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the magazine of professional coaching

**Breaking  
the Rules!**

Is it time  
for the  
coaching  
paradigm  
to expand?

Shattering  
the Myths

A Roadmap for  
Rule Breaking

Is it Time to  
Change Course?

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# Breaking the Rules!



We all do it. It's that secret conversation where we admit to a colleague that we also give clients advice, regularly teach or train them, or even tell our own stories. How do we manage the balance between standard descriptions of coaching and what our clients are asking us for? How does an understanding of the brain help us expand what we do as coaches? How are we limiting ourselves and not offering everything we have when we refrain from these things? Why are we afraid to challenge the convention that is only 20 years old? Join us as we explore expanding the coaching paradigm.

# Shattering the Myths

What does the coaching framework really allow?



By Damian Goldvarg, PhD, MCC, ESIA

**A**s ICF-certified coaches, to what extent is what we do with our coaching clients 100 percent aligned to International Coach Federation (ICF) core compe-

tency framework and philosophy? Do we consistently work with our clients following the ICF core coaching competencies that we had to demonstrate to obtain our ICF credential?

Let's clarify some myths around ICF framework. First, I want to be clear that even though I am an ICF past Global

President, (2013-2014), in this article I am not representing ICF and currently don't hold any leadership responsibility other than being an assessor.

I would like to give you a brief context so you will understand where I am coming from as I share my personal perspectives. For the past 20 years I have been coaching executives in more than 40 countries and for the last 10 years I have been an ICF assessor, mentor coach and teacher of coaching skills to managers worldwide.

Being originally from Argentina, my motivation to become an ICF volunteer assessor was to support coaches who needed to be assessed in Spanish to obtain a credential. I decided to study and learn the ICF coaching competencies to a greater degree by writing a book about them in Spanish in collaboration with my mother, Norma Perel, MCC, which was published in 2013 and will be available in English this year.

My goal was to increase awareness about the importance of professional and ethical standards among Latin American coaches and help build a professional practice in the region. In the process, I developed a coach training program around the ICF framework. Many experienced coaches participated in the certification just to obtain an ICF credential. I also developed a mentor coaching certification program to support mentor coaches offering feedback around the competencies at coaching schools or supporting credentialing renewal.

In my work as facilitator and trainer of these programs, I had the opportunity to work with experienced coaches who were very frustrated with the ICF framework because even though they wanted an ICF credential – which was often required by their clients – they believed it was not aligned to what they were doing with their clients. They felt forced to work with a structure that limited their creativity.

My approach was consistent: “You need to demonstrate that you can coach following the framework, not as a formula but demonstrating some skills. What you do with your clients will depend on their unique needs.”

The most important distinction for me to emphasize is that coaching *is not consulting*. I am very aligned with ICF philosophy here: you are not supposed to be an expert and tell your clients what to do as your main responsibility in coaching. As an expert giving advice, you are to some extent responsible for your clients' results.

I believe it is easy to tell people what to do if you are a content expert. Making people think and reflect on their lives and find their own resources from within to maximize their potential involves much more work. It can be argued that you can do both depending on your client. I think that is fine

if, as the coach, you are clear on what you are doing.

Now that I've explained the context, let's explore some myths.

### **Myth #1: Coaches Don't Give Advice**

The ICF framework and philosophy understand clients as whole and complete; they don't need to be fixed or told what to do. The main task of the coach is to create an environment of co-creation where the client can develop insights as a result of exploring beliefs, values, emotions, attitudes and apply the learning to action plans that can be defined and followed.

This is a key component of the ICF framework: if the coach is in charge of the session, controlling it, directing and providing exercises without client input, there is not a real partnership. When the coach provides advice and guidance, the coach may also be taking some responsibility for the results.

Different than providing advice, the coach may provide some information as to what may have worked for other clients, what research shows, or what experts think about the issue being explored. This is not telling a client what to do but sharing best practices that can be helpful for the client. This is secondary to the work of the coach, not the most important task.

When the ideas are coming from the coach, the client may not be as committed. Some clients hire coaches because they want advice. What they really want are consultants, not thought partners. According to ICF ethical and professional standards, it is important in contracting to be clear what is




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**The main task of the coach is to create an environment of co-creation where the client can develop insights.**

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and what is not coaching. If you are a content expert, that may be the best intervention you can provide, but this is not coaching; it is consulting and the client needs to understand the difference.

Many former executives who become coaches have a difficult time accepting this difference. Many coaches may not agree with this position and say that consulting is part of coaching. I hold a PhD in Organizational Psychology with expertise in Leadership Development. I have a lot to say about leadership,

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but I do it in training, not in coaching unless the client, with an understanding of how coaching works, knowingly asks me to share strategies that may have been effective for other executives with similar challenges.

When I share possible strategies I never do it expecting clients will follow them; only as possible resources for action.

### Myth #2: The ICF Model Restricts Creativity

Coaches *can* use creative interventions in their work, such as visualizations, breathing exercises, NLP exercises, psychodrama, etc. According to the ICF framework, coaches can be as creative as they want. There is nowhere that indicates otherwise. Coaching is both a science and an art.

There is a requirement to follow some structure, such as having a solid agreement, conducting exploration and closing with an action plan when appropriate. But each conversation is unique. We never know where we will go with our clients.

What needs to be clear is that these interventions are decided in partnership with the client vs. being imposed by the coach. Additionally, we want to create an opportunity for the client to reflect on the experience when appropriate. I have seen coaches working with creative techniques without spending enough time to go from the exercise presented to the implementation of the learning.

### Myth #3: All Coaching Competencies Need to be Demonstrated in Each Coaching Session

According to the ICF Framework, the coach needs to explore issues and work on the “who” of the client. The framework values the space the coach offers the client to explore not only the situation brought to the discussion (the

*what*) but also how the client relates to the situation (the *who*), which includes client’s beliefs, values, emotions, etc.

But what happens when the client is not ready or willing to explore issues to a deeper degree? What happens when the clients are sent to coaching for performance issues and are not willing to explore their actions or emotions more deeply?

Sometimes it is appropriate to stay at a “superficial” level depending on client needs and the context of work. These sessions may not be good recordings to be assessed for an ICF credential because they may not provide the coaches the opportunities to demonstrate all their skills.

### Myth #4: The Client Always Has All the Answers

Sometimes this is not the case. Sometimes the client is very lost and needs clear guidance. In that case the client may need a consultant, not a coach. As I tell participants from my coaching certification and mentor coaching programs, there is nothing wrong with working as a consultant; we just need to be clear to our clients.

Ideally, we want to become consultative in our approach after the clients have done some self-reflection by themselves.

In short, different clients need different things, and we need to adapt accordingly. I like Tatiana Bachkirova model of Developmental Psychology, which states that clients are at different levels of self-development and as a result they need different levels of coaching. This is not very clear in the way some coaches interpret the ICF framework.

We can’t treat each client as a nail for our hammer. Coaching is both an art and a science. Let’s use the ICF framework to do the best possible job for the unique needs of our clients without restricting our creativity in our work.