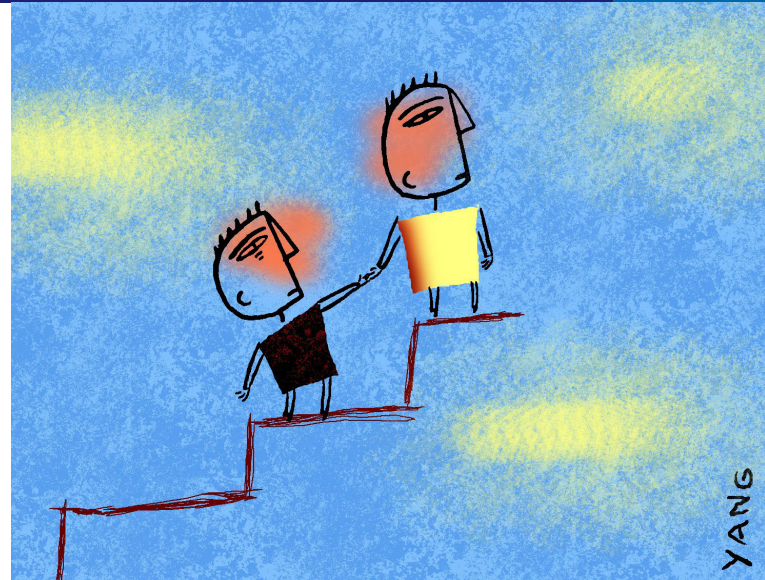# FROM UNDER THE VEIL:

THE COACHING PROCESS AND THE CHANGE PROCESS OF PROFESSIONAL COACHING

Michael Brazzel

As a professional coach and organization-development practitioner, I am fascinated with theories of change (Brazzel, 2014). I learned to be a professional coach by participating in four coach-training programs. After many hours of learning about and practicing coaching, of being coached, of coaching individual coach-clients, and of being a mentor-coach for coaches-in-training, one thing stood out for me about professional coaching – *Change happens as a result of the coaching process!* This realization set me on a quest to understand *how* change happens in the coaching process. The purpose of this article is to describe the outcome of my quest.

There are many global, regional and national organizations for accrediting and certifying coaches, none of which is universally recognized for these purposes (Brock, 2012, pp. 257, 294-359). This article uses the approach to professional coaching developed by the International Coach Federation ('ICF') (Goldvarg et al, 2018) which is the largest, global accrediting and certifying body (Brock, 2012; ICF, 2019a). In 2016, there were an estimated 53,300 coach practitioners across the world based on the ICF-commissioned 2016 Global-Coaching Study conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (ICF, 2019c). As of December 21, 2019, the ICF had approximately 34,600 members in 139 countries, 29,400 coaches with an ICF Credential in 123 countries (Wikipedia, 2019), and 330 third-party Accredited Coach-Training Programs (ICF, 2019d).

Professional coaching is a non-directive, coach-client partnership dedicated to supporting the client to achieve what they want in their lives and work. As a helping profession, it differentiates the role of a coach from other roles in the helping professions such as those of teacher, consultant or psychotherapist (ICF, 2019b; Goldvarg et al, 2018). The ICF approach to professional coaching is based on eight equally-weighted, core coaching competencies and sixty-three sub competences that are all "critical for any competent coach to demonstrate" (2019b) and may be viewed on the ICF's website. But this approach does not identify a professional-coaching *process* (although one is implied in the ICF definition of coaching and in the ICF core competencies), nor a *change theory* that explains how change emerges for coaching clients.

I searched the coaching literature, without success, for discussions on how professional coaching results in change. After days of living in a state of not being able to make sense of how change happens in coaching, I realized that there is a change theory that can be applied to the coaching process. It is the dialogic-change theory that Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak (2014) use to explain organization-change.

This article draws the core-competency veil back from professional coaching to describe the coaching process and to offer a theory of how change happens through coaching, by applying the organization-change approach used by Bushe and Marshak (2014) to professional coaching. This article is divided into four sections: the first is focused on the ICF's description of the client-coach partnership and the ICF core coaching-competencies; the ICF professional coaching process is described in the second; the coaching change-process is explained in the third, followed by concluding thoughts in the fourth.

PROFESSIONAL COACHING

Professional coaching was established in 1995 with the founding of the ICF which describes the practice in two ways:

- It provides a definition of coaching which calls attention to the coach-client partnership, and
- It defines core coaching-competencies which call attention to coach behaviors and skills (ICF, 2019b).

