



Engaging Metaphor as an Exploratory Tool to Coaching Artistry

One coach's metaphoric journey with the ICF core coaching competencies

One of the many joys of being a Mentor Coach is the rich reciprocal learning that occurs organically while partnering with a coach or a group of coaches, especially when it's in a developmental learning process aimed at increasing coaching artistry and effectiveness.

One example of this is that while leading a Mentor Coach Certification Program in 2009, an analogy and a subsequent *choice Magazine* article (© 2010) emerged from our discussions. This analogy has been an effective

teaching tool ever since, providing an easy-to-understand context for applying all of the ICF core competencies within every single coaching conversation.

It is offered here along with one coach-client's written reflections of developmental learning across the span of a 16-week group mentor coaching program. [*Shared with permission of course!*] May it inspire your own developmental journey!

Article: Analogy for the ICF Core Coaching Competencies

The founders of our coaching profession were quite wise and visionary as they identified and defined the distinct *skill* sets that are the 11 ICF Core Coaching Competencies (CCCs). Our coaching colleagues, who have served on the ICF Credentialing and Program Accreditation Committee over the years, have been dedicated and diligent as they fleshed out the CCCs with defined *observable behaviors* that demonstrate these skill sets.



As a mentor coach and coach trainer since 1999, I've worked with hundreds of coaches as they acquired and/or expanded their professional coaching expertise and artistry. In my many years as an ICF assessor, I've conducted numerous exams for ACC, PCC and MCC credential applicants. In all of these roles, I've seen coaches struggle to integrate and effectively demonstrate the ICF Core Coaching Competencies (CCCs) in a way that complemented their unique coaching style and supported their pursuit of coach training certification and/or coaching credential.

A Fresh Context for the ICF CCCs

As a result of these experiences, I formulated a tool to support easier integration and a deeper understanding of the CCCs. My students and coach clients have found this tool very valuable because it helps them take their minds off the CCCs as separate and distinct skill sets, instead applying them as a fluid process, which then frees them up to relax and trust the **process** that the CCCs represent.

That's right; I submit that these 11 ICF Core Coaching Competencies outline a **process** that has a beginning, middle and an end. I also submit that this process, ***in the entirety of its 11 components***, is what **differentiates** a coaching conversation from any other type of conversation.



A simple washing machine used as an analogy becomes the pathway to context for each coaching conversation.

A Lens for Mastering the ICF CCCs as a Process

An analogy that can describe this coaching conversation process is that of placing a load of clothing in a washing machine:

- CCC #1 Ethics & Standards: the outer machine body within which all other coaching competencies occur;
- CCC #2 Establishing the Coaching Agreement: the session agreement defines the 'clothing' to be washed: this 'clothing' contains 4 components: [1] the session topic; [2] a desired outcome; [3] measure(s) of success for the outcome; and, [4] the underlying issues that are related to the session topic and its desired outcome;



- CCC #3 Establishing Trust & Intimacy and CCC #4 Coaching Presence: the washing machine's inner drum/container for the 'clothing' – the co-created space in which the conversation occurs;
- CCC #5 Active Listening, CCC #6 Powerful Questioning & CCC #7 Direct Communication: Represented by the **back and forth action within the drum** in which the 'clothing' washes. During this part of the process, *the coach's genuine curiosity, willingness to 'not know' and partnership with the client* allow the 'clothing' to release dirt and more clearly reveal the cloth. This propels the process toward the client's access to new awareness around the session topic and underlying issues as established in the session agreement;
- CCC #8 Creating Awareness: the 'rinse' cycle, which continues to use the back and forth action within the drum of CCCs 5 through 7 to identify insights relevant to the session's topic and underlying issues as established in the session agreement;
- CCC #9 Designing Actions and CCC #10 Planning & Goal Setting: the 'spin' cycle that builds on the awareness/insights identified in the session and defines next steps as well as goals/timelines that will support that awareness, both as it relates to this session and/or to the client's overall coaching goals; and,
- CCC #11 Managing Progress & Accountability: the 'emptying out' cycle that supports the client to stay in forward motion, to define measures of success for their actions and that anchors the *meaning* of these actions as it relates to the underlying

issues as established in the session agreement and/or to the client's overall coaching goals.

