

Agency for Thee, But Not for Me:

How the ICF's Double Standard Undermines Its Own Coaching Philosophy

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The International Coaching Federation (ICF) has built its global authority on a core principle that distinguishes its coaching: *radical client agency and autonomy*.

The ICF defines coaching as a "*partnership with clients*" where the coach honors the client as the expert in their own life and work. The entire ethical and philosophical framework rests on the idea that a coach's role is not to provide advice or answers, but to facilitate the client's own process of discovery.

This article argues that the ICF's model is a double standard. While it champions a philosophy of radical client autonomy, it enforces a model of coach conformity through standardizing and assessing a single "correct" way to coach.

The ICF, in effect, imposes its own beliefs onto the coaches through its assessment process, and treats the coach in a way that it explicitly forbids the coach from treating the client. This presents a significant unresolved incoherence at the heart of the profession's "gold standard."

The reason we must see this as an imposition rather than as an invitation is because an imposition has clear rewards and punishments that are evident in the assessment process.

At the heart of this is a contradiction in how the Core Competencies are presented versus how they are used.

- 1. The Descriptors (The Philosophy):** When presented to the world, the Core Competencies are aspirational descriptors. They paint a picture of an ideal coaching relationship built on abstract qualities. The language is philosophical, describing a state of *being*: "Embodies a Coaching Mindset," "Cultivates Trust and Safety," "Maintains Presence". These competencies describe a fluid, intuitive, and co-creative partnership.
- 2. The Prescriptions (The Assessment):** For credentialing, this descriptive

philosophy is replaced by a prescriptive reality. The ICF uses "PCC Markers", "MCC BARS" and "Minimum Skills Requirements," which are "indicators that an assessor is trained to listen for to determine which ICF Core Competencies are in evidence". These markers are a checklist of specific, observable behaviors a coach *must* perform to pass. While the ICF states these are "not intended as a rigid checklist," the nature of a standardized, high-stakes performance evaluation functionally turns them into one.

This creates a possibility of bait-and-switch. Coaches are drawn to a philosophy of artistry and presence but are evaluated on their ability to execute a series of mechanical, prescribed actions. The descriptive "what" of coaching is supplanted by the prescriptive "how" of assessment.

The Core Competencies do not exist as a standalone philosophy of coaching; they exist only as a function of assessment. They were developed, and are continuously updated, to serve as the "foundation of the Credential process, including the ICF Credentialing Exam".

The Myth of "Natural Demonstration"

The primary defense of the ICF's assessment model is that a masterful coach should demonstrate the required behaviors "naturally" and "effortlessly." The argument suggests that the performance evaluation is not forcing a specific style but is simply a filter; by recording enough sessions (10, 20, or more), a coach will eventually produce one that happens to showcase their integrated skills authentically.

The core of the issue lies in the conflict between the client's agenda and the assessment's agenda.

- **The Philosophy of Singular Focus:** Masterful coaching requires the coach to be "fully present and flexible with the client, 'dancing in the moment'". At the MCC level, this is defined as having "a complete curiosity that is undiluted by a need to perform". The assessment criteria explicitly state that a coach will fail if they are "focused on your own performance". The coach's sole agenda must be the client's.
- **The Mandate of a Dual Focus:** The ICF's instructions for the performance evaluation create a second, competing agenda. The candidate is explicitly told to "pick one that truly showcases your skills and strengths" and to "Look

for a session that highlights your use of a wide range of ICF Core Competencies".

These two directives are structurally incompatible. A coach cannot be simultaneously "undiluted by a need to perform" while also consciously trying to produce an artifact that "showcases" and "highlights" a "wide range" of skills for an evaluator. The instruction to record multiple sessions and *select* the best one is an admission of this conflict.

The Bias Against The Simplicity of Mastery

Furthermore, the instruction to showcase a "wide range" of competencies creates a structural bias against what can be a key indicator of mastery: elegant simplicity.

- **The Philosophy of Contextual Effectiveness:** Masterful coaching is about choosing "in the moment what is most effective". A truly masterful session might achieve a profound breakthrough for a client through a long, reflective silence and a single, perfectly timed question. The effectiveness is contextual, not based on the quantity of different skills demonstrated.
- **The Mandate of Demonstrative Variety:** By requiring a "wide range" of competencies to be highlighted, the assessment process structurally favors sessions that are a "greatest hits" compilation of different markers.