The Coach-Client Partnership

In its definition of coaching, the ICF highlights the coach-client relationship as a partnership: coaching is "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential" (ICF, 2019b). This definition puts the coach-client relationship at the heart of coaching. "The client learns and grows through reflecting on their own experiences and intuition via thought-provoking and insightful inquiry from the coach, in a trusting and supportive environment" (de Haan and Sills, 2012).

Coaching happens at the boundary between coach and client. The relationship between coach and client engages their whole beings: the intellectual, emotional, physical, energetic, and spiritual aspects of their beings; their intuition, humor and empathy; their gender, race, sexual orientation and other social-group identities; their social-group power differences; what they stand for; their values and purpose; their speech, language and voice; their history and life/work experiences; their vulnerabilities; assumptions, beliefs and mindsets; and their experiences of prejudice and bias, privilege, discrimination, racism, sexism, colonialism and other forms of systemic oppression.

The ICF Core Coaching Competencies

In 1998, representatives of eight coach-training organizations developed eleven core coaching competencies that professional coaches should demonstrate (see Figure 1). They are the architecture of professional coaching, and are 'core' competencies in the sense that they are fundamental competencies that a professional coach should demonstrate:

"The Core Competencies are grouped into four clusters according to those that fit together logically based on common ways of looking at the competencies in each group. The groupings and individual competencies are not weighted - they do not represent any kind of priority in that they are all core or critical for any competent coach to demonstrate" (ICF, 2019b).

They are separate from, and do not include, the theoretical models and philosophies of the different coach-training programs that the ICF accredits (Goldvarg et al, 2018, p. iii).

The ICF uses the core competencies in three ways:

- To define what professional coaches do.
- To provide criteria for credentialing ICF coaches at three levels – Associate Certified Coach (ACC), Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and Master Certified Coach (MCC).
- To guide ICF accreditation of coach-training programs, and their development of curricula for training new coaches (Goldvarg et al, 2018, p. iii.).

Figure 1

The Original ICF Core Coaching Competencies (1998)
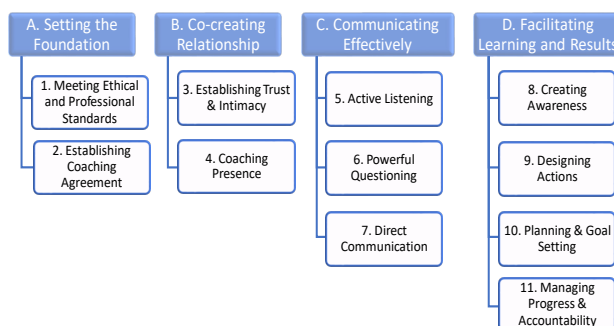
Source: The International Coach Federation, 2019b.

The coaching profession is evolving. In November 2019, the ICF adopted a new, updated set of *eight* core competencies to replace the eleven 1998 core competencies. This change was based on data collected from more than 1,300 coaches during an 18-month coaching-practice analysis. The updated 2019 core competencies are shown in Figure 2. They are consistent with the earlier 1998 core competencies. They also reflect current coaching practice and give increased emphasis to ethical behavior; confidentiality; the coach-client partnership; equal client-voice; the coaching mindset; awareness of systemic, cultural and contextual aspects of coaching; coaching agreements for both individual coaching sessions and the overall coaching engagement with clients; professional development; and reflective practice (ICF, 2019b).

Figure 2

The Revised ICF Core Competencies (2019)
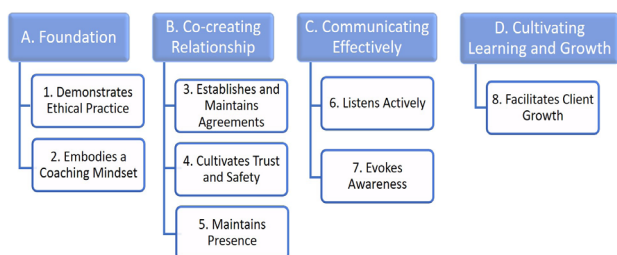
Source: The International Coach Federation, 2019b.

The Emerging Narrative

The new emphasis in the 2019 competencies on systemic, cultural and contextual aspects of coaching reflects a new narrative that is emerging in the coaching profession about "identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs" (ICF, 2019b). This emerging narrative is an expanding recognition that coaching is more than an individual-to-individual coach-client interaction; that the coaching relationship impacts, and is impacted by, individuals and larger systems beyond the coaching relationship; and that social-group identity and power dynamics are an integral part of the coaching process (Lawrence, 2019).

