Hacking the Core Competencies

Throughout the content and process of our work together, we’ve asked you as new coaches and coaching leaders to focus on the Key Skills and Behaviors and stages of coaching human change. And we’ve used the Play Card (***The 3 A’s and the Core Four***) to learn to set the stage for trust and to begin to find the balance and rhythm of between exploration and action. And as you’ve grown in this work, we’ve widened our focus to the development of your personal presence.

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. The following eleven Competencies are the industry standard for our work. And as we explore each one, you will find yourself “connecting the dots” between them and everything we’ve explored and practiced together.

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

Coaching becomes nearly magical when, instead of driving to solution and accomplishment, we trust the people we’re coaching more--and when we stay open to learning from and being touched by them. One coaching leader observed, “people always sound far more confident at the end of a coaching conversation than they used to when I was simply mentoring them.”

These Competencies will help you to foster the magic.

A few years ago 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 the following behavioral “markers” and I happily edited this document. At SeattleCoach it is our goal to prepare coaches to work solidly at the PCC level—even if you haven’t yet completed the required number of coaching hours for this advanced certification. This is a high bar, and we’re confident that in our work together, our coaches can meet it.

Think of the ICF Core Competencies in four big categories:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Setting the foundation** | **Co-creating the relationship** | **Communicating effectively** | **Facilitating learning and results** |
| 1. Meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards 2. Creating the coaching agreement | 1. Creating trust and intimacy 2. Coaching presence | 1. Active listening 2. Powerful questioning 3. Direct communication | 1. Creating awareness 2. Designing actions 3. Planning and goal setting 4. Managing progress and accountability |

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. Notice that this is an editable copy, designed for you to add your own comments and learnings.

* Everything in blue below is © [ICF](http://www.coachfederation.org/files/FileDownloads/0614%20PCC%20Markers.pdf?utm_source=Real%20Magnet&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=42869956) and describes the behaviors, the “markers” that should be in place in coaching at the Professional Certified Coach (PCC) level.
* Everything in red below is my take on things.
* And there’s room under each hack for your personal comments and learnings too.

***Ask yourself, how do you see our Key Skills and ways of thinking about human change mapping to these Eleven Core Competencies? I’ll include a couple of possibilities under each competency. As you give each other feedback in our upcoming mentor coaching sessions, practice the positivity ratio, and be as specific as you can. You will likely build on each other’s comments as you work from these eleven 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. Setting the foundation**

#1: Meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards—Understanding of

coaching ethics and standards and ability to apply them appropriately in all coaching situations.

1. Understands and exhibits in own behaviors the [ICF Code of Ethics.](https://coachfederation.org/code-of-ethics)
2. Clearly communicates the distinctions between coaching, consulting, psychotherapy and other support professions.
3. Refers client/coachee to another support professional as needed, knowing when this is needed and the available resources.

**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 will make it easy to maintain your ethical clarity as a coach. Grow increasingly clear about the* [*ICF Code of Ethics*](https://coachfederation.org/code-of-ethics)*. (And explore* [*these FAQs*](https://coachfederation.org/ethics-faqs) *before you take the Coach Knowledge Assessment.) Act like a coach and 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 coaching, or if you violate the ICF Code of Ethics, it’s 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 you’ll invite your coachees to evaluate the content you create. 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 when it’s not. And, in the informational interview, to ask, “What’s it like for you to talk with me?” Refer when you need to. Consult with another coach when you need to. Keep confidences. Keep promises. Follow the big laws. Stay primarily in your role as coach.*

Your comments and learnings:

#2: Creating the coaching agreement—Ability to understand what is required in the

specific coaching interaction and to come to agreement with the prospective and new client/coachee about the coaching process and relationship.

1. Coach helps the client identify, or reconfirm, what he or she wants to accomplish in the session.
2. Coach helps the client to define or reconfirm measures of success for what he or she wants to accomplish in the session.
3. Coach explores what is important or meaningful to the client about what he or she wants to accomplish in the session.
4. Coach helps the client define what the client believes they need to address or resolve in order to achieve what he or she wants to accomplish in the session.
5. Coach continues conversation in direction of client’s desired outcome unless the client indicates otherwise.