When washing a load of clothing, it is typical that the process is continuous from beginning through to the end. If the process is interrupted at any point before the emptying out cycle, the clothes either are not fully clean, or have not been thoroughly rinsed, or are not yet dry enough to move to the drying machine or clothesline.

By allowing each session to unfold using ALL of the competencies, the *process* has forward momentum from beginning to middle and through to the end, serving as a powerful, unique catalyst for sustainable change and achievable goals.

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I didn't realize that
"being in the flow"
meant getting wet!



A Learning Journey

One coach-client's developmental reflections about the ICF core competencies as a participant in a group mentor coaching program

Every once in a while a mentor coaching client comes along who is not only a deep thinker, but also a joy-filled, highly articulate and creative learner - the image to the above left is representative of the playful side that this engaging 'Laughing Buddha' coach brought to my classroom as well as being the source of the reflections that follow. These reflections on the specific core competencies shared prior to each class contributed to the richness of discovery that occurred in every group discussion.

This coach-client is also known for possessing a finely honed, almost uncanny ability to find exactly the right image to further illustrate the eloquent phrasing of the thoughts being expressed. Because this added a multi-media dimension to the text, both elements have been included here in a close approximation to their original placement by the writer to further enhance your enjoyment.

Offered in respectful service to your own expanding artistry and understanding of this amazing profession we call coaching!

Reflection #1

ICF Competencies: #2 Establishing the Coaching Agreement and #3 Establishing Trust & Intimacy [with a touch-in on #1 Ethics & Standards (from the 1st class)]

CC #2 Establishing the Coaching Agreement: I had an interesting insight into this CC when my stepsister (who is training to become a therapist) recently commented about therapists and liability insurance. She asked me if life coaches have insurance, as well. Here is my reply:

No, I don't carry liability insurance as a life coach. This is because a coach isn't in the business of advice giving, they simply listen and ask questions. It is up to the client to discover their own insights/answers as a natural result of the coaching relationship. Therapists, on the other hand, are far more vulnerable to lawsuits since they hold a position of authority to the client in making diagnosis and prescribing behavioral changes. It's a standard practice in coaching to include a disclaimer of liability within the coach-client contract:

"As a client, I understand and agree that I am fully responsible for my well being during my coaching calls, including my choices and decisions. I recognize that coaching is not therapy and that professional referrals will be given to me if needed."

Even so, I still run the risk of litigation brought against me as a professional. I've posted the ICF code of ethics on my coaching website as a reminder of my promise of trustworthiness and professionalism to my clients.

"A coaching relationship exists when it includes a business agreement/contract that defines the responsibilities of each party." [NOTE: Language sourced from the ICF Code of Ethics & Standards, which is core competency #1] In a nutshell: balancing my instinct for compassion with the professional standards that I adhere to. This insight is enormously freeing for me.



CC # 3 Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client: Several things occur to me immediately: Personal integrity, humor, not crossing the "advice line," and genuinely respecting the client's fundamental wholeness and ability to reach a creative solution for their stated topic.

Personal integrity is obvious. To me it's simply holding to a professional standard within the ICF Code of Ethics – and not taking them for granted (!)

Humor (especially the ability to laugh at myself) humanizes my relationship with my clients and helps them both to elevate their perspective as well as freeing them from taking their issues too seriously. Strong emotions such as fear, worry and self-doubt signal "outside-in" thinking to me. Our mutual ability to laugh, on the other hand, radiates directly from our core and invites the insightful "I didn't realize I could do that" solution (i.e., inside-out).

Not crossing the advice line: The bottom line here for me is respect. I've said that I believe my client is able to find their own answers, but if (in spite of this) I attempt to insert my own advice and opinions into our exchange then I've already eroded the trust that our coaching relationship is built upon – and the client knows it (although they may not recognize it consciously).

