

## **Regulating the regulators: Paving the way for international, evidence-based coaching standards**

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### **Abstract**

Attempts to standardise coaching and develop frameworks of accreditation for professional coaches currently appear to be growing as rapidly as the coaching industry itself. Coach training organisations, professional associations and universities are vying to regulate the industry through the development of competencies and standards. However, most existing frameworks of coach regulation are not evidence-based or empirically validated. The International Coach Federation (ICF) is the current leader in the promotion and regulation of professional coaching standards and the largest coach accreditation body in the world. Using the findings from a qualitative grounded theory study of ICF certified coaches and their clients, this paper empirically examines and discusses the ICF coaching core competencies. The paper presents evidence to strengthen the credibility of the ICF core competencies as well as inform their future refinement and, by encouraging further research into existing coach regulation, it paves the way for future shared standards of coaching.

### **Key words**

Personal coaching, International Coach Federation, coaching core competencies, coaching standards, coaching regulation

### **Introduction**

Due to the rapid and unregulated emergence of the coaching industry, the focus on the development of standards and accreditation is only now coming to the fore. Among a multitude of training organisations, competing professional associations and the increasing number of universities offering coaching degrees, preparations are being made for a combined code of practice (Sheppard 2005) and the development of shared standards. As the world's largest resource for business and professional coaches, The International Coach Federation (ICF) champions the professional integrity and standards of the coaching industry (International Coach Federation 2007). It promotes a code of professional standards, which include eleven coaching core competencies (International Coach Federation 1999) that underpin a "universally accepted accreditation process" (International Coach Federation 2007) for coaches and coach training. However, the evolution of the ICF core competencies (Richard 2006) may be described as eclectic and unscientific, without any apparent evidence-base or empirical foundations. This paper therefore examines the empirical validity of the ICF core competencies in the light of findings from a qualitative grounded theory study of the learning processes underlying the experiences of five ICF Master and Professional Certified Coaches (MCC/PCC) and nine of their respective personal coaching clients. The paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive

evaluation of the ICF core competencies, but attempts to ignite further inquiry to develop a solid evidence-base upon which future coaching standards may rest.

## **Background**

Professional coaching associations as well as coach training organisations have seen the value in engaging in research to boost the credibility of, and empirically validate at least some of their coaching claims (Linley 2006). This movement towards evidence-based coaching and the scientist-practitioner model is reflective of the increasing demand for standardisation and regulation from the research field (Brotman, Liberi and Wasylyshyn 1998; Luebbe 2005) as well as the industry (Gaskell 2006) and the marketplace (Jarvis 2004; International Coach Federation 1998; Kubicek 2004; Hall 2005). Many bodies have evolved to fill this need to offer accreditation:- the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Association of Coaching (IAC) and the European Coaching Institute, in addition to many universities and other tertiary institutions (Gaskell 2006). However, the ICF is the largest at present. Their coaching core competencies which underpin a three-level accreditation process were also identified as an influential factor behind the credibility of ICF coaches (Carr 2006; O'Neill and Broadbent 2003).

There are eleven ICF core coaching competencies (International Coach Federation 1999) each of which are clustered within a broader competency and are specifically broken down into specific coach behaviours:

- A. Setting the foundation
  - 1. Meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards
  - 2. Establishing the coaching agreement
- B. Co-creating the relationship
  - 3. Establishing trust and intimacy with the client
  - 4. Coaching presence
- C. Communicating effectively
  - 5. Active listening
  - 6. Powerful questioning
  - 7. Direct communication
- D. Facilitating learning and results
  - 8. Creating awareness
  - 9. Designing actions
  - 10. Planning and goal setting
  - 11. Managing progress and accountability

## **Methodology**

This paper provides the first known evidence-based discussion of coaching standards. The findings presented here were based on a qualitative grounded theory approach investigating the learning processes in personal coaching. Grounded theory is a methodology which is particularly useful to the field of coaching, as its purpose involves the generation of theory (Creswell 2002; Chemnitz and Swanson 1986). Thus, in areas such as this, in which there is currently no extant literature that attempts to examine or evaluate proposed coaching standards or competencies, grounded theory is most appropriate. The findings presented emerged from the analysis of more than thirty hours of interviews with five coaches and nine of their respective current and past

personal coaching clients. All coaches had over 2000 hours coaching experience and were recognised as either Master or Professional Certified Coaches (MCC/PCC) with the ICF.

