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WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE COACHING WORLD

Coach Certification: A learning credential

What does it mean to be a “certified coach”? We can identify three trends, represented by three organizations, summarized as:

- Qualified
- Effective
- Qualified & Effective

Qualified

There's a new coach certification on the horizon – the “Board Certified Coach,” through the Center for Credentialing in Education (CCE). According to CCE's website (www.cce-global.org), CCE is a corporate affiliate of the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC®) and “has provided a variety of services ranging from comprehensive association and credential management to specialized aspects of credential review and psychometric functions for more than 10 years.” Thus, CCE's entry into coach certification stands to make a significant impact on the field.

In its approach to certification, CCE proposes to focus primarily on qualifications: education, training, ethics, screening, orientation and assessment. These will not require an oral demonstration of coaching capability. Why? Because of the lack of an objective and consistent way to evaluate such demonstrations, or what's otherwise known as “inter-rater reliability.” Being unable to consistently establish agreement between raters as to what constitutes effective performance is a problem that has plagued credentialing for years in counseling psychology and has been abandoned in many professions. Without inter-rater reliability, oral exams are vulnerable to undue subject-



tivity and are potentially misleading: one rater may pass a candidate while another does not. The CCE solution? No oral exam at all. Receiving the CCE credential therefore implies that a person is qualified to coach well.

Effective

At the other end of the spectrum is the certification offered by the International Association of Coaching (IAC). According to its website, www.certifiedcoach.org, the IAC certifies coaches without requiring any particular educational background or coaching experience. The IAC assesses candidates as to their comprehension of coaching mastery through an online exam and as to their demonstration of coaching mastery through a detailed review of two recorded coaching sessions. That review works with both the recordings as well as the transcripts of those recordings to carefully assess whether or not candidates demonstrate the nine IAC Coaching Masteries®. Receiving the IAC credential therefore implies that a person is effective at coaching well.

Given this approach to certification, inter-rater reliability is a primary concern of the IAC. Two certifiers independently rate the recordings of every candidate. If there is a difference of opinion, a third certifier reviews the recordings and ratings to mediate. The IAC is currently working with an outside consultant to statistically establish and to operationally enhance its inter-rater reliability. If and when such consistency between certifiers is established, this could become a model for others to follow. Inter-rater reliability is essential to the viability and integrity of performance-based certifications.

Qualified & Effective

The International Coach Federation (ICF) has long asserted its credential as the “gold-standard” in the coaching profession. According to its website (www.coachfederation.org), “coaches who have been credentialed by the ICF have received coach-specific training, achieved a designated number of experience hours and have been coached by a mentor coach.” The ICF also requires candidates to demonstrate

the eleven ICF Core Coaching Competencies through written as well as live and recorded oral exams. Receiving the ICF credential therefore implies that a person is both qualified to coach well and is effective at coaching well.

To the best of my knowledge, neither the ICF, the IAC, nor any other global coaching association has yet established inter-rater reliability when it comes to the evaluation of coaching effectiveness. That accounts for some of the discontent that is often expressed regarding coach certification. People who fail to get certified have grumbled that the process is inaccurate and subjective while those who watch the public coaching demonstrations of Master Certified Coaches have grumbled that such demonstrations are less-than-spectacular or even ineffective examples of masterful coaching. The profession apparently has a ways to go before the necessary rigor comes to the assessment of coaching effectiveness.

Accountability & Responsibility

The challenge for any coach-certifying body is to maintain the integrity of their credentials, both for coaches seeking credentials and for those who already have them. In the case of both the CCE and the ICF, maintaining a credential often revolves around obtaining approved Continuing Education Units (CEUs). The focus, in other words, is on the “qualified” aspect of the credentials. No attempt is usually made to retest whether or not certified coaches remain effective. It is assumed that coaching effectiveness continues as long as coaches maintain their qualifications. The process of getting CEUs is what accountability looks like when it comes to such certifications.

The IAC has adopted a different approach. Since the IAC does not require any particular Education Units (EUs) to earn its designations in the first place, it does not make sense for the IAC to require CEUs in order for

coaches to maintain their designations over time. When a credential is based entirely on coaching effectiveness, a different method for accountability is required.

After much discussion through a strategic planning process, the IAC received inspiration from the concept of

“Through self-responsibility, coaches can both maintain and increase their coaching effectiveness over time.”

“Giving an A” developed by Rosamund Stone Zander and Ben Zander in *The Art of Possibility* (Penguin Books, 2000). To unleash the creativity and commitment of students at the New England Conservatory of Music, Ben announces at the start of every school year, “Each student in this class will get an A for the course; however, there is one requirement that you must fulfill to earn this grade: Sometime during the next two weeks, you must write me a letter dated next May, which begins with the words, ‘Dear Mr. Zander, I got my ‘A’ because ...,’ and in this letter you are to tell, in as much detail as you can, the story of what will have happened to you by next May that is in line with this extraordinary grade.”

That is the approach the IAC is now taking with regard to securing and maintaining its credentials. Instead of specifying the hoops of education and experience that a coach must jump through in order to become or to stay certified, the IAC is requiring that coaches specify those hoops for themselves. On an approved form, tied to the IAC Coaching Masteries®, coaches will annually describe their intentions and plans for continued professional self-development and self-responsibility. These personalized Learning Agreements, as the IAC is calling them, will then be reviewed in live telephone conferences after the first year and every five years thereafter. Once the form

becomes an online, interactive web form, coaches will have the option of making their Learning Agreements public as part of their profiles in the “Find a Coach” directory.

The IAC process reflects a highly individualized approach to coach learning and certification. There is no one-size-fits-all

understanding of how coaches become qualified. There is, however, the recognition that professional coaches must be accountable for both their learning and effectiveness. By “giving everyone an A,” and then requiring everyone to describe what “happened to them that is in line with this extraordinary grade,” the IAC is challenging coaches to fully embody and model the essence of coaching as a learning profession.

Through self-responsibility, coaches can both maintain and increase their coaching effectiveness over time. Certification is not an end point; it is rather a learning credential and a commitment that propels coaches forward in the continuing advancement of the profession. This is certainly the hope of all global coach certifying bodies, and no process precludes such continued evolution. It is, in the end, up to us as coaches to make sure we walk the talk and realize the full potential of our profession in service to our clients. •

ICF European Coaching Conference (ECC Madrid 2011)

June 16-18, 2011
Madrid, Spain

2011 ICF Annual International Conference

September 24-27, 2011
Mandalay Bay,
Las Vegas, Nevada, USA
www.coachfederation.org