**Patty’s Summary:** *This one is all about co-creating the coaching agreement (i.e. both the big starting point, and the session-to-session agreements along the way). It’s also about helping your coachee to know how coaching works and that you will stay relentlessly present and interested in their agenda—what they are working on, why it’s meaningful to them and what the evidences of success will be. What must be resolved? Beginning with the informational interview, explore fully your coachee’s hopes and focus of learning, vision and intended change: i.e. their Big Agenda and why it matters to them. Explain how you like to work, your terms. Explore, establish, check and revisit along the way. What’s ambiguous? You are regularly curious about what the person you’re coaching is getting both overall, and from each conversation. “What are you taking away from this conversation?” As you evaluate, 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. You cultivate and customize a full partnership, evaluating as you go.*

Your comments and learnings:

**B. Co-creating the relationship**

#3: Creating trust and intimacy—Ability to create a safe,

supportive environment that produces ongoing mutual respect and trust.

1. Coach acknowledges and respects the client’s work in the coaching process.
2. Coach expresses support for the client.
3. Coach encourages and allows the client to fully express him/herself.

**Patty’s Summary:** *This one is about the signal strength and about the creation and cultivation of the safety, integrity, honesty and trust required for deep learning. I think a great coach is a little bit pastoral, providing both support and challenge for the coachee’s genuine welfare and full expression and experimentation with strengths, assets, new behaviors and risks. The coach works from not-knowing and shares his or her observations without attachment to being right about them. Or diagnosing. In addition, the coach asks 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 the coach’s. The coach follows the coachee and checks on the pace and process: Is it time to tap the brakes? Or to press down on the accelerator? There is mutual equality and vulnerability and comfort with not-knowing. The coachee is a full and complete partner and the ultimate decider of what’s important. The coach is at ease and NOT more interested in his or her 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:

#4: Coaching presence—Ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship

with the client/coachee, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.

1. Coach acts in response to both the whole person of the client and what the client wants to accomplish in the session.
2. Coach is observant, empathetic, and responsive.
3. Coach notices and explores energy shifts in the client.
4. Coach exhibits curiosity with the intent to learn more.
5. Coach partners with the client by supporting the client to choose what happens in the session.
6. Coach partners with the client by inviting the client to respond in any way to the coach’s contributions and accepts the client’s response.
7. Coach partners with the client by playing back the client’s expressed possibilities for the client to choose from.
8. Coach partners with the client by encouraging the client to formulate his or her own learning.

**Patty’s Summary:** *Here’s my 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.” Notice in the eight markers for “Coaching Presence,” the first four are linked to how the coach responds to what the coachee offers. The second four about how the coach invites deep partnering with his or her coachee. The coach doesn’t coach for just a solution to the coachee’s concern. The coach responds both to what the coachee wants to accomplish and to who he/she is and wants to be. Using his or her unique style and voice, the coach is curious, empathetic and encourages the coachee’s use of space/time to reflect. In addition to being fully present and attuned to the coachee, as good coaches, we keep growing in our understanding of ourselves, paying attention to our own somatic intelligence and energy: Our beliefs, emotion, triggers, biases, body, posture, gestures, breath and voice as well as our own sense of meaning and value. And then we occasionally use our own hunches and “intuitive hits”—inviting the coachee’s evaluation, or to “go down a layer.” The coach understands that the more they use their own presence, the more coaching becomes a brave and light and energetic and improvisational dance. The coach stays aware of what he/she 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). The coach leaves time for what he/she says to land. The coach is present, agile, intuitive, equal and at ease, not driving an agenda, and willing to risk along with the coachee. The coach is open to what the coachee has to teach him/her and there is complete curiosity and customizing without the need to perform or be right. The coach’s job is far more about creating trust, space and focus than it is about driving an agenda, but 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

#5: Active listening—Ability to focus completely on what the client/coachee is saying and is

not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client/coachee's desires, and to support client/coachee self-expression.

1. Coach’s questions and observations are customized by using what the coach has learned about who the client is and the client’s situation.
2. Coach inquires about or explores the client’s use of language.
3. Coach inquires about or explores the client’s emotions.
4. Coach inquires about or explores the client’s tone of voice, pace of speech or inflection as appropriate.
5. Coach inquires about or explores the client’s behaviors.
6. Coach inquires about or explores how the client perceives his or her world.
7. When appropriate, coach is quiet and gives client time to think.