This perspective appears in the 18-month coaching-practice analysis for the 2019 revision of the ICF core competencies, and is included in the 2019 sub-competencies for:

• Competency 1 'Demonstrates Ethical Practice',
• Competency 4 'Cultivates Trust and Safety', and
• Competency 6 'Listens Actively' (ICF 2019b).

It also appears in the Code of Ethics of the Association of Coach Training Organizations ('ACTO') in Ethical Standard 47:

"Seek understanding and education about social diversity, systemic equality, systemic power, systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of systemic oppression, and how they show up in the coach training process" (ACTO, 2019a);

and in the ACTO's 'Stand for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging':

"ACTO is committed to creating diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in the coaching profession through calling forth, honoring and inviting the uniqueness of all individuals and diverse life experiences.

In support of this stand, we acknowledge and are committed to eliminating the negative impact of personal and systemic bias, privilege and oppression, which may be conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional, overt or subtle.

As coach trainers, we are tasked with creating the future of the coaching profession. We commit to providing dialogue, learning and resources and to cultivating personal and organizational responsibility in alignment with this stand, at ACTO, for each of our students, members and member organizations" (ACTO, 2019b).

This emerging narrative for the coaching profession will mean expanding professional coaching skills and awareness to include:

• A systems-thinking and multiple levels-of-system perspective.
• The recognition that social-group identity, power dynamics, privilege, discrimination, and systemic oppression are an integral and ongoing consideration for professional coaching.
• The capacity to explore differences in social-group identity and their implications for dominant and marginalized-group power dynamics, and for discrimination and systemic oppression, in the coach-client relationship and beyond.

THE PROFESSIONAL COACHING PROCESS

The ICF does not specify a process for professional coaching, though one is implied in the ICF's core- and sub-competencies. The coaching process has three parts:

1. **An introductory coach-client meeting:** at the beginning of a coaching engagement there is an introductory coach-client meeting to initiate the process with the new client.
2. **Coaching sessions:** the introductory coach-client meeting is followed by a series of coaching sessions. Each individual coaching session has four segments parts: session-startup; a coach-client dialogue; client awareness; and session-ending. The total number of individual coaching sessions is determined jointly by the coach and the client.
3. **A meeting to complete the coaching engagement:** at the end of a coaching engagement, there is a completion meeting to formalize the end of the coach-client relationship.

This three-part process is pictured in Figure 3.

Figure 3

The Professional Coaching Process

The Introductory Coach-Client Meeting

The first meeting between the coach and a new client sets the foundation for the overall coaching process. They review the ethical standards and principles of the ICF Code of Ethics; the open, curious, and client-centered nature of coaching; and the differences between coaching, consulting, therapy, counseling, and other support professions. The coach is sensitive to their new client's identity, environment, experiences, values, and beliefs, and partners with them for a relationship that is trusting and courageous. The coach and client discuss their roles and responsibilities, confidentiality, services, fees, the schedule for their coaching sessions, the completion process, and any other logistics of the coaching engagement.

The Coaching Sessions

The overall coaching engagement with a new client includes a series of coaching sessions, each of which has four segments: the coaching-session startup, the coaching dialogue, client awareness, and the session-ending.

1. **The Startup of the Coaching Session: the Coach-Client Partnership, the Client's Agenda, and the Coach's Presence.** At the beginning of each coaching session, the coach checks with the client about what is needed to sustain a trusting and courageous relationship, and clarifies and contracts with the client about what they want to work on, their measures of success, and the issues to be addressed. The coach seeks to understand the client within their context, including their identity, environment, experiences, values, and beliefs; and uses their whole-being in a here-and-now partnership to serve the client, their agenda, their learning and development, and their aliveness. The coach is present and open to the whole-being of the client – including their intuition, energy, mind, body, spirit, emotion, and intellect. The coach also tracks their own internal experience, and the client's reactions and responses; is empathetic and curious; and is open to not-knowing, taking risks, and interacting with the client's strong emotional expressions.

2. **The Coach-Client Dialogue: Inquiry, Sharing and Listening.** The coach asks clear, direct, primarily open-ended questions about the client's agenda and whole-being, and explores differences in social-group identity and their implications for dominant and marginalized-group power dynamics, discrimination, and systemic oppression, within both the coach-client relationship and beyond. The coach shares their inner experience - including their intuition, emotions, physical experience, perspectives, observations, and thoughts - to support the client and their learning and forward movement, without attachment to being right; and makes space for self-reflection by

the client, and for the client to do most of the talking. Listening by the coach is demonstrated through inquiry, sharing and silence.

