

Coaching Supervision:

The Allure and the Risks of Institutional Embrace

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Coaching Supervision has an official mention in the 2025 update to the International Coaching Federation (ICF) core competencies. This is being interpreted as hinting at a potential mandatory requirement of coaching supervision in the future. For many supervisors, this feels like a long-awaited victory.

This article is intended to shine a light on potential blind spots. While coaching supervision is a vital practice, this positioning warrants careful consideration, as it highlights a deeper conflict between two increasingly divergent fields: **the profession of coaching** and **the profession of coach-credentialing**.

It invites supervisors to reflect on the long-term consequences of this shift, ensuring their practice remains a powerful catalyst for genuine development, not just a mechanism for credentialing. Underlying issues are deconstructed to encourage a conscious, collective reflection on the future of supervision and its role in the integrity of the coaching profession.

Defining the Practice of Supervision

The term supervision itself, borrowed from helping professions like therapy and social work, can be misleading. In those fields, supervision often carries connotations of a managerial or hierarchical relationship, where the supervisor may hold clinical or ethical responsibility for the supervisee's cases.

Coaching supervision is fundamentally different. It is a non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer reflective partnership. The supervisor holds no managerial authority or responsibility for the coach's clients. Their role is not to "oversee" but to provide "super-vision", a broader perspective.

Coaching supervision creates a formal space for coaches to explore the totality of their work. Its functions are often described as threefold: Formative/Developmental, Normative/Qualitative and Restorative/Supportive.

Under this definition of supervision, its value is not under question, any more than the value of coaching itself, since both these practices share significant overlap in their approaches and functions with their respective clients. This inquiry is focused

on *who supervision serves* and *what it becomes* when its primary purpose shifts from development to compliance.

A Theory on Divergence: The Profession of Coaching vs. The Profession of Coach-Credentialing

The divergence between the *profession of coaching* and the *profession of coach-credentialing* can be theorized as a paradoxical byproduct of professionalization, rather than an intentional drift in mission. This divergence is best understood as a fundamental break in worldview, and can be explained as an epistemological split leading to divergent ontological priorities.

Consider the "map versus territory" analogy, where the "territory" represents the complex, relational, and emergent reality of the live coaching session navigated by the practitioner. Conversely, the "map" represents the standardized competency models and assessment rubrics required by a credentialing institution to ensure rigor and consistency at scale.

The *profession of coach-credentialing*, in its necessary function as a map-maker, must adopt a bureaucratic logic focused on standardization and reliable measurement. This institutional focus on administering the map inevitably creates a separate professional domain with different priorities and success metrics than the *profession of coaching*, which remains focused on the adaptive, contextual navigation of the client's unique territory.

An epistemological split occurs first because the two professions develop conflicting ways of knowing and validating "good coaching."

- The **Profession of Coaching**, operating in the "territory" of the live session, relies on a *phenomenological* way of knowing. Truth is discovered through the subjective, lived experience of the coach and client, through intuition, relational depth, and emergent insights. A coach *knows* a session was successful through a felt sense of connection, observed and stated client transformation etc.
- The **Profession of Coach-Credentialing**, operating as the "map-maker," must rely on a *positivistic* way of knowing. To be scalable and defensible, its truth must be objective, observable, and measurable against a standardized checklist. An assessor *knows* a session was successful by ticking boxes or rating on scales that correspond to prescribed behaviors that are largely devoid of their relational context.

This explains why a single coaching session can be a "success" from the coach's experiential perspective while simultaneously being a "failure" from the credentialing body's behavioral perspective, and vice-versa.

This split in *knowing* inevitably leads to a split in *what they are being*. The two professions, because they know differently, have come to prioritize two different realities.

- For the **Profession of Coaching**, the ontological priority - the most real and essential thing - is the **coach-client relationship** and the **impact of coaching**. This dynamic, intangible "space between" is the foundational unit where all coaching value is created, and is its core business model. All skills, models, and competencies are in service to the health of this space.
- For the **Profession of Coach-Credentialing**, the ontological priority is the **credential itself**. As a standardized, marketable, and objective asset, the credential is the foundational unit of the institutional system. It is the bedrock of its value proposition and the core of its business model. The institution's actions are, rightly from its perspective, in service to protecting the integrity and value of this credential.

To put it simply:

- **The Profession of Coaching:** Its primary stakeholder is the client. Its logic is relational and emergent. Success is measured by client outcomes, development of practitioner wisdom and flourishing of coaching business. The primary transaction is between the coachee and the coach.
- **The Profession of Coach-Credentialing:** Its primary stakeholder is the coach. Its logic is bureaucratic and transactional. Success is measured by credential-holders, membership and market recognition. The primary transaction is between the coach and the institution.

This is the chasm that the institutionalization of supervision risks widening.

The Risks of Institutional Embrace

It is understandable why many supervisors view the ICF's move with optimism. It appears to validate their work, secure a market, and raise standards. This is an invitation to pause and consider the potential consequences.

Risk of Performative Development

Recently a colleague who is a coach supervisor asked me, "mentor coaching is already mandatory, so why not supervision?"

We have seen how mentor coaching, while intended for a coach to develop the technical skills necessary in alignment with the core competencies, mutates into simply *performing* the behaviors that one knows the assessor is looking for. The learning becomes a theatrical performance for an audience of one: the assessor.

