

Hacking the Core Competencies

In **Module I** and in **Coaching for Leaders**, we ask new coaches to focus on the Key Skills and Behaviors and stages of coaching human change. And we use the Play Card (**The 3 A's and the Core Four**) set the stage for trust and to begin to find the balance and rhythm of between exploration and action.

And now, as you continue to develop your balance and rhythm as a coach, we want you to understand and make personal the Core Competencies of the International Coach Federation (ICF): the industry standard for our work. As we explore each one, you will find yourself “connecting the dots” between them and everything we’ve explored together thus far.

When you are ready to apply for certification, your grasp of the following competencies will be assessed at the ACC level via a multiple choice “coach knowledge assessment” (155 questions), and via a recording of a session (of at least twenty minutes) along with a transcript of that session.

Coaching becomes nearly magical when, instead of driving to solution and performance, we trust the insight and creativity of the people we’re coaching--and when we stay open to learning with them. We are always more effective when we see them as bearers of gifts for us. These Competencies will help you to foster the magic.

In the early days of SeattleCoach, I designed this document, “Hacking the Core Competencies.” In those days, the ICF’s Core Competencies were big philosophical targets that, in my opinion, needed a little decoding in order for new coaches to grasp what they looked like behaviorally, in practice. Then, in early 2014, the ICF developed some behavioral “markers” and I happily edited this document. Then again, in 2019, the ICF revised and consolidated their Core Competencies, and we then did some of our own updating at SeattleCoach, with the goal of continuing to prepare SeattleCoaches to work solidly at the PCC level at the end of Module II (even if you haven’t yet completed the required number of coaching hours for this advanced certification).

Both now and with the revisions, think of the ICF’s Core Competencies in **four big categories**:

Foundation	Co-creating the Relationship	Communicating Effectively	Cultivating Learning and Growth
1. Demonstrates ethical practice 2. Embodies a coaching mindset	3. Establishes and maintains agreements 4. Cultivates trust and safety 5. Maintains presence	6. Listens actively 7. Evokes awareness	8. Facilitates client growth

I still keep my own personal learnings-log, noting what I believe each of these competencies looks like in my own life and work--as I hope you will. There is an editable copy of this document on the [Module II page](#). It’s designed for you to add your own insights and learnings.

- Everything in blue below is © ICF and describes the behaviors, the “markers” they listen for.
- Everything in red below is my take on things.
- And there’s room for your take on things too.

As you review the following Core Competencies, be thinking about how you see our **Key Skills** and ways of thinking about human change mapping to them. I'll include a couple of possibilities under each Competency. As you give each other feedback in our upcoming mentor coaching sessions, be as specific as you can. You will likely build on each other's comments as you work from these Core Competencies.

As we listen to each other coaching, remember:

- ***Our primary focus is on the coach, not the client.***
- ***The "markers" below are not a checklist, we use them to respond and customize to the agenda the coachee brings.***
- ***It's common for a coach's skill to speak to more than one Competency at the same time.***

A. Foundation

1. Demonstrates Ethical Practice

Definition: Understands and consistently applies coaching ethics and standards of coaching.

1. Demonstrates personal integrity and honesty in interactions with clients, sponsors and relevant stakeholders
2. Is sensitive to clients' identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs
3. Uses language appropriate and respectful to clients, sponsors and relevant stakeholders
4. Abides by the ICF Code of Ethics and upholds the Core Values
5. Maintains confidentiality with client information per stakeholder agreements and pertinent laws
6. Maintains the distinctions between coaching, consulting, psychotherapy and other support professions
7. Refers clients to other support professionals, as appropriate

Patty's Summary: Remember this quote by GK Chesterton? ***"When you break the big laws, you do not get freedom, you do not even get anarchy. You get the small laws."*** Your own core morality and integrity will make it easy to maintain your ethical clarity as a coach. Grow increasingly clear about the [ICF Code of Ethics](#). (And explore [these FAQs](#) before you take the Coach Knowledge Assessment.) Act like a coach. Respect confidentiality. Be able to explain distinctions when you need to (like the differences between consulting, psychotherapy, rescuing, managing, directing, giving legal or financial or relationship advice, nagging, etc.). This Competency is not evaluated in mentor coaching, but if you spend most of your time doing something other than pure coaching, it would be a disqualifier.