3. **Client Awareness: Learning, Action, Accountability.** The coach partners with the client to explore what the client is learning about their agenda and themselves. Then the coach invites the client to formulate actions to carry forward their learning and insights, and to consider support mechanisms, resources and potential barriers for the way ahead. The coach also develops an accountability process with the client, including an accountability method, partner, and time-period.

4. **The Ending of the Coaching Session: Client Progress, Completion, and Decision-to-Continue or to End the Coaching.** The coach inquires about the client's progress toward their agenda, notices and reflects the client's overall progress, and celebrates them and their work. The coach and client share with each other whatever needs to be said to conclude the session satisfactorily, and they decide whether to continue with another coaching session or to close the overall coaching engagement.

The Meeting to End the Coaching Engagement

When the coach and client decide to end the overall coaching engagement, their coaching relationship is concluded during the last coaching session, or in a final coach-client meeting. In this meeting, the coach and client review the client's accomplishments, their overall progress, the remaining aspects of the client's work, and the next steps the client can take to continue their growth and development. Finally, the coach and client share with each other whatever needs to be said to conclude their relationship.

THE PROFESSIONAL COACHING CHANGE-PROCESS

Change happens as a result of coaching. The question "How does change happen?" is addressed in this section by applying the organization-change theory developed by Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak (2014) to professional coaching.

From the Bushe-Marshak perspective, our thoughts and actions arise in a continuous process of meaning-making and emergence of new thoughts and actions. Reality is created and sustained in the narratives and stories with which people make meaning about their experiences. Change happens when the stories and narratives that shape thinking and behavior change because of the ongoing introduction of new perspectives, metaphors, and different points of view that inform and reframe how people talk with each other, think about their worlds, make decisions and take action (Bushe and Marshak, 2014).

The coaching change-process is shown in Figure 4. Change emerges for coaching clients in the context of the coach-client relationship and as a result of dialogue between the coach and client. This disrupts and reframes the client's current narratives and stories about their coaching agenda, and leads to new narratives and stories, new learning and insights, and momentum and energy for action and change. The coach fosters and supports a coaching approach that leads the client to unanticipated, new thinking, new possibilities, and new ways of acting, rather than planning for specific changes.

Figure 4

The Professional Coaching Change-Process
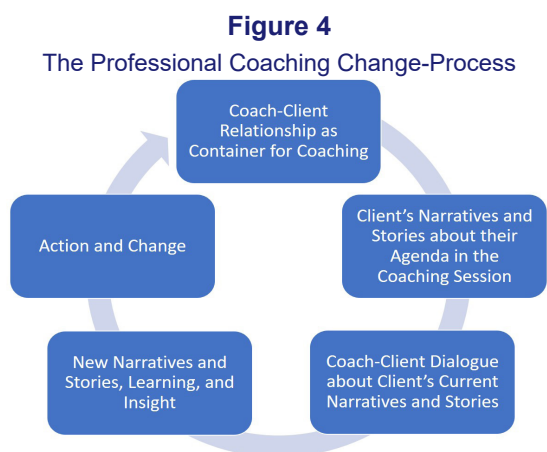
The Coach-Client Relationship as a Container

Coaching begins with the coach partnering with the client to co-create the coach-client relationship as a safe 'container' (Bushe, 2010) for holding honest, open, and courageous conversations, for developing a clear coaching focus and intention, and for the coaching process itself. The coach is a convener and host who helps to create a space where the coach and client can join in listening and understanding each other, and share at a deep level their uncertainties, questions, hopes, dreams, fears, and concerns.

The Client's Narratives and Stories about their Coaching Agenda

The coach enquires about what the client's wants to work on in the coaching session and listens for how the client is making meaning of their current situation through their narratives and stories. 'Narratives' are the client's account of connected events - the what, when, where, who, and how of the client's coaching work. The client's 'stories' add mind, heart, soul, spirit, structure, and provocative metaphors to their narrative about their agenda. These narratives and stories are the current reality and "the way things are" for the client.

The Coach-Client Dialogue about Current Narratives and Stories

In the coach-client dialogue, the coach engages with the client in inquiry, sharing, and deep listening, and provides space for self-reflection by the client about their current situation. The coach demonstrates listening to the client's unique experiences by hearing their words, and sensing and responding to their underlying emotions, physical experiences, perspectives, observations, thoughts, and unexpressed meanings behind their words. The coach-client dialogue is a method that heightens, broadens, and deepens the client's understanding and meaning-making of the narratives and stories for their current coaching agenda. It also unsettles and disrupts meaning-making and understanding by the client.