**Patty’s Summary:** *The coach listens with emotion and presence to the coachee’s wholeness and agenda at all levels, to what matters to them (their agenda, concerns, values, language and beliefs), and to what is and is not possible in their thinking--to both the logical and the emotional. The coach explores what the coachee feels deeply about, listening for underlying beliefs, values and incongruities. Level III listening is unfiltered by the coach’s need to demonstrate knowledge, tools and methods—or to be correct. The coach is 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 gentle 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 Key Skills).*

*For example, if a coachee who is aiming for a big promotion tells you, “This is a big opportunity and I’ve been a little rattled . . . fingers are crossed!” What goes on in your heart? In your head? What part of that statement gets your attention? What part it that statement has your coachee’s attention?*

*The coach’s questions and observations are customized and based on what he or she is hearing from the coachee. Without an attachment to being right, the coach “connects the dots,” integrating and deepening what he or she hears. The coach listens beyond the words to the coachee’s shifts in energy and emotion, to voice, breath, mood, posture. The coach doesn’t rush the coachee, nor fill up the silence with stacked questions, interpretations or meandering comments. The coach doesn’t finish the coachee’s statements/questions. The coach doesn’t listen in order to teach or impose a story. The coach lets the coachee lead but may also “call a time-out” and “bottom line” the coachee in order to explore the essence of what the coachee is saying.* [*This audio file*](http://www.seattlecoach.com/dear-master-coach-blog/wait-for-it) *talks about the value of (and toleration of) silence.*

Your comments and learnings:

#6: Powerful questioning—Ability to ask questions that reveal the information needed for

maximum benefit to the coaching relationship and the client/coachee.

1. Coach asks questions about the client; his or her way of thinking, assumptions, beliefs, values, needs, wants, etc.
2. Coach's questions help the client explore beyond his or her current thinking to new or expanded ways of thinking about himself/herself.
3. Coach's questions help the client explore beyond his or her current thinking to new or expanded ways of thinking about his or her situation.
4. Coach’s questions help the client explore beyond current thinking towards the outcome he or she desires.
5. Coach asks clear, direct, primarily open-ended questions, one at a time, at a pace that allows for thinking and reflection by the client.
6. Coach’s questions use the client’s language and elements of the client’s learning style and frame of reference.
7. Coach’s questions are not leading, i.e. do not contain a conclusion or direction.

**Patty’s Summary:** *This one is at the heart of things. Did you notice? It’s “powerful questioning” (which is directly related to “active listening”), not “powerful questions.” If all you needed to be a great coach was a list of standard or formulaic questions, an app would work. This competency 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 aren’t standardized, leading, analytical, interrogating or all lined-up, but rather they are in response to what your coachee offers. They encourage self-reflection and discovery and flow from the partnership. Done well, powerful questioning is more of a dance than a list. When you get stuck, use your intuition and experiment with something a fourth-grader might ask. Ask questions to which you don’t know the answer early on. Remember, you’re a learner more than a knower. The goal isn’t data collection, the goal is to raise/deepen your coachee’s awareness--In the words of one coach, to “double-click.” Again, if your question is big enough to matter, don’t clutter it with too many words, or stack other questions on top. 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”*](http://www.seattlecoach.com/dear-master-coach-blog/start-with-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 something he or she has just learned (“Why do you think your experiment worked so well with the team?”).*

Your comments and learnings:

#7: Direct communication—Ability to communicate effectively during coaching sessions, and

to use language that has the greatest positive impact on the client/coachee.

1. Coach shares observations, intuitions, comments, thoughts and feelings to serve the client’s learning or forward movement.
2. Coach shares observations, intuitions, comments, thoughts and feelings without any attachment to them being right.
3. Coach uses the client’s language or language that reflects the client’s way of speaking.
4. Coach’s language is generally clear and concise.
5. The coach allows the client to do most of the talking.
6. Coach allows the client to complete speaking without interrupting unless there is a stated coaching purpose to do so.

**Patty’s Summary:** *Even though our goal as coaches is to amplify the voices of our coachees, coaches are expected bring their unique style and voice to the conversation in ways that serve the coachee’s forward movement. This might mean that occasionally, you as the coach, share your wise intuition and observations. When I was a tentative new coach, 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. The coach leaves space for the coachee to explore, create and learn and is clear about the purpose behind any exercises, assessments and requests. The coach is open to sharing his or her own experience and observations in the moment, directly and simply—without “dressing things up.” Then the coach celebrates the coachee’s directness, deeper engagement, metaphors, learning and intuition in return. 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 interrupt, you have a good reason to.*

Your comments and learnings:

**D. Facilitating learning and results**

#8: Creating awareness—Ability to integrate and accurately evaluate multiple sources of

information and to make interpretations that help the client/coachee to gain awareness and thereby achieve agreed-upon results.