*If you are known for some subject matter expertise (and most great coaches are), you'll use that in your writing and speaking and in your web presence, and probably to inform key questions. When you do, you'll invite your coachees to evaluate what you offer. But if your agreement is to coach, that's what you do. Focus on inquiry and exploration, the present and future, rather than on telling, advising, assigning or acting alone to choose the focus or answers. Be clear when you know it's a match, ***"This is coachable and I think I can help."*** And be clear when it's not. Refer when you need to. Consult with another coach when you need to. Keep confidences. Keep promises. Honor the big laws.*

Your comments and learnings:

2. Embodies a Coaching Mindset

Definition: Develops and maintains a mindset that is open, curious, flexible and client-centered.

1. Acknowledges that clients are responsible for their own choices
2. Engages in ongoing learning and development as a coach
3. Develops an ongoing reflective practice to enhance one's coaching
4. Remains aware of and open to the influence of context and culture on self and others
5. Uses awareness of self and one's intuition to benefit clients
6. Develops and maintains the ability to regulate one's emotions
7. Mentally and emotionally prepares for sessions
8. Seeks help from outside sources when necessary

Patty's Summary: *This Competency is foundational to your inner life as a great coach. When you came to coach training, we asked you to, "write a little about how you take time to reflect on your life and work. How do you course correct? Metabolize what you're learning." How are you growing in your understanding of yourself? How do you pay attention to your own somatic intelligence and energy? To your beliefs, emotions, triggers, biases, body, posture, gestures, breath and voice? To your own sense of meaning and value? And as we've moved deeper into this training, we've talked about the power of your differentiated presence. This Competency is about your growth mindset, and your ability to self-regulate and to use yourself as you coach big change and work with big emotions. Will you allow your coachees to see the impact they have on you? It's also about knowing what you're responsible for and for knowing the strength of your influence even as you maintain respect for your coachee's autonomy.*

Your comments and learnings:

B. Co-Creating the Relationship

3. Establishes and Maintains Agreements

Definition: Partners with the client and relevant stakeholders to create clear agreements about the coaching relationship, process, plans and goals. Establishes agreements for the overall coaching engagement as well as those for each coaching session.

1. Explains what coaching is and is not and describes the process to the client and relevant stakeholders
2. Reaches agreement about what is and is not appropriate in the relationship, what is and is not being offered, and the responsibilities of the client and relevant stakeholders
3. Reaches agreement about the guidelines and specific parameters of the coaching relationship such as logistics, fees, scheduling, duration, termination, confidentiality and inclusion of others
4. Partners with the client and relevant stakeholders to establish an overall coaching plan and goals
5. Partners with the client to determine client-coach compatibility

6. Partners with the client to identify or reconfirm what they want to accomplish in the session
7. Partners with the client to define what the client believes they need to address or resolve to achieve what they want to accomplish in the session
8. Partners with the client to define or reconfirm measures of success for what the client wants to accomplish in the coaching engagement or individual session
9. Partners with the client to manage the time and focus of the session
10. Continues coaching in the direction of the client's desired outcome unless the client indicates otherwise
11. Partners with the client to end the coaching relationship in a way that honors the experience