In what follows, the ICF core competencies are discussed with reference to findings which emerged from the study. All references to the main competency clusters are written in **bold**, while the competencies themselves are underlined. In addition, competency definitions and associated behaviours appear in “inverted commas” followed by a page number associated to the page in the original ICF Professional Coaching Core Competencies document (International Coach Federation 1999) in which they can be found. Finally, actual words spoken by participants are written in *italics*, with participants being identified by number (in brackets) and as clients or coaches.

## Findings

### *A. Setting the foundation*

The competencies associated with **setting the foundation** were minimally represented within this study of personal coaching. Competency one, meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards, was referred to in several ways. A coach’s professionalism was referred to by two clients in this study. Interestingly, both clients were the only clients in this study who also had coach training. In addition, there were several references made by both coaches and clients relating to “communicat[ing] the distinctions between coaching, consulting, psychotherapy and other support professions” (p.2). These references were made however only in relation to counselling. Firstly, coaches (2, 3, 4) were specific in pointing out that their process was not counselling and in one case, a coach used her coaching process to encourage and prepare her client to seek out counselling. In addition, clients revealed that they were also aware of the distinction between coaching and counselling, with several clients (1, 3, 8) commenting on having seen a counsellor previously and one client (2) intending to see a counsellor in the future. In all cases, clients distinguished the past healing and emotional work of counselling from the specifically present-future orientation of coaching.

*...but all the other stuff was about repairing and healing when I had counsellors but this was actually about me. This was about Ok that was then, where to from here. This is a new day. (Client 3)*

Thus, whilst meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards did not frequently emerge explicitly within this study, it was nevertheless an implicit part of both coach and client awareness. However, competency two, establishing the coaching agreement, was represented more significantly than competency 1 within this study. All coaches as well as several clients in this study referred to setting up an agreement for their coaching relationships. This included discussion of the expectations of both coach and client, including time, logistics, fees, action and desired outcomes. Interestingly however, this process emerged as more influential in reference to competency eleven, managing progress and accountability, in that it served to foster a sense of commitment and responsibility within the coaching relationship:

*...we actually need to have an agreement with a client and I also believe because it adds clarity... because we both know what our responsibilities are, what we agree to. It’s part of setting the context. (Coach 2)*

Thus, whilst establishing the coaching agreement emerged as an important part of the coaching process, it did not emerge as a major process, as the core competencies imply, but rather as an influential factor within another competency, namely managing progress and accountability.

### ***B. Co-creating the relationship***

The competencies associated with **co-creating the relationship** were largely validated within the findings of this study. The coaching relationship emerged as a major category and the associated competencies were clarified and extended by the findings of this study. Whilst the coaching behaviours associated with competency three, establishing trust and intimacy with the client, were only partially represented within the findings of this study, “Ability to create a safe, supportive environment that produces ongoing mutual respect and trust” (p.2) the competency definition, was strongly supported. Trust emerged as an important element in the coaching relationship, as did safeness. However, whilst acceptance is alluded to in the competencies by a notion of respect, the competency does not reflect the quality of acceptance, which emerged in this study through coaches’ suspension of judgement and led to the cultivation of trust. Instead, non-judgement is referred to by the ICF as a part of competency five, active listening, rather than as the quality of the relationship, as it emerged in this study. Furthermore, whilst honesty is referred to by the ICF as a coach behaviour, the competency does not reflect the distinction between coach honesty versus client honesty. Indeed, both were displayed among the participants in this study with the former providing honest feedback and the latter sharing aspects of themselves with their coach that they were not likely to share with others. Again, this process was also supported through trust and acceptance.