Respecting my client as being fundamentally Whole, Resourceful, Capable and Creative: Either I do or I don't. Their behavior may appear harmful, confused or unskillful (like froth on a mug of beer) but if I truly look - if I look with care – I can see past the froth to the foundation of their being which is BIGGER than both of us (i.e., the beer itself). And (funny) when I see it in them, they see it in me.



Questions: What advice do you all have for sitting still with the squirm (i.e., when your client doesn't know – and you don't know – in trusting the silence that surrounds the question)?

Comments: I love your Core Competency Washing Machine analogy, Amarah, since it shoots straight past the mental strain of trying to remember the CC's (outside-in) and points directly to what we, as practicing coaches, already have: a fully functional "washing machine." And still we

are bound to study and continuously refine our understanding of these Competencies.

Reflection #2

ICF Competencies: #4 Coaching Presence and #5 Active Listening

CC #4 Coaching Presence: Ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.

[Washing machine analogy: *The washing machine's inner drum/container for the 'clothing' – the co-created space in which the conversation occurs.*]

- Putting forward a professional presence: I learned an interesting fact from someone on an online coaching directory I subscribe to that most prospective clients look for coaches who are competent and willing to commit to them – someone they can depend upon to show up on time, be fully engaged, and take this profession seriously. I'm interested to see how many potential cross-country clients will choose to engage with me by phone (instead of face-to-face) if they feel satisfied that these criteria will be met.
- Chameleons: I've been reflecting this week on what Amarah said about coaches being "chameleons:" that we connect to our client by (temporarily) stepping into their skin -- honoring their unique language and learning style in the reflections and the questions that we ask. This exemplifies Coaching Presence to me because it actively demonstrates her engagement and willingness to be in service to them.
- Horror Vacui: (Latin: "Fear of open spaces"). Resisting the urge to fill silent, open spaces that appear during the coaching call (.)



Horror Vacui



Form Pointing to Emptiness

CC # 5 Active Listening: Ability to focus completely on what the client is saying and is not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client's desires, and to support client self-expression.

[Washing machine analogy: Represented by the back and forth action within the drum in which the 'clothing' washes. During this part of the process, the coach's genuine curiosity, willingness to 'not know' and partnership with the client allow the 'clothing' to release dirt and more clearly reveal the cloth. This propels the process toward the client's access to new awareness around the session topic and underlying issues as established in the session agreement.]

- Respect: As client, when I hear my coach's questions and reflections phrased in my own language (and the adjectives of my own learning style) I feel the competency of my own Essence being honored and respected by them. It keeps the ball on my side of the net and assures me that I'm both heard and trusted to find my own answers.
- Clients need to feel safe. Opening ourselves up to others makes us feel vulnerable. It's all about trust. A coach who recognizes and manages their own biases and emotional hooks protects this raw, vulnerable, unknowing, creative space.
- Silence is golden: (but my heaaaaart still sings. . .) I love what Amarah said: "Just ask a question, let it stand, zip your lips and wait!" and "Be curious. What are they going to do with it?" In a world saturated by information, using abundant curiosity to create a trusting, innocent space for new awareness to appear is the unique value of our profession. It's having faith that an answer more appropriate to the client than anything I can imagine is waiting out there in the wings.
- Checking in: Constantly checking throughout the session accomplishes the same goal of partnership presence. People want to feel "heard" and know in a heartbeat whether a coach is fully engaged or distracted by their own thoughts. A client feels heard when the coach is flexible enough to notice and name sudden shifts in their energy and awareness (body language, pauses, excitability, etc.), "What just happened?"