Patty's Summary: *The coaching agreement includes both the big starting point and the session-to-session agreements along the way. Starting with the informational interview and throughout your coaching relationship, you stay curious about your coachee's evolving answers to the SeattleCoach "starting point" questions (as always, you'll ask several of these repeatedly): **What do you want to work on? What can you tell me about your vision for what might be next for you? What are the personal strengths you might bring to our work? If we become successful and six to twelve months from now, you're sitting there smiling at me, feeling proud, what evidence of success would you see? What would be different? Why does it matter to you? Who else is in your thinking as we work together?** Explain how you like to work, your terms. Explore, establish, check and revisit along the way. What's ambiguous? You are regularly curious about your coachee's progress both overall, and in each conversation. **"What are you taking away from our conversation?"** As you evaluate, you stay curious about how the **"agenda for today connects to the big question or aspiration you came to coaching with."** If it changes, you re-contract. Notice how many times the word "partner" appears here. This includes how you close sessions.*

Your comments and learnings:

4. Cultivates Trust and Safety

Definition: Partners with the client to create a safe, supportive environment that allows the client to share freely. Maintains a relationship of mutual respect and trust.

1. Seeks to understand the client within their context which may include their identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs
2. Demonstrates respect for the client's identity, perceptions, style and language and adapts one's coaching to the client
3. Acknowledges and respects the client's unique talents, insights and work in the coaching process
4. Shows support, empathy and concern for the client
5. Acknowledges and supports the client's expression of feelings, perceptions, concerns, beliefs and suggestions

6. Demonstrates openness and transparency as a way to display vulnerability and build trust with the client

Patty's Summary: *This one is about signal strength and about the creation and cultivation of the safety, integrity, honesty and trust required for greater awareness and deep learning. Safety fosters increasing coachability. A great coach is a little bit pastoral, providing both compassionate support and respectful challenge for their coachee's genuine welfare. A strong alliance is a place of expression and experimentation with strengths, assets, new behaviors and risks. You work from not-knowing and share your observations without attachment to being right about them. Or diagnosing. In addition, you ask permission to explore sensitive or new areas ("I have a hunch. Would you like to hear it?"). The focus is on the coachee's language and pace and view of the situation more than on your own. You follow your coachee and check on both pace and process: Is it time to tap the brakes? Or to press down on the accelerator? There is mutual equality and vulnerability. Your coachee is a full and complete partner and the ultimate decider of what's important. You are at ease and NOT more interested in your own views, tools, performance or demonstration of knowledge. What is the coachee taking away from the conversation? With trust and intimacy, value almost always happens.*

Your comments and learnings:

5. Maintains Presence

Definition: **Is fully conscious and present with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible, grounded and confident.**

1. Remains focused, observant, empathetic and responsive to the client
2. Demonstrates curiosity during the coaching process
3. Manages one's emotions to stay present with the client
4. Demonstrates confidence in working with strong client emotions during the coaching process
5. Is comfortable working in a space of not knowing
6. Creates or allows space for silence, pause or reflection

Patty's Summary: *Here's a favorite quote, from Anne Lamott, about presence: "**Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.**" You allow your coachee to see your immediacy and transparency (which isn't the same thing as grabbing the spotlight to tell you own stories). You allow them to see their impact on you. You respond both to what your coachee wants to accomplish and to who he/she is and wants to be. Using his or her unique style and voice, you are curious, empathetic, encouraging your coachee's use of space and time to reflect. You occasionally use your own hunches and "intuitive hits"—inviting the coachee's evaluation, or asking them to "**go down a layer.**" You understand that the more you use your own presence, the more coaching becomes a brave and light and energetic and improvisational dance. You stay aware of what you may want to teach the coachee (if you're aware, you can be wise with what*

to do vs. becoming an automatic advice-giver/fixer). You leave time for what you say to land. You are present, agile, intuitive, equal and at ease, not driving an agenda and willing to risk along with your coachee. You are open to what the coachee has to teach you and there is complete curiosity and customizing without the need to perform or be right. If we work from a solid sense of our own presence, we're usually contagious, and our coachee's personal presence gets more solid too.

Your comments and learnings:

C. Communicating Effectively

6. Listens Actively

Definition: Focuses on what the client is and is not saying to fully understand what is being communicated in the context of the client systems and to support client self-expression.

