Rishi partners with his clients to navigate complexity and achieve profound, sustainable results. He is the founder of Paradigm Shift Transformative Coaching, a practice dedicated to fostering deep awareness and impactful leadership.

Rishi's work extends beyond his coaching practice to influencing the broader conversation on leadership and professional development. As a sought-after thought leader on high-impact coaching, he is the co-author of the book, *The Rise of Manager as Coach*, and the creator of "*The Awakened Leader*," a private newsletter for leaders navigating complexity.

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