Reflection #3

ICF Competencies: #6 Powerful Questioning and #7 Direct Communication

CC #6 Powerful Questioning

[Washing machine analogy: CCC #5 Active Listening, #6 Powerful Questioning & #7 Direct Communication: Represented by the *back and forth action within the drum in which the 'clothing' washes.* During this part of the process, the coach's genuine curiosity, willingness to 'not know' and partnership with the client allow the 'clothing' to release dirt and more clearly reveal the cloth. This propels the process toward the client's access to new awareness around the session topic and underlying issues as established in the session agreement.]



- Leave questions open: "Yes/no" questions bring exploration to an abrupt halt (dull thud).
- Keeping questions simple and succinct keeps the spotlight on the client (and puts *them* on the spot to generate an answer, not you!)
- Active Listening + Direct Communication + Powerful Questioning = New Awareness
- Example combinations of AL, DC & PQ:
"I notice that you keep complaining about your mother. What's up with that?" and "We relate well. What would a satisfactory relationship with your business partner look like?"

CC # 7 Direct Communication

[Washing machine analogy: *ibid*]

- Skill: Sharing intuition & feedback with the client with ease, directness and depth without attachment. Using respectful language that makes the greatest positive impact on the client. Granting the client freedom to share their own perspectives, thoughts, intuition and feedback (partnership).
- A mentor coach commented on my feedback form (under Direct Communication): "You have an ability to find depth in the presence of humor. You show that over and over." For example, I highlighted a client's limiting beliefs by saying good-naturedly, "I'm hearing some limiting beliefs in here around. . . ." My client said "Oh, I do have some!" which cracked us up.
- Tell it like it is. That's what our clients are paying us for. They don't want to keep circling around the same stories and self-talk (although they may still be stuck in an old pattern because they don't see a way out.)



Questions

- What experiences have you had with "calling it as you see it" with your clients?

Comments:

I attended the recent webinar "Stop Rescuing, Start Coaching" last week which I found to be exceedingly helpful. Here are some questions that coaches can ask themselves to discover if they've slipped into rescuing:

- Do you work harder than your client?
- Do you constantly provide new materials for your clients to read (articles on self-help or coaching)? The key here is moderation.
- Do you find yourself making a lot of helpful suggestions?
- Do you avoid "calling it as you see it" (Direct Communication) because you either don't want to hurt your client's feelings or believe they can't handle it?
- Do you try to jump in and reassure them when there's an awkward silence?

Rescuers - react from their own internal anxiety and fail to see the "victim" as "whole, resourceful, capable and creative."

Indoctrination - This made me think about how we are indoctrinated in the victim, persecutor and rescuer model as children. In the Cinderella story, Cinderella is, of course, the victim ("poor me!") Her wicked stepsisters are the persecutors and - guess who - her fairy godmother and Prince Charming are her rescuers. All of these characters, however, act from a place of fear and disempowerment.

None are superior or have any real advantage over the others.



Daily Inquiry: So the question I keep asking myself these days is "Am I acting from a place of empowerment or disempowerment?"

Disempowerment means that "I grant this [external] person/situation the authority to make me weaker/smaller." Empowerment means "My internal, core values are the true, final authority" – especially when I feel lonely, vulnerable or afraid. When the wind is up, touch bedrock."

Reflection #4

ICF Competencies: #8 Creating Awareness and #9 Designing Actions

CC #8 Creating Awareness

[**Washing machine analogy:** *the 'rinse' cycle, which continues to use the back and forth action within the drum of CCCs 5 through 7 to identify insights relevant to the session's topic and underlying issues as established in the session agreement*]