1. Considers the client's context, identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs to enhance understanding of what the client is communicating
2. Reflects or summarizes what the client communicated to ensure clarity and understanding
3. Recognizes and inquires when there is more to what the client is communicating
4. Notices, acknowledges and explores the client's emotions, energy shifts, non-verbal cues or other behaviors
5. Integrates the client's words, tone of voice and body language to determine the full meaning of what is being communicated
6. Notices trends in the client's behaviors and emotions across sessions to discern themes and patterns

Patty's Summary: *You listen with emotion and presence to your coachee's wholeness and agenda at all levels, to what matters to them (their agenda, vision, concerns, values, emphases, language and beliefs), and to what is and is not possible in their thinking--to both the logical and the emotional. You explore what the coachee feels deeply about, listening for underlying beliefs, values and incongruities. Level III listening is unfiltered by your need to demonstrate knowledge, tools and methods—or to be correct or to add content. You are curious along the way: What are limiting beliefs? Is the coachee getting what he/she really wants?*

And when you as a coach find yourself reacting with concern to something a coachee says (and this will absolutely happen regularly), you have choices:

- *You can notice it, take a breath and return your attention and curiosity to your coachee.*
- *Then maybe you'll find the place in your coachee's story where you can respond with your wisdom and experience and grace (see **"Requesting / Challenging"** in **The Key Skills**).*

*Your questions and observations are customized and based on what you are hearing from the coachee in the moment and over time. Without an attachment to being right, you **"connect the dots,"** integrating and deepening what you hear. You listen beyond the words to the coachee's shifts in energy and emotion, to voice, breath, mood, posture. You don't rush the coachee, nor fill up the silence with stacked questions or interpretations. You don't finish the coachee's statements/*

questions. You don't listen in order to teach or impose a story. **You don't "Yes, and . . ." too quickly.** You may also "**call a time-out**" and "**bottom line**" the coachee in order to explore the essence of what your coachee is saying. [This audio file](#) talks about the value of (and toleration of) silence.

Your comments and learnings:

7. Evokes Awareness

Definition: Facilitates client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, silence, metaphor or analogy.

1. Considers client experience when deciding what might be most useful
2. Challenges the client as a way to evoke awareness or insight
3. Asks questions about the client, such as their way of thinking, values, needs, wants and beliefs
4. Asks questions that help the client explore beyond current thinking
5. Invites the client to share more about their experience in the moment
6. Notices what is working to enhance client progress
7. Adjusts the coaching approach in response to the client's needs
8. Helps the client identify factors that influence current and future patterns of behavior, thinking or emotion
9. Invites the client to generate ideas about how they can move forward and what they are willing or able to do
10. Supports the client in reframing perspectives
11. Shares observations, insights and feelings, without attachment, that have the potential to create new learning for the client

Patty's Summary: *I love it when my brain lights up. And it's even better in a coaching conversation when my coachee's brain lights up with a core issue, a deepening vision or new learning.*

You help your coachee to find and hold the focus, to use both strengths and silence, to take the time and space to keep coming back to himself or herself in deeper and deeper ways.

You invite your coachee to create, express, share what they're learning and how they want to use that learning. You hold new thoughts or possibilities that emerge from the conversation, growing in your own awareness along the way. Continuing to listen beyond the words, you invite your coachee to explore how new awareness will connect to new aspirations—to next steps and broader applications in his or her life. The partnership makes it possible for the coachee to reflect on how new learning will be integrated into their behavior, their systems and their next steps.

Your comments and learnings:

Two Crucial Tools for Evoking Awareness

Powerful questioning *This one is at the heart of things. If all you needed to be a great coach was a list of standard or formulaic questions, an app would work. Evoking awareness is about asking simple, open-ended questions that are informed by the conversation, are not complicated, dressed up or stacked and are big enough to matter. Powerful questioning inspires your coachee to insight, to think more deeply, moving below the surface, or into a larger space with his or her concerns, hopes and desires. “What do you notice about your breath, voice...? What part of you is not ok with this?” Your questions are not standardized, leading, analytical, interrogating or all lined-up, but rather they are in response to what your coachee offers. Ask a question to which you don’t know the answer early on. Wait for it to land. Maybe ask it a second time. Let your coachee work a little harder. Let silence do some of the heavy lifting. And when you decide to ask “why?” make it what I call a “[forward-facing why](#)”. Our curiosity aims more at the future more than at explanations, justifications and regrets. The coach’s best “whys” are designed to help the coachee to further the use of something he or she has just learned. “Why do you think your experiment worked so well with the team?”.*