In addition, equality emerged in the study as an important aspect of the coaching relationship. This was evident in the way in which coaches and clients worked together as coaches were responsible for some things, while clients were responsible for others. In addition, coaches were not seen as having the answers, but the process involved both coaches and clients collaboratively discovering them:

*I think it was four weeks like I said to [my coach] well tell me what I need to know, but she doesn't know either. She's also working out with me, she hasn't got the answer and her job is to help coach it and bring it out of me. That's how I see it. (Client 4)*

Whilst “ongoing mutual respect...”, “Asks permission...” and “demonstrates respect...” allude to equality, the competencies do not appear to be adequately communicating the quality of equality that emerged within the coaching relationships examined in this study.

A particularly interesting aspect of the findings from this study is the emergence competency 4, coaching presence, not as a core competency in itself, but rather as an influential factor within competency five, active listening. Thus, coaching presence was demonstrated to be an element within **communicating effectively**, not **co-creating the relationship**, although the quality of listening also appeared to contribute to the quality of the relationship. In this study, clients and coaches frequently alluded to the notion of coaching presence as the coach *tapping into* (Coach 2, 3, 4, 5; Client 2, 4, 9), *tuning into* (Coach 2, 3; Client 3) or *connecting to* (Coach 2; Client 4, 8) the client as they were speaking:

*She [my coach] tried to tap into your.. she tries to connect with you as well, she tried to be intuitive as well. Not just a guide but really listening to what I'm saying. (Client 4)*

Furthermore, it was this presence, characterised by the quality of listening, which allowed coaches to dance “in the moment” (p.2). Thus, coaching presence emerged as an integral part of the process of listening. Nevertheless, several aspects of coaching presence as explained by the ICF were still supported by the findings of this study. As the above example highlights, the coach “Access[ing] [their] own intuition...” (p.2) was frequently mentioned by both coaches and clients. Similarly, humour was also referred to. Notably however, clients’ use of their own intuition is not reflected in the competency, but emerged in this study as a client competency which became more dominant as coaching progressed.

### *C. Communicating effectively*

The competencies associated with **communicating effectively** were significantly validated by the findings of this study. Competency 5, active listening, emerged as a major coaching process and the coach behaviours associated with it were largely supported in this study. Listening for meanings behind words including feelings, values and wants, listening for cues such as tone and body language and reflecting back to the client what was heard all emerged as significant processes in this study:

*...the coach is almost able to in a way, listen beneath that and sort of interpret what it is they're really hearing us longing for... there is something way more than just mirroring where the coach is really listening and seeing with all of their senses and sort of able to name the things that they might see or hear that's really getting in our way. That we can't see. (Client 7)*

The process of listening was demonstrated by both client and coaches as an active process in which subtle messages on a variety of levels were interpreted. As one coach said:

*To me it's like listening with my eyes and my I'm listening with my ears, I'm listening with my eyes, I'm listening with the pictures in my head, I'm listening with the feelings in my stomach... (Coach 3)*

In addition, this study revealed that the process of active listening appeared to be underpinned by coaches’ implicit understanding of an underlying framework of focus which allowed them to “attend to the client and the client’s agenda...” (p.3) and “hear the clients concerns, goals, values and beliefs...” (p.3). Indeed, this underlying framework, which included focus on clients’ observable life situation, emotions, desired outcomes, beliefs and values, appeared to allow coaches to choose which information to further explore. Each element of this underlying framework is reflected among the behaviours associated with the competency of active listening.

One particular aspect of the findings from this study, which however was not articulated by the ICF competency of active listening was a frequently reported process of clients developing the ability to listen to or hear themselves (Client 8) and be more present or connect with themselves (Coach 1, 2; Client 3).

