THE COACHING AGREEMENT

The International Coach Federation (ICF) has established the Coaching Agreement as a core competency of coaching. It is defined as the ability to understand what is required in a specific coaching interaction and the ability to come to agreement with the prospective or new client about the coaching process and relationship.

Often overlooked, though, is that this competency includes both an initial agreement of the coaching relationship and an agreement at the beginning of each session pertaining to what the client wants to work on, a possible outcome, and a measure for progress in that time.

The initial agreement starts with a conversation on the roles of the coach and the client—what coaching is and is not. A written agreement detailing this information, as well as addressing ethics and confidentiality, is often used and signed by the coach and the client. For a more dynamic written agreement, you could ask your client to add their own paragraph describing what they want from the coach and commit to doing.

This exercise provides a strong start to the coaching process, a clear foundation from which to work together and encourages openness.

The second part of the competency says it is the responsibility of the coach to ask the client at the beginning of the session what they want to focus on and achieve. At the ACC credentialing level, this is adequate. At the PCC level, the coach should ask how the client measures success for the topic. By the MCC level, the coach should check in with the client to ensure that the direction is continuing to serve the client.
Key Elements

The following are key elements of ICF Core Competency #2 – Establishing the Coaching Agreement that will help you set the stage and facilitate a transformational coaching conversation.

Focus.
What is the client’s focus for this conversation? Understand the client’s issue: Inquire, Establish and Align with you on a FOCUS
Explore for specificity- GO DEEPER: What is the issue beneath the issue? The present “issue” is rarely the “real” or underlying one.

Outcome.
What is the client’s desired outcome for the coaching conversation?
Clarify a desired OUTCOME – What does the client want to accomplish with this conversation? This is the equivalent of asking your client, “What do you want?”, which is one of the most powerful and empowering questions you can ask.
Desired outcomes may be subjective or objective. Examples of objective outcomes include a plan, action steps, or a list of ideas. Examples of subjective outcomes include feeling more confident, less stressed, or clearer.

Motivation.
What is important to the client about this focus/outcome?
This helps you and your client understand their relationship to their issue. It can also reveal information you can use for empowering your client (vision, goals, values, strengths, beliefs, etc.).
Questions you could ask:
What does this mean for you?
What is important for you about this?
What is the benefit of having this?
What will be different about your life when you have accomplished this?

Measure Success
Establish a way to measure accomplishment, and a baseline, so you can measure progress at the end of the conversation and beyond.
How will your client know they have achieved what they wanted to accomplish?
What will that look like or feel like (subjective or objective)?
One example of a measurement tool is a scale of 1-10. Where are you now?
Where do you want to be?
Check in periodically, if needed. Ask, how are we doing? Is this the right direction? Are we on track toward what you wanted to accomplish?

If the client wants to change directions, then re-contract for clarity and alignment. At closure, check in on this measure for success related to desired outcome. Ask, where are you now in relationship to what you wanted to accomplish today? This helps the client measure their progress and acknowledge their accomplishment. Remember, the client is always the ultimate decision maker about where the conversation goes, including whether or not a change in conversation direction occurs. The client sets the agenda. The skilled coach exhibits an attitude of exploration and partnership with the client and moves in the direction the client wants to move.

Examples of coach language used at the beginning of a coaching session to establish the overall agreement are as follows:

- “As you think about the overall goals you’ve set for yourself this year, what would you like to focus on today, and what do you want to achieve by the end of our call?”

- “In our time today, what’s the most important thing for us to focus on, and how will you know that it’s been a successful conversation for you?”

- “We have about 30 minutes together today. What would you like to work on, and what will indicate to you that it’s been time well spent?”

Examples of coach language used for the agreements happening throughout a coaching session are as follows:

- “Now that we’ve established the focus for our conversation, where would you like to start?”

- “It sounds like you are facing two imminent challenges. Which one do you want us to focus on first?”

- “Would it be helpful if we spent a little time thinking about …?”

- “How are we doing on giving you what you wanted?”

- “Are you ready to move forward?”

- “May I challenge you here?”

- “There seems to be a gap between what you say you want and what you are doing. Would you like to talk about this?”
The first question in a coaching session sets the tone for how the client will respond. In establishing the coaching agreement, the coach must ask a question that best supports the client in gaining clarity about what they want to focus on for the session.

**Reflections**
What actions can I take to improve this competency?

- Download the Sample Coach Agreement from the ICF website (http://www.coachfederation.org/icf-members/assets-and-tools/)
- For coaching agreements with 3 parties (coach, client, sponsor), think about how you will define each stakeholder’s roles & responsibilities, communicate status to the sponsor, and establish confidentiality.
- Create and employ a coaching agreement for all clients
- Here are some typical questions coaches use to establish the coaching agreement. Which set do you think contains the most effective questions?

**Set #1**
What will help us get started?
What’s on your mind?
How are you?
What’s up?
How can I help you?

**Set #2**
What would be valuable to explore today?
What would you like to work on or discuss that would really make a difference to you?
How would you like to use our time together today?
What would you like to focus on today?
What would you like to accomplish by the end of our session?
The first set of questions are open-ended to the point that the client may meander through their thoughts, delaying the client from honing in on what is most important to accomplish for this coaching session.

Some coaches may ask a general question from Set #1 and then ask a follow up question from set #2. So why not be more direct in the first place with your question? Help the client begin to focus so you can help them to establish an effective coaching agreement for the session.

Establishing the agreement is not intended to create some sort of rigidity. Once you and your client have agreed on the desired outcome of a session, you "step into" the issue and sometimes, your client might wander away from the topic or find an insight and another "goal" that neither could have suspected at the beginning of the session. In that case, we should become aware of that and bring that awareness back to our client. We can say something like, "I noticed we wandered off your original goal. Would you like to re-establish our agreement (design another desired outcome or goal to work on) or would you like to get back to our original topic?"

As a result, it's always alive and fluid, not constricting. The agreement is there so our clients can be responsible at all times about what they want and so that we can help them get it.

Resources
Establishing the Coaching Agreement: The Misunderstood Competency
Is establishing a coaching agreement necessary at the start of every session?