Therefore, the comparison to mentor coaching is not an argument *for* mandatory supervision, but a stark warning of what supervision will risk becoming.

Risk of Commoditization

A mandatory market inevitably commoditizes the service. Currently, a majority of coach-supervisors operate in the realm of 'masterful coaching' as opposed to 'minimum compliance'. The demand for 'supervision hours' will attract providers competing on price and focusing on compliance.

This incentivizes coaches struggling to make it as professional practitioners to move up the ladder into supervision training, reinforcing the risks of a methodological echo chamber that I have argued against in [The Standard Bearer's Dilemma](#).

We already see this with coaching itself, with commoditization and low-quality coaching making a race for the bottom as a consequence of democratization.

Risk of Institutional Capture

Supervisors working with ICF credentialed coaches currently serve the *profession of coaching* rather than the *profession of coach-credentialing*. Their role is to serve the developmental needs of the practitioner and, by extension, the client.

Their independence allows them to maintain a critical distance, enabling them to question, challenge, and even critique the credentialing models in service of the coach's deeper learning.

By accepting a mandate, supervisors risk becoming insiders, compromising their independence and making them complicit in a system whose foundational flaws they will no longer be in a position to question. They become a designated functionary within the *profession of coach-credentialing*.

Their role is implicitly redefined from a trusted guide to an approved vendor of a required service. This creates a conflict of allegiance and compromises independence.

It creates a psychological and professional pressure to align with the institutional worldview, as their legitimacy (and a guaranteed market) is now derived from that institution.

Again, we already have precedent of this with senior credential holders whose major revenue comes from mentor-coaching and are therefore unable to openly engage in critical dialogue with the status-quo due to the conflict of interest.

When one's business model is predicated on serving a particular system, the incentive is to uphold the system or stay silent even when it is flawed.

The Illusion of Retrofitting Rigor

For many supervisors, the ICF's move toward mandatory supervision is seen as a welcome and overdue step, finally "catching up" to the perceived rigor of bodies like the EMCC. This perspective, however, overlooks a fundamental distinction: the difference between a practice that is foundational to a system versus one that is retrofitted onto it. These two professional bodies do not exactly share the same logic in how they operate, and therefore this comparison is short-sighted.

Positioning supervision as a new requirement onto the existing ICF framework creates an illusion of rigor while leaving deeper, foundational flaws unaddressed. When a developmental practice like supervision is bolted onto a system with a different operating logic, it doesn't fix the system; the system's logic reshapes the practice to fit its existing priorities.

This is not a genuine elevation of standards but a patchwork solution that masks critical, unresolved issues within the ICF's credentialing model. These include but are not limited to:

- The reductionist nature of competency models,
- Systemic and cultural biases deeply rooted in western culture and the approaches of the ICF's foundational coach-training institutes,
- Inadequate and flawed assessment systems,
- The surprisingly thin link between the competency models and actual client outcomes.

Supervision as a requirement merely adds a new, costly component, alongside a public narrative that the standards have improved.

The Economics of the Credentialing Profession

The shift toward mandatory supervision is an economic expansion for the *profession of coach-credentialing*. This expansion demonstrates how the institutional logic of the credentialing industry operates.

When a new professional standard (supervision) is mandated, it creates demand for:

- A new service (receiving supervision),
- A new professional role (the supervisor),
- A new educational product (supervisor training),
- A new layer of accreditation (for both supervisors and their training programs).

Each step in this chain creates new financial transactions that flow through the ecosystem, ultimately reinforcing the central role and financial stability of the

governing institutions. These additional financial transactions will inevitably originate from the pockets of the coach-practitioners who choose to pursue the credentialing pathway.

The Sacred Container: Navigating the Supervisor's Role

In an act of reimagining coaching, I offer you this: A mature profession is defined by the wisdom of its practitioners, not the complexity of its bureaucracy. Supervision, rightly understood, is the place where that wisdom thrives.

For many supervisors, the work is more than a professional service; it is a deeply rewarding, often sacred practice. They distinguish it sharply from the mechanics of mentor coaching, cherishing the supervisory space as a unique container - one that remains in touch with the emergent, and authentic reality of the coaching terrain.

Given this, the joy and sense of validation that comes with the ICF's institutional embrace is entirely understandable. It feels like a long-awaited recognition of the work's profound importance.

I want to conclude this with an invitation for supervisors to reflect on the precise nature of this seeming victory.

The supervision we value - the sacred container - is a practice of the *profession of coaching*. It thrives on nuance, psychological safety, and emergent wisdom that often goes in the face of established frameworks and standards.

The paradox is that for the institution to validate the 'territory,' it must first translate it into the language of the 'map.' In this act of translation, the very essence of the practice is inevitably altered. What was emergent becomes prescribed; what was relational becomes transactional.

I do not know if supervision will ever be mandated by the ICF. But as more supervisors are rooting in that direction, there are two vital questions that must be asked from the future:

Is the practice of supervision we cherish the same as the mandated requirement we are celebrating?

Is it possible that in our joy at seeing our work finally placed on the map, we have not noticed that it is no longer the territory we fell in love with?

These questions are an invitation to a deeper stewardship. The future of coaching will be defined by our courage to hold these questions, consciously and continuously, as we reimagine and navigate its unfolding.

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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