1. Coach invites client to state and/or explore his or her learning in the session about his or her situation (what).
2. Coach invites client to state and/or explore his or her learning in the session about himself/ herself (who).
3. Coach shares what he or she is noticing about the client and/or the client’s situation, and seeks the client’s input or exploration.
4. Coach invites client to consider how he or she will use new learning from the coaching.
5. Coach’s questions, intuitions and observations 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 core value or a core learning. The coach helps the 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. Occasionally a great coach offers content or mentoring that will aid further exploration.*

*The coach invites the coachee to create, express, share what they’re learning and how they want to use that learning. The coach holds new thoughts or possibilities that emerge from the conversation, growing in his or her own awareness along the way. Continuing to listen beyond the words, the coach invites the coachee to explore how the new awareness will connect to new aspirations—and next steps and broader applications in his or her life. The partnership makes it possible for the coachee to claim and integrate what they’ve explored and how their new learning will be integrated into their behavior, situations and relationships.*

Your comments and learnings:

#9. Designing actions, #10. Planning and goal Setting, #11. Managing progress and accountability

1. Coach invites or allows client to explore progress towards what he or she want to accomplish in the session.
2. Coach assists the client to design what actions/thinking client will do after the session in order for the client to continue moving toward the client’s desired outcomes.
3. Coach invites or allows client to consider her/his path forward, including, as appropriate, support mechanisms, resources and potential barriers.
4. Coach assists the client to design the best methods of accountability for himself/herself.
5. Coach partners with the client to close the session.
6. Coach notices and reflects client’s progress.

**Patty’s Summary of #9:** Ability to create with the client/coachee opportunities for ongoing learning, during coaching and in work/life situations, and for taking new actions that will most effectively lead to agreed-upon coaching results. *This one’s about the gentle artistry required to deepen and further learning as the coachee moves forward both in the session and from the session. If the partnership has created awareness (#8) and the coach has been curious about the stage of change, this competency will help the partnership to identify potential next steps. The coach asks things like, “Do you need a plan? Who will you talk to about this? How does this move you in the right direction?” 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, journal, talk to their spouse)—or it might be to take action (create, ship, learn and repeat). Without assigning or endorsing, the coach keeps holding the focus. I think of #9 as tactical, and #10 as a bit more strategic.*

Your comments and learnings:

**Patty’s Summary of #10:** Ability to develop and maintain an effective coaching plan with the client/coachee.*This one is about coach holding and building on the coachee’s focus and successes over time as their results evolve and deepen. With each success, help your coachee to anchor their learning in their key strengths, resources, enthusiasms and accomplishments. Find some low-hanging fruit in the early sessions to help your coachee to establish traction. Check with the coachee about how he or she likes to learn. Keep track of key dates and check with the coachee about the pace of your coaching. Leave responsibility with the coachee. What will you do? When will you do it? Who will know? Do you need a plan? Again, there is either full partnership or the coachee leads. Don’t let the ICF words above throw you. If you’re clear about the big agenda and the agenda “for today,” if you invite evaluation and know when and how to help a coaching engagement to wrap up, you’ve got a plan.*

Your comments and learnings:

**Patty’s Summary of #11:** Ability to hold attention on what is important for the client/coachee, and to leave responsibility with the client/coachee to take action. *This one is about that dance between holding attention on what matters most to our coachee, the discipline of asking for a next step and then the leaving of responsibility for action with the coachee. The coach encourages the coachee to determine his or her own accountabilities (or, as I like to say, their aspirations, experiments and next steps) and checks in regularly,* ***often both at the end of a coaching conversation—and following-up at the beginning of the next one, acknowledging the coachees successes (and what the progress required) and staying curious and even challenging about “missed marks.”*** *The best accountabilities/next steps call forth the coachee’s hopes, goals, strengths and broader learning. The coach’s voice is never the most significant, yet the coach skillfully interrupts to hold the focus and revisit the measures of progress. Again, any tools that the coach suggests must be fully discussed and explained for their value and congruence with the coachee.*

*The coach holds, revisits, celebrates and supports the coachee’s hopes and measures of success: “Are we hitting it? What are you taking away? What can you carry forward? How’s our pace?” The coach keeps track of key experiments, shifts, evolving concerns, agreements, learnings, accountabilities and “bookmarks” for future conversations.*

*And finally, even in the closing of a session, there is strong partnering.*

Your comments and learnings:

**Three Key ICF links**

[The Code of Ethics](https://coachfederation.org/code-of-ethics)

[Ethics FAQs](https://coachfederation.org/ethics-faqs)

[A comparison of the competencies the ICF Assessors are looking for at the ACC, the PCC and the MCC levels. (Includes “how to fail” at each level.](https://coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2017/12/ICFCompetenciesLevelsTable.pdf))