The Emergence of New Narratives and Stories, Learning and Insight

The coach-client dialogue is a generative and discovery method that challenges and disrupts the status quo of the client's current agenda. Disruption results from the coach's observations, perspectives, questions, and invitations to the client to bring their whole being into the coaching dialogue in order to help the client alter their prevailing narratives. New narratives, stories, and understanding of the client's work emerge, along with new learning, insights, and aha's that generate energy and momentum for decision-making and action.

Action and Change

The coaching change-process is one in which the coach-client interaction challenges and reshapes the status quo of the client's current understanding of their coaching agenda, generates energy and momentum for change, and impacts their behavior and the decisions they make about the work they want to accomplish in coaching. The realization by the client that their current narratives and stories no longer fit their new reality is a powerful force for change. It can affect the client's internal experience (for example, their perceptions, mindsets, dreams, memories, emotions, and physical sensations). It can lead to actions that address specific learning, insights, and aha's; and it can lead to changes in their behavior toward themselves (for example, self-love, self-care and self-development), and toward other individuals, groups, organizations and larger systems.

Robinson, Morrow, and Miller conducted a quantitative and qualitative study of this insight-to-change phase of the coaching change-process (2018). They used a sample of six certified-coach and client pairs with nine one-on-one coaching sessions for each coach-client relationship. While recognizing the study and sample-size limitations, the authors concluded that "moments of insight increase significantly during coaching and can be tracked to behaviour change" (Robinson, Morrow, and Miller, 2018).

In sum, coaching is a change method based in the client's narratives and stories about their coaching agenda; the coach-client interaction and dialogue about that agenda; the emergence of a new narrative and understanding of the client's situation and of themselves; and energy and momentum for action, new behavior, and change. Change happens for clients in unguided and often-unanticipated ways. The coach is an integral part of the coaching change-process: The coach's presence and actions disrupt and unsettle the client's narrative and understanding of their agenda, and influence the outcome of the coaching session. Unanticipated change may emerge for the coach as well.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This article has been a search beneath the veil of the ICF core competencies for a description of the process of professional coaching, and for an understanding of how change emerges for coaching clients as a result of the coach-client interaction.

The process of professional coaching is implied in the ICF coaching competencies which were updated in 2019 with a new emphasis on the systemic, cultural, and contextual aspects of professional coaching. This new emphasis is reflected in the coaching process as a systems-thinking and multiple levels-of-system perspective; and in the consideration of differences in social-group identity and their implications for dominant- and marginalized-group power dynamics, discrimination, and systemic oppression, within the coach-client relationship and beyond. When the coaching process is viewed through the lens of the Bushe-Marshak organization-change theory (2014), it becomes clear: *The process of professional coaching is also a change process*.

The beauty of professional coaching is in its simplicity. When a coach-client partnership of respect, trust, and courage is in place, when coach and client have a shared agreement about the client's agenda, and when the coaching process is followed, change happens. For this result, the professional coach must be fully present with their whole-being; demonstrate respect, humility, honesty, vulnerability, and humor; and believe fully in the client's wisdom, creativity, resourcefulness, and wholeness.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Brazzel, PhD, CPCC, PCC is a professional coach, organization-development practitioner, author, economist, trainer, and group-facilitator. Michael is in the world as partner, father, grandfather, and great grandfather and he brings a social-justice consciousness to his work and life. He is co-editor of the NTL Handbook for Organization Development and Change: Principles, Practices, and Perspectives (2nd Edition, 2014) and the NTL Reading Book for Human Relations Training (8th edition, 1999), and a member of four professional networks – NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, Leadership that Works, White Men as Full-Diversity Partners, and Coaches for Equality and Diversity – all of which include coaching and have social justice at their core. Michael held teaching and/or research positions with American University, Cleveland State University, Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies, Newton College, University of North Carolina, University of Missouri, and U.S. Air Force Academy and served as executive, manager, executive-coach, and organization-development and diversity consultant in the US government. Michael lives in Columbia, Maryland, USA.

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Author's Notes:

1. This article is dedicated in celebration of my daughter, Shawn Quinn Clements, who died from a glioblastoma brain-tumor on September 28, 2014.

2. To Damon Gbuduala Azali-Rojas, Kate Cowie, Janet M. Harvey, and Dorothy E. Siminovitch: your comments, questions, and suggestions have made this article better. Thank you!

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