- My wish for each client: approaching each session with two relaxed, overarching intentions: 1.) holding an attitude of unlimited possibility (guided by abundant curiosity), and 2.) creating space for new awareness. Thank you for putting this into a nutshell, Amarah.
- The distinction between Powerful Questions and Powerful Questioning: Grasping that Powerful Questions are part of this competency, but that the full competency is about reading the field and noticing what's right in front of you as coach: inviting the client to sound out what is truly important to them and identifying their underlying concerns, sharing intuitive insights, communicating broader perspectives, and putting them in touch with their own inner strengths and resources. The relief here is that I don't have to angst about my next "knock 'em out question," my client will give it to me in how they're being in the present moment.
- Simplicity: that Powerful Questions can be as simple as "What else?" or "What question would you ask yourself right now?"
- Asking questions about impact – Asking questions in as neutral a language as possible when responding to a client's 'aha!' moment ("What is coming up for you?" "What is the impact for you as you hear that?") How this gives the client freedom to move in any direction and fulfills my intention of unlimited possibility for my client (it's their path of discovery, after all!). How asking, "What do you feel (hear, or see)?" forces them to narrow their awareness to the realm of only feeling or only hearing or only seeing. Taking them out of the comfort zone of their dominant perceptivity (kinesthetic, auditory or visual) so that they might get in touch with additional access points to greater awareness.



CC #9 Designing Actions

[Washing machine analogy: # 9 Designing Actions and #10 Planning & Goal Setting: *the 'spin' cycle that builds on the awareness/insights identified in the session and defines next steps as well as goals/timelines that will support that awareness, both as it relates to this session and/or to the client's overall coaching goals.*]

- Design-ing Actions – I love how Janet Harvey MCC says "The 'ing' belongs to the client, not the coach." We don't need to come up with a plan of action for our clients. Our job as coaches is to facilitate how the client will plan their own actions. For example, if I step in and suggest actions for my client they will feel it as something imposed from the outside (like homework). When they summon the will to design their own forward actions they're already invested in making it a success. How freeing!
- Creating educated and engaged clients – I've noticed a fundamental shift occurring in me lately with all of my relationships, both personal and professional: stepping back and letting others own responsibility for the quality of their own lives. It may be absurdly obvious, but this insight (that being fully partnered is a two-way street) is a deep one for me and opens a path to greater comfort and ease. The coach manages the process and creates the space for awareness, but unless the client is willing to invest time and energy into it and own the consequences of their actions the relationship lacks sufficient potency to move them forward. I've acted as a masterful fixer for so many years, it's refreshing to me to adopt this attitude. It begs the question, "How do I want to be with others?" and "How do I inspire new clients to generate their own self-directed enthusiasm?"



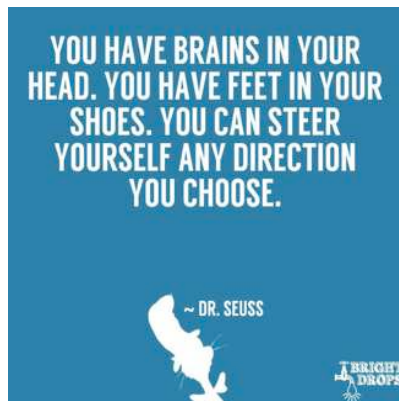
Questions: How do the rest of you inspire your clients to become fully engaged in the coaching process?

Comments: "Nobody can be exactly me. Sometimes even I have trouble doing it." - Tallulah Bankhead

Reflection #5

ICF Competencies: #10 Planning & Goal Setting and #11 Managing Progress

CC #10 Planning & Goal Setting



[Washing machine analogy: CCC #9 Designing Actions and #10 Planning & Goal Setting: the 'spin' cycle that builds on the awareness/insights identified in the session and defines next steps as well as goals / timelines that will support that awareness, both as it relates to this session and/or to the client's overall coaching goals.]

- If my wish is to fully partner with my client then I fulfill that wish by inviting my clients to plan their own lives and establish their own goals.
- For example,
 - "What I experience in you, Sue, is that you're a highly organized individual. Where do you want to start with this?"
 - "How will you know you've done it? How will you know you've achieved _____ by week's end?"
 - "How will you reward yourself / celebrate once you've reached that goal? What will make it worth the effort?"

Question: How do you invite your clients to plan a reward when meeting their goals?