Your comments and learnings:

Being graciously direct: *Even though our goal as coaches is to amplify the voices of our coachees, coaches are expected to bring their unique style and voice to the conversation in ways that serve the coachee’s awareness. Coaches tend to be big personalities! This might mean that occasionally, you as the coach, share your wise intuition and observations and then invite evaluation. When I was a tentative new coach, driving with my foot on the brake, my own mentor coach used to encourage me to “go right in there!” Coaches say what they see with clarity of language **without attachment to being right**, without endorsing, and without becoming the main voice in the room. You leave space for your coachee to explore, create and learn and you are clear about the purpose behind any exercises, assessments and requests. You are open to sharing your own experience and observations in the moment, directly and simply—without dressing things up. Maybe you say something that no one else in your coachee’s life has said or will say. Then, in return, you celebrate your coachee’s own directness, deeper engagement, metaphors, learning and intuition. As always, the partnership uses the coachee’s agenda, strengths, language, metaphors and underlying stories, thinking, learning style, and even limiting beliefs and critical voices to explore and to find the experiments. If you decide to interrupt, you have a good reason to.*

Your comments and learnings:

D. Cultivating Learning and Growth

8. Facilitates Client Growth

Definition: Partners with the client to transform learning and insight into action. Promotes client autonomy in the coaching process.

1. Works with the client to integrate new awareness, insight or learning into their worldview and behaviors
2. Partners with the client to design goals, actions and accountability measures that integrate and expand new learning
3. Acknowledges and supports client autonomy in the design of goals, actions and methods of accountability
4. Supports the client in identifying potential results or learning from identified action steps
5. Invites the client to consider how to move forward, including resources, support and potential barriers
6. Partners with the client to summarize learning and insight within or between sessions
7. Celebrates the client's progress and successes
8. Partners with the client to close the session

Patty's Summary:

*This one's about the gentle artistry required to deepen and further learning as your coachee moves forward both in the session and from the session. As the partnership evokes awareness and you have been curious about the stage of change, this Competency will help the partnership to implement new learning. Early on, you are clear with your coachee about the how you will behave as their coach regarding accountability. You ask things like, **"Do you need a plan? Who will you talk to about this? How does this move you in the right direction? OK if I ask you about this next time?"** Sometimes the best accountabilities/experiments get test-driven in the session: **"Are you doing it now?" "Want to rehearse?"** As a coach, you want to hear more "I-coulds" from your coachee (vs. "you-coulds" from you). Keep your eye on the stage of change that your coachee might be in. Is the next step congruent? Remember, the next step might be to contemplate (reflect, pray, get outside, journal, talk to their spouse)—or it might be to take a specific action (create, ship, learn and repeat). You don't choose the next step, but you may stand up for what your coachee says is important. Without assigning or endorsing, you keep holding the focus, tracking key experiments, shifts, evolving concerns, agreements, learnings, accountabilities and occasionally bookmarks for future conversations. You leave responsibility with your coachee to take action, both from session-to-session and over time. Notice the number of times you see the word "partners" above. And again, even in the closing of a session, there is strong partnering.*

Your comments and learnings:

Read more about it . . .

[The Former and Current Versions of the Core Competencies](#) (The new markers will be used in the Coach Knowledge Assessment and in assessing recordings starting in 2021)

[The ICF Code of Ethics](#)

[Ethics FAQs](#)

[A comparison of the competencies the ICF Assessors are looking for at the ACC, the PCC and the MCC levels level\)](#)