

Why a Coach Cannot Create Awareness for the Client

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In my years as a coach trainer and Mentor Coach, I’ve found that many practitioners struggle with the eighth ICF Core Competency, which calls on them to “create awareness.”

The true purpose of any coaching conversation is to create a safe, supportive environment where clients can explore and uncover what they may not have conscious access to about themselves, their work, or some other aspect of their lives. Usually, there is a gap between where the client is now and where she desires to be. The coach plays an important role in creating the conditions for awareness to emerge, so the client can close that gap and move toward the desired outcome.

If you’ve ever been coached by someone who has drawn wisdom out of you that you never thought you possessed, you know what a joyful high that is. When I have that experience, I find it easy to determine what steps to take next. As a coach and as someone who listens to a lot of coaching sessions, I am always

delighted when I hear clients gain awareness, which increases their energy and most often leads to knowing what to do next. It’s truly the juice that makes coaching so rewarding for me: witnessing unfolding awareness that turns into empowered action.

For coaches who struggle to help their clients create awareness, focusing on another ICF Core Competency—that of coaching presence—may be the key to taking their skills to the next level.

Coaching Presence: The Key Competency

The core competency of coaching presence is the bridge between coach and the client because it’s about being fully present, fully conscious and in spontaneous relationship with the client.

It takes practice to be fully present with your clients; i.e., to listen with your whole self to how they speak about their successes as well as their challenges. You are listening at many levels at once—for the words clients use, what their tone of voice or body language might be conveying, what emotions they might be experiencing, and their self-talk and beliefs about their situation. You must pay attention to patterns of thinking and behaving and listen with your full senses, including your gut or intuition. Then you need to discern if what you are sensing is a bias you have, or whether it’s something you can share with the client. If you do have a bias, and you still feel it would serve the client to hear what you are sensing or observing, then you must own your bias with the client.

Starting With Self-awareness

Self-awareness is crucial to cultivating coaching presence, especially when it comes to identifying our own biases. It’s through self-awareness that we begin to understand how our own thinking can limit our clients and their ability to gain the awareness they desire in order to move forward toward their desired outcomes.

For coaches to be of full service to their clients, they need to pay attention not only to their clients’ ways of

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processing their thoughts and feelings, but also to their own. We are limited in our ability to create the potential for awareness to occur by our own mindsets and biases as human beings. As coaches, we need to become aware of our biases—how we listen, what we listen for, what we include and what we exclude so we can be more purely present as vessels listening for and receiving the whole of our clients.

Emerging Awareness

When the coach is fully present and has highly attuned sensory perception and listening, it's more likely she will ask a powerful question of the client or make a direct observation that prompts deeper thinking.

The coach's role is to provide an environment where there is potential for awareness to emerge. The coach cannot create awareness for the client or have awareness on behalf of the client. Sometimes a coach will say something like, "Wow, that's powerful." Just because the coach thinks it's powerful doesn't mean the client does. In these moments, a coach runs the risk of taking away the client's opportunity to make her own connections and have the joy of awareness come through her.

You will know the client is experiencing emerging


awareness if she is silent after you make an observation or ask a question and then says something like, "Hmmm ... let me think about that." She might even say, "That's a great question." Or she may say nothing at all: Often, you know awareness is emerging when the client becomes quiet or reflective.

As the coach, you want to be present to the signs of emerging awareness and give your client the space to think and reflect more. Be totally present and just listen. Coaches often miss these moments of gold because they're still talking or thinking of what they want to say next. You are missing the very point of coaching when you step on or over emerging awareness, or when you are unconscious to what is occurring for the client.

Allow the client to process her thoughts or feelings. After a while, if the client doesn't say anything, you might want to ask a question, such as, "May I ask what that question is revealing to you?" Or if the client becomes quiet and reflective, you may want to inquire of the client, "May I ask what you are thinking (or feeling) right now?"

From Awareness to Action

Once emerging awareness has been explored, it's often appropriate to ask a question around designing actions, such as, "What would you like to do with that new awareness?" Coaches often miss the opportunity to see if the client wants to create an action—even if the action is simply to take more time to reflect on what has emerged. When you are fully present, you will sense whether it's the right time to ask the client if she's ready to move forward, or if she wants to stay with the emerging awareness. Partner with the client and ask her how she wants to move forward.

The ultimate purpose of coaching is to support our clients as they gain awareness of how to move forward toward their desired outcomes. We serve our clients best when we engage in our own self-discovery work to uncover our own biases in how we listen. We owe it to our clients to be fully present to hearing their unique voice and tapping their greatness. When we listen with our whole selves and with clients as our full focus, we are more likely to call forth a powerful question that leads to emerging awareness. When indicated, be quiet, stay present and allow your clients to wrestle with that awareness and decide what actions to take. This is the joyful dance of coach and client partnering together for the client's increased success. 

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