A session of masterful, elegant simplicity would be a poor candidate for a credentialing submission because it would fail to provide evidence for a "wide range" of markers. The system does not reward the most *effective* coaching; it rewards the most *demonstrative* coaching.

While mentor coaches and assessors argue that a masterful coach should demonstrate the required behaviors "naturally", the simultaneous suggestion to "record 10-20 sessions" is a tacit acknowledgement that most authentic coaching sessions do not "naturally" look like a highlight reel of every behavioral marker privileged by the assessment process.

This leads the coach to hunt for a session that fits an artificial template of variety, rather than accepting that a masterful coach's contextually appropriate, and perhaps simple, intervention is sufficient.

The Philosophy of Agency vs. The Mandate of Conformity

The following table juxtaposes the principles the ICF requires coaches to uphold with the principles the ICF, as an institution, applies to the coaches themselves.

Principle Applied to the Client	Principle Applied to the Coach
<p>The Client is the Expert: The coach must acknowledge "that clients are responsible for their own choices" and respect the client's "unique talents, insights, and work in the coaching process".</p> <p>The coach's knowledge is secondary to the client's context.</p>	<p>The ICF is the Expert: The coach must demonstrate "knowledge and proficient application of the ICF Core Competencies, Code of Ethics, and definition of coaching".</p> <p>The coach's own unique insights, context, or effective methods are secondary to the ICF's standardized model.</p>
<p>Non-Directiveness: A coach will fail an evaluation if they "focus primarily on telling the client what to do" or if their questions "contain predetermined answers".</p> <p>The coach must not impose their "view of the situation".</p>	<p>Absolute Directiveness: The ICF Credentialing Exam presents scenarios with four options and requires the coach to identify the single "best possible action" and "worst possible action".</p> <p>Credit is given by imposing a single correct answer.</p>
<p>Honoring Context: The coach must be "sensitive to clients' identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs" and "adapt one's coaching to the client".</p>	<p>Ignoring Context: The Performance Evaluation is an audio recording stripped of all context. The assessor does not know the client's history, the coach's unique style, or the relationship's depth, yet judges the coach against a universal, context-free standard.</p>
<p>Partnership and Co-Creation: The ICF defines coaching as "partnering</p>	<p>Compliance and Conformity: The relationship between the coach and</p>

<p>with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process". A coach fails if "full partnership with the client is not demonstrated".</p>	<p>the ICF is not a partnership. The coach must demonstrate behaviors and styles privileged by the assessment process.</p>
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The result is a system that is philosophically incoherent. The ICF has created a professional hierarchy that violates its own core tenets.

- **At the top is the ICF**, which acts as the ultimate expert, defining and enforcing a single body of knowledge about what constitutes effective coaching.
- **In the middle is the coach**, who must subordinate their own agency, context, and experience to demonstrate expertise in the ICF's model. While the stated goal is to uphold a standard of integrity, the process requires the coach to shift from being an autonomous expert in their own practice to a candidate demonstrating compliance with an external authority of the ICF.
- **At the bottom is the client**, whose agency is held sacred. The coach treats the client as the expert, to not impose knowledge, and to honor their unique context.

The coach is thus placed in a paradoxical position. They are trained in a philosophy of empowerment, non-judgment, and respect for individual autonomy. Yet, to be professionally recognized, they must submit to a system of judgment, compliance, and conformity that does not afford to honor their autonomy.

Conclusion

The principle of not imposing one's knowledge on another out of respect for their agency, and out of the understanding that we are not an expert on their life and work, is the philosophical bedrock of coaching. It is what distinguishes coaching from consulting, mentoring, and therapy.

Yet, the International Coaching Federation, the profession's most prominent governing body, has built its entire credentialing structure on this very act of imposition.

By creating a standardized set of competencies and enforcing them through a rigid assessment process, the ICF has institutionalized a single "right way" to coach. It shares its knowledge and demands adherence, undermining the agency of the individual coach to practice in a way that is authentic to their own context, personality, and beliefs.

The system requires coaches to embody a philosophy of non-directiveness while simultaneously demanding they follow a highly directive path to professional validation. This represents a fundamental incoherence that calls into question the philosophical integrity of the ICF's model of coach-development.

About the Author



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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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