*I definitely have markers along the way which just let me hear what I've just said, or have been saying. (Client 2)*

*Blood was flowing to a part of my body but now it's all over. It's I can experience all of myself I'm not just getting bits and pieces like I was before. It was sort of like a jig-saw puzzle and I only had a few pieces at a time whereas now I've got the whole thing mapped out. (Client 3)*

*You know she would call and say 'How are you?' And 'I'm so busy' or 'I'm so tired' and she would let me talk on and gradually she carefully sort of crafted her questions and I started to hear myself. (Client 8)*

Thus, in this study, the process of listening began as a coach competency, but often led to a client competency, in much the same way that clients learnt to be more intuitive. In this way, the findings of this study suggest that coaching process rather than only coach competency more adequately defines coaching.

Competency six, powerful questioning, was also well supported by the findings of this study. As in and heavily linked to the process of listening, coaches appeared to use the same underlying framework of focus (clients observable life situation, emotions, desired outcomes, beliefs and values), to pose questions:

*It's attuning to the client in a way that you can see that... try to see what's going on underneath what they're saying. So that's how it sort of came about. You know I was enquiring and in that dialogue engaging with her in a way that [was] going deeper and deeper and a train of questions that 'you know what were you feeling? And what were your thoughts?' (Coach 4)*

Examples like this one supported the link made by the ICF between listening and questioning, though also highlighted the pattern in which coaches appeared to move through the framework of focus. As one client participant in this study pointed out, *it's not just any old questions either... They're key questions and obviously they just get to the nuts and bolts of what's going on and actually get deeply enough into you... to get a little insight (Client 3)*. Thus, powerful questioning was characterised and referred to in this study by as a process of *going deeper* (Coach 4). Similarly, another client described coaching conversations as *Just a question-answer and a chat and a focus* (Client 2), thereby highlighting the relationship between questioning and focusing, as the former was shown to stem directly from the latter. Indeed, whilst the ICF highlights that powerful questioning occurs through *active listening*, this study highlighted that active listening provided the context for guiding focus and this informed the process of questioning.

However, whilst ICF portrayed powerful questioning as a component of **communicating effectively** the findings of this study suggested that it was a fundamental tool in creating awareness (competency eight) and **facilitating learning and results**. As one client said when talking about the learning and changes which occurred in her life, *It happened through the kinds of questions that she [my coach] asked me* (Client 7). Similarly, another client commented in relation to her progress, *it's taken a lot of different questions for me to get there* (Client 4). Thus, in this study the process of questioning emerged as far more than a communication tool, but rather a key driver in the whole coaching process.

One particular finding which emerged from this study in relation to the nature of powerful questioning and which was not apparent within the ICF core competencies was the way in which the process of questioning served to trigger clients to engage in reflection. All coaches and most

clients (1, 2, 4, 7 & 8) referred to it directly, describing in a variety of ways including *think a lot* (Coach 1 & 3; Client 3 & 9), *examine* (Coach 3 & 4; Client 5 & 6), *think deeply* (Client 3), *think hard* or *think too hard* (Client 4), *thoughtful behaviour* as opposed to *ROTE behaviour* (Client 8), *review* (Client 3) and *observe* (Coach 2). In fact, the ‘power’ in powerful questioning appeared to be held in the degree to which it caused clients to *stop and reflect* (Coach 2; Client 8) on those aspects involved in the framework of focus. In fact, in the light of this function, sometimes ‘questions’ reportedly did not occur in the form of questions at all. Instead, be it question, story, metaphor or comment, both coaches and clients emphasized how it triggered clients to reflect and more deeply examine aspects of themselves. Furthermore, it was through the process of reflection, that learning and insights were generated:

*The a-ha is the asking a question which is asked at a higher level than anyone else that has actually asked them before, in a different way, so they’ve got to actually stop and think to actually, to retrieve the information in the unconscious. (Coach 5)*

Thus, the ICF competencies, by focusing on coach competency, fail to articulate reflection as an essential coaching process. The other aspect of powerful questioning which the ICF competencies do not perhaps adequately reflect, but which emerged as an interesting phenomenon in this study, was the tendency for clients to take on the role of questioning themselves. Through engagement with the coach in powerful questioning, gradually clients began to demonstrate the ability and tendency to self-manage this process:

*I’d pick a scenario, I’d go at what point do I feel negative about myself? Why is that? Could it be looked at another way? Or was there a fear? What was the fear about? How could I see that differently? And what would be a better alternative? And any time I’d go through the process again so da-da-da-da-da. And that took awhile too because you’d have to think about that sometimes, what is it that I know? Or what is that I’m afraid of there? You know what’s the real issue? I think it’s this? No, no, no. That’s not right. Or this. No, go deeper. This, tha-, thi-, that. Now let’s have a look at that. And look at it a different way, you know what I mean? (Client 1)*

*The other thing that I’m noticing is that I am frequently paying attention to how do you feel or what do you think or is this ok. I’m asking small questions of myself that I have never asked. And I am getting answers some of the time such as I really don’t want to be at this show at the moment, I’m really tired and I think I’ll just go back and take a nap. (Client 8)*

This process was noted by coaches and clients alike (Coach 1, 2 & 5; Clients 1, 2, 4, 8 & 9) and, as in clients developing the ability to listen to themselves and be intuitive, it is viewed as important evidence to support the argument that coaching process rather than coach competencies may best represent coaching standards.

Finally, in relation to **communicating effectively**, competency seven, direct communication, did not emerge as a major coaching process in this study. Whilst the coach behaviour of “providing feedback” emerged instead as an aspect of honesty within the coaching relationship and “clearly stat[ing] coaching objectives” occurred as a part of focusing on desired outcomes, the other behaviours associated with the “ability to communicate effectively during coaching sessions, and to use language that has the greatest positive impact on the client” (p.3) were not significantly referred to by the participants of this study. Noticeably however, as this study interviewed some

clients first at the beginning and then at the end of coaching, there was some evidence that clients developed more ability to demonstrate the behaviours associated with direct communication as a result of their coaching. Again, due to the ICF focus on coach competency, this aspect of the process is not reflected in the competencies.

#### ***D. Facilitating learning and results***

The competencies associated with **facilitating learning and results** were especially well validated by the findings of this study. In fact in this study, **facilitating learning and results** emerged as the culmination of most of the other competencies converged together:

*...the whole process of coaching is all about learning I think. If I didn't want to learn, or if I didn't need to learn, then I wouldn't have been there. And I think everything that I did in coaching was all about learning. So every process, every frustration, every exercise I had to do, every conversation I had with [my coach], was all about learning. So I guess how it happened was in everything. So how do you describe everything? (Client 1)*

Thus, according to the findings of this study, **facilitating learning and results** also involved competencies which the ICF otherwise referred to as part of **setting the foundation, co-creating the relationship** and **communicating effectively**, especially those relating to the coaching relationship, listening and questioning. According to the ICF, these competencies are purportedly distinct from *facilitating learning and results* and may be demonstrated through coach behaviour. However in this study, they emerged as integrated processes, demonstrated by both coach and client behaviour, which in turn brought about learning and results.

The coach behaviours associated with competency eight, creating awareness, were largely supported by the findings of this study. Coaches and clients frequently referred to “go[ing] beyond what is said” (p.3), typically referring to this as a notion of *going deeper* (Coach 4):

*So when she [my coach] triggers that deeper thought process it then makes me more aware and when I articulate how I actually felt, then it really brings it to my consciousness. (Client 8)*