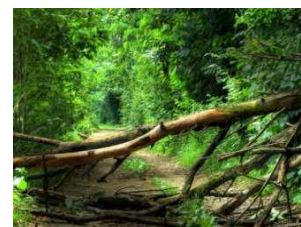
CC #11 Managing Progress & Accountability

[Washing machine analogy: CCC #11 Managing Progress & Accountability: the 'emptying out' cycle that supports the client to stay in forward motion, to define measures of success for their actions and that anchors the meaning of these actions as it relates to the underlying issues as established in the session agreement and/or to the client's overall coaching goals.]

- What will give you traction around _____ during the next week?"
I gain greater self-respect when I act from my core values and follow through with my intentions. It's a powerful incentive for my clients, also. As Amarah said, the specific results they get are less important than the transformational shift that their attentive awareness to those core values is creating for them.



- I'm not my client's parent and I certainly don't want to follow them around to observe them between sessions (egad)! They walk their own heroic path and – thankfully – are not answerable to me. My job as coach is simply to reflect and hold their stated values and intentions within the stillness of my presence and to be curious about what got in the way (or supported them) during the previous week – especially what they were telling themselves as those obstacles arose.
- Of course clients waffle, but there are also excellent reasons why a client might switch directions or not complete an assignment - conditions haven't ripened yet. I believe that the best answers are bigger than our questions: that what is good to do generally exceeds our expectations or imagination. If, in my own life, I want something and then move toward it only to find the way blocked, I have a choice – be still and wait, or try to force my way through. Experience has taught me that brute force yields unsatisfactory results which often need to be done over. The reason this is so is that I'm only one thread in a MUCH larger fabric and benefit by waiting for the whole cloth to unfold. That's what I mean by ripening. "No" doesn't mean "never." If I meet adversity with curiosity rather than frustration I open my heart's door to a greater truth of being. The universe is simply telling me "not now, not yet... be patient. Something better is coming." This is "the Mind that seeks the Way."



Reflection #6

In preparation for the final class, these were the coach-client's responses to the class completion questions

1. What are the top 3 'wins' you're celebrating as a result of taking this class?

1. A depth of learning in the Core Competencies that I had wanted during my ACTP Mastery course (my attention was focused on caregiving – no regrets). This is exactly what I wanted! Especially:
 - i. CC # 2: A grounded understanding of the coaching agreement (and how to link it with my client's over-arching contract goals).
 - ii. CC # 3: What full partnership looks like and how checking in and passing the baton back-back-back to the client builds a safe container of trust and intimacy.
 - iii. CC # 4: Setting the intention for my coaching presence with clients of unlimited possibility and space for awareness.
 - iv. CC # 5: Active Listening. A deeper understanding of how to recognize and leverage my client's unique learning styles (visual, auditory, somatic and feeling/empathic) to create new awareness for them.
 - v. CC # 9-11: A practical and straight-forward understanding of how to Facilitate Learning and Results with clients (ie., CC# 9: "What?" CC# 10: "When?" CC# 11: "How?" & "What might get in the way of fulfilling this forward action?")
2. The confidence this has given me to market myself as a professional coach: Being a professional life coach is no longer a "wouldn't it be nice idea" to play around with. It's what I'm meant to do. I've gained greater ease and certainty in my identity as coach, which comes across effortlessly with prospective clients.
3. My joy and pleasure in getting to know all of you (sincerely). [*Acknowledgements to specific individuals are withheld for confidentiality purposes.*]



2. What has shifted in your coaching skill set?

- A quieter inside which creates room to actively listen and be fully present with my clients. I also experience a greater comfort with "not knowing" (if I don't know, ask my client). The startling realization that I can dance!

3. What has shifted in your mind-set as a coach?

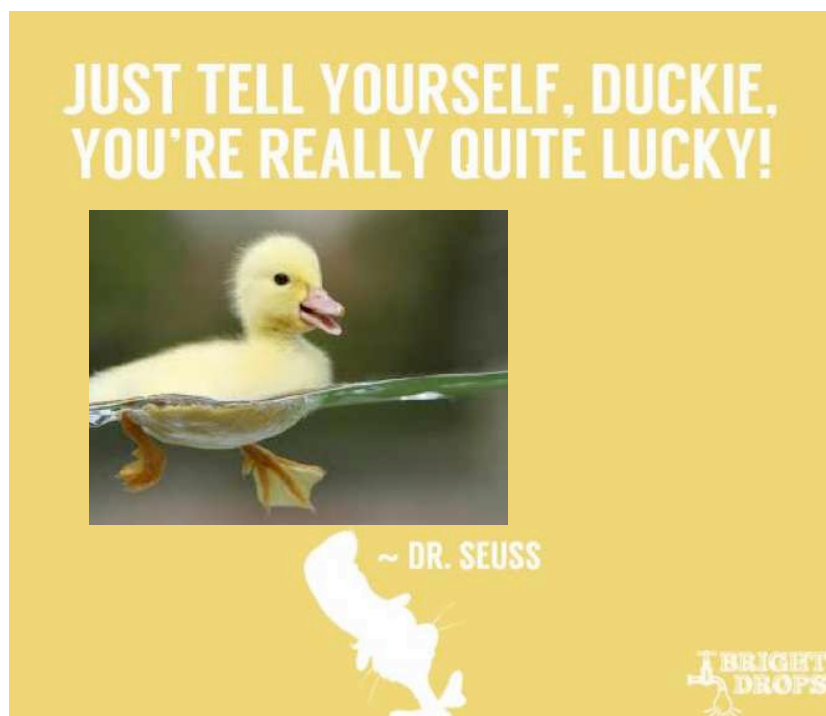
- Confidence and a felt ownership of my own coaching competence.

4. What's next for you in developing your coaching skills?

- Crisp, succinct questions. Inviting my clients to name their own qualities.

5. What do you want to say, to specific individuals and collectively, in order to feel complete with this group experience?

- Thank you. Truly. . . . (keep scrolling)



In closing...

I hope you've been as inspired as I was by these thoughtful, clearly expressed discoveries gained by a coach-client through their learning journey with me as mentor coach and our class's coach colleagues. It has certainly been the longest-lasting 'apple for the teacher' I've ever received!

My sincerest desire is that your own fascinating journey into artistry is a lighthearted yet profound experience filled with inspiration, joy and intriguing new discoveries.

Imagine: mentor coaching as a pathway to the heart and art of coaching - who knew?!?!?

Warmest regards,

Amorah Ross



About Me

Amorah Ross, ICF Master Certified Coach and Certified Mentor Coach

My Past Areas of Work Experience

A professional career that spans more than 40 years and a wide variety of industries, including consumer finance, legal services, wholesale electrical, aerospace, hospitality, public accounting services, residential construction, commercial property management and coach training.

My Coaching Philosophy

Whether you're an executive, business owner, entrepreneur, budding professional, parent, son/daughter, or community volunteer, underneath it all you're a human being.

My work is to support you in bringing your soulful humanity out so that it serves you as the guiding light for all that you do. Never again must your humanity get buried or compromised amid the often-conflicting demands of the various roles you inhabit day by day.

Passionate about celebrating wholeness as your birthright, I am a Transformative Coach for those who choose to show up in their careers and live their lives from their authentic core essence and beyond the limitations of traditional thinking. Your inner wisdom, unique self-expression and authenticity are brought forward through my powerful questions, forthright communication, and insightful observations, all of which help you create heightened awareness and effectiveness in both your leadership roles and on your life's journey.

You have the opportunity to gain absolute clarity as I listen keenly without judgment and, with gentle rigor, hold you accountable to your values, goals and vision. Together we create a safety zone of trust, accountability and effective action from which you look deep within for clarity about your work and day-to-day life to attain whatever brings you joy and fulfillment.

When you're ready to purposely and powerfully claim your authentic leadership, act in alignment with your values and make decisions sourced from your heightened awareness and innate wisdom, I'm committed to joining you on an exploratory field of possibility that is limitless, safe, nurturing, joyous and meaningful.

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