The above example demonstrates the competency of creating awareness by highlighting “inquiry for greater understanding, awareness and clarity” (p.3) and in this case, helping the client “to discover for themselves the... emotions...” (p.3). In addition, the emergent framework of focus introduced earlier emphasises the discovery of “new thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, emotions...” (p.3). However, the framework of focus also suggests three additional aspects of creating awareness, including a focus on the observable aspects of clients’ lives, developing awareness of their future desired outcomes and a strong focus on developing awareness of values. Although the ICF competencies reflect a focus on future desired outcomes through the competency of planning and goal setting and active listening, they fail to integrate this within the competency creating of awareness. In addition, they do not refer to creating awareness of the observable aspects of clients’ lives and only refer to creating awareness of values in reference to active listening. Thus, they overlook the observable phenomena in clients’ lives and implicitly assume that clients are already aware of their values, which, among the participants in this study, was not the case. Furthermore, creating awareness of clients’ observable situation, future desired outcomes and values emerged as equally important in this study as creating awareness around their feeling and beliefs. Indeed, the combined focus of all of these elements served to facilitate the process of



creating awareness “to shift [clients’] viewpoints and find new possibilities for action”, the latter being an inherent outcome of the collective process rather than a coach behaviour. Thus, this study revealed that rather than demonstrating a series of disparate behaviours which resulted in creating awareness, there was a distinct framework of focus which, facilitated through the other major processes of listening, questioning and reflecting, resulted in the creation of awareness.

The coach behaviours associated with competency nine, designing actions, were comprehensively reflected within the findings of this study. Most specifically there was direct correlation between action which progressed clients towards the achievement of their desired outcomes, action which practiced and applied new learning and action which created create “opportunities for ongoing learning” (p.4). However, there was one category of action which emerged in this study, but which was not represented in the ICF competencies. This form of action occurred independent of the coach, yet as a result of the culmination of the successful integration of all the other processes. It was a kind of action which clients engaged in independently and often spontaneously as a consequence of the learning they had acquired and which often led to immediate results in their lives:

*The coaching that I’ve had thus far I feel has automatically integrated into me. And it’s not on a superficial level, it’s not requiring practice, it seems to be automatically spontaneously occurring even though the external me is in the same set of circumstances that I was in before the coaching. I’ve got the same external influences. I’m interacting with the same people but I’m having a different response and it’s not requiring conscious thought and it’s not requiring practising or exercise, it is simply occurring spontaneously. (Client 8)*

This form of action was identified through the added dimension provided by clients participating in this study and again highlights the importance of referring to coaching processes, rather than coach competencies.

Interesting findings emerged in this study in relation to the tenth competency, planning and goal setting. Whilst there was an implicit and integral focus on clients’ desired outcomes, which has already been discussed, there was a large degree of variation among coaches in relation to the significance of planning and goal setting. Whilst, three coaches (1, 3, 5) in this study were explicit about their intention to set and achieve goals, two coaches were explicit in clarifying that specific goal setting/achievement did not make up a major part of their coaching focus. On closer examination however, what was found to be common in all coach and client cases was that each coaching relationship and coaching sessions were directed towards the desired outcomes of the client, whether by means of *goals* (Coach 1, 3, 5), *visions* (Coach 1, 2, 3, 5), *targets* (Coach 1, 2) *purposes* (Coach 4), *outcomes* (Coach 4) or *intentions* (Coach 2). Furthermore, desired outcomes were often uncovered and refined throughout the process of coaching. Thus, planning and goal setting emerged in this study as an integral focus on desired outcomes rather than a competency in itself. It made up a part of the framework of focus explained earlier and therefore, whilst focus on clients’ desired outcomes was a thread which ran through all coaching conversations, in this study it was used in equal coordination with the other foci on clients’ observable phenomena, feelings, beliefs and values.

The final competency, managing progress and accountability, was both supported and challenged by the findings of this study. This competency relates mostly to clients being held accountable to progress towards goals and to taking action. Whilst this was substantially supported in this study,

the findings also revealed four additional components. Firstly, whilst clients were mostly held accountable, in some cases, coaches also positioned themselves to be held accountable. Clients were held accountable first and foremost to their desired outcomes and their progress towards these throughout coaching, whereas coaches tended to hold themselves accountable to their clients progress towards their desired outcomes during sessions. Secondly, close data analysis revealed that holding clients accountable was also a process by which coaches expected and encouraged clients to act in alignment with what they knew or learnt during the process of coaching. As a result, in addition to being held accountable to taking action and moving towards their desired outcomes, coaches also held their clients accountable to their values, feelings and insights or learning, as they emerged through the coaching process. Thirdly, through these combined streams of accountability, coaches ultimately held their clients accountable to themselves and with that clients developed an intrinsic ability to hold themselves accountable:

*I think the biggest thing is about to actually really to read over my own stuff, to go back and get what I want out of it, I know I was committed to coaching session and I turned up for it even though I wanted to quit, but that critical time just before it, I actually went back and thought, these are my notes, what's going on here for me I owned them. 'Oh, yep I haven't done that and I haven't done that'. (Client 2)*

Finally, commitment emerged in this study as an important element in managing progress and accountability and was extrinsically facilitated by way of the coaching agreement. Thus, the findings of this study suggested that establishing the coaching agreement, otherwise a competency of its own, was in fact a component of managing progress and accountability.

### **Significance, recommendations and limitations**

The findings from this study give empirical support to the ICF core competencies. The following competencies were well supported within this study:

3. Establishing trust and intimacy with the client
5. Active listening
6. Powerful questioning
9. Designing actions
11. Managing progress and accountability

Each of the above competencies emerged as major processes within coach and client experiences of coaching. In addition, competencies 2, establishing the coaching agreement, and 4, coaching presence, emerged as components of managing progress and accountability and active listening respectively. Similarly, competency 10, planning and goal setting, emerged as one aspect of an underlying framework of focus, while competency 8, creating awareness, demonstrated itself to be an inherent outcome of this focus facilitated through the above major processes. Finally, competencies 1, meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards, and 7, direct communication, were only partially supported by the findings of this study.

Because clients in this study exhibited an ability to facilitate many of the above major processes independently towards the end of their coaching, this paper emphasises that the ICF competencies may be better represented as broader processes, which include both coach and client behaviours. In this way, the crucial process of reflection which emerged in this study but is omitted with the ICF competencies may be included and integrated with other major processes such as powerful

questioning. Furthermore, the findings highlight some areas in which the competencies may be more comprehensive. In particular, the paper reveals the absence of an underlying framework of focus, which underpins the other processes and includes an integral focus on observable phenomena in clients' lives, their desired outcomes, feelings, beliefs and values. Finally, the paper also highlights some inconsistency in the grouping of competencies. In the light of these findings, the paper recommends further research into the ICF core competencies, as well as other standards of coach regulation.

Whilst this study yielded significant data with which to analyse the ICF core competences, it does however have several limitations. Firstly, the focus of the study was on learning and was not designed specifically to evaluate the authenticity of ICF competencies. In addition, only ICF certified coaches were used in this study. This may have influenced the degree to which ICF competencies were supported within the findings of this study, but also suggests that those areas which were challenged, indicate a discrepancy between ICF core competencies and the actual coaching practice of ICF coaches. Another major limitation of this study was that only interview data was used and not observations of coaching sessions which could inform the nature of coaching process and the development of future standards. Finally, within the limitations of this paper, a complete analysis of ICF core competencies could not be provided and few data samples could be included to provide an 'audit trail' of the findings.

### **Conclusion**

One of the fundamental premises of coaching is collaboration. Yet until now the coaching industry itself appears to have been somewhat lacking in this essential quality. Every new set of standards and every new coach accreditation body which emerges threatens the credibility of the coaching industry itself. Therefore, internationally shared frameworks for coaching are both necessary and overdue. As preparations begin to be made to this end, research-based investigation is required to ensure that existing coach standards are strengthened rather than undermined by the movement towards evidence-based coaching.

This paper has revealed some ways in which ICF core competencies are empirically grounded and challenged some ways in which they are not. Indeed, it is but the tip of an iceberg in research into existing coaching standards. It represents the first attempt to regulate the current regulators of the coaching industry and may serve to pave the way for future shared standards of coaching which acknowledge and reflect the foundations from which they have sprung.

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