

# Exclusive Feature



## The Imperative for Coaching Standards: Upholding Integrity and Excellence

*A collective effort by all coaching bodies is paramount to curb the tide of unprofessional coaching practices and establish coaching on a secure footing grounded in fundamental, agreed-upon standards. Without regulation, its legitimacy is called into question at every turn.*

**Naysan Firoozmand & Wendy-Ann Smith**

### The Need for Universally Accepted Coaching Standards

Coaching, a supportive practice rooted in fostering individual and collective development, stands at the brink of substantial growth with the advent of AI and the multiple education domains both academic and public. The absence of universally accepted standards and regulations is a growing concern that threatens the very fabric of our profession. As staunch advocates for the integrity and quality of coaching, we have dedicated significant effort to address this issue. The absence undermines coaching's potential to effect transformative change in individuals, teams, organisations, and human consciousness.

The current landscape of coaching is as diverse as it is unregulated. Thousands of self-proclaimed coaches offer their services, many without any formal

qualifications or adherence to a codified set of ethical guidelines. This lack of regulation not only dilutes the quality of coaching available but also poses a significant risk to those seeking guidance, potentially leading to unsatisfactory outcomes and even harm.

The need for a foundational standard in coaching practices cannot be overstated. It is not merely a matter of credentialing but of establishing a benchmark that ensures every coaching engagement is underpinned by a commitment to professionalism, confidentiality, and a client-centred approach. We have long championed this cause, recognising that the path to legitimising coaching as a profession is through the implementation of rigorous standards.

### Dysregulation: Reputation of Coaching

The realm of coaching is filled with instances of

unregulated practices that can be detrimental to the profession's reputation. Unqualified individuals can exploit clients' vulnerability, leading to a tarnished reputation for the coaching community. Clients may not have the means to validate the coach's expertise and, more importantly, the wellbeing of the coach's clients, a fundamental principle of ethics of care in coaching (Smith & Arnold, 2023; Smith & Clutterbuck, 2023). For example, there are coaches who offer "instant" solutions, promising dramatic life changes with minimal effort or engagement. These quick-fix approaches often lack the depth and rigour of accredited coaching methods.

Another concerning practice is the absence of confidentiality agreements; some coaches do not understand nor adhere to strict privacy standards, which can result in the misuse of sensitive client information. This breaches trust and exposes clients to potential exploitation..

### Training Programs and Continuous Self-Development

The core of our advocacy is the promotion of accredited training programs that equip coaches with the necessary skills, knowledge, and ethical competence to serve their clients effectively. Accreditation serves as a seal of quality, assuring clients that a coach has undergone a comprehensive evaluation of their competencies and understanding of ethics. It is a safeguard that protects the interests of both coaches and clients, ensuring that the coaching relationship is built on a foundation of mutual respect and professional integrity - and the field of coaching.

Moreover, we emphasise the critical importance of continuous professional development in related fields that contribute to the skill, knowledge and capability of the coach. This is in addition to having regular coaching supervision from a qualified and accredited coach supervisor. The field of coaching is dynamic, with new theories and methodologies emerging regularly. It is incumbent upon coaches to remain at the forefront of these developments, refining their skills and expanding their knowledge base to provide the highest level of service. This ongoing learning process is not just a professional requirement but a necessity for maintaining the quality and relevance of coaching services. Experienced coaches have demonstrated their commitment to ongoing reflection and development, constantly evolving their practice (Rajasinghe, Garvey, Smith, et al., 2022).

Continuous professional development should be the basis for all professional coaching practice.

### Our Efforts Towards Standardisation

To this end, we have initiated dialogues with representatives from the world's leading coaching accreditation organisations. Our objective is clear: to forge a consensus on the essential standards that define competent and ethical coaching. These discussions are critical in shaping a future where coaching is not just seen as a supportive tool but as a professional service characterised by excellence and trustworthiness. These organisations play a pivotal role in ensuring that coaching practitioners adhere to high standards of competence, ethics, and professionalism.

These bodies provide independent certification and create a global network of credentialed coaches. Independently all of these organisations add incredible value to the coaching profession, providing opportunities for learning, establishing credibility, advocate for the profession and elevate coaching standards through continuous improvement. However, their collective impact transcends what they could achieve independently. Together they can advocate for coaching's recognition and relevance; they can influence policymakers, organisations, and the public to appreciate coaching's value and integrate it into various contexts.

They can collectively address gaps, validate coaching methodologies, and contribute to evidence-based practices; coaches often seek multiple credentials, collaboration enables streamlined processes for cross-credentialing (this benefits coaches' professional growth and simplifies the credentialing journey); and coaches benefit from collective wisdom.

### Can there be a universally accepted standard?

Our endeavour to establish global standards in coaching is a challenging one. Global standards grounded in evidence-based practice are the requirements for a service industry to become a profession (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Kauffman, 2005) and regulation with a coherent cross-cultural ethical standard (Smith & Arnold, 2023). A significant hurdle is the diversity of legal and cultural contexts in which coaching operates. What is considered ethical and professional in one country may not align with

the norms of another, making it difficult to create a one-size-fits-all standard. Also, at the same time, it allows for flexibility and personalisation in coaching approaches, but it also makes it challenging to enforce a standardised approach. One approach to resolving this could be to adopt international standards with local adaptations to respect local cultural norms and practices. Cultural competence training within coaching training, could ensure coaching methods are effective and respectful among different cultures. What does seem evident is that engaging coaches and organisations from diverse backgrounds in the development of a common foundation can ensure that these standards are inclusive and considerate of various cultural perspectives.

In contrast, how do you define global standard approach, while allowing for flexibility and personalisation in coaching approaches? Coaches who are accustomed to operating independently may resist the imposition of regulations that they perceive as restrictive or bureaucratic. We also fully recognise the financial implications of standardisation.

Accreditation, continuous professional development and having a qualified coach supervisor require investment of time and money. Not all coaches may be willing or able to incur these costs. This economic barrier can limit the reach of standardised practices, especially in regions where coaching is still an emerging profession. However, working collaboratively across all regions around best practices in coaching can elevate the profession's reputation locally (and globally), paving the way for new innovations and opportunities for aspiring coaches wishing to be part of a universally accepted standard and a profession that is respected.

### Consensus Building: Safeguarding the Reputation of Coaching

Understandably, consensus-building among the various accreditation bodies is complex. Each organisation has its own criteria and values, and finding common ground requires a process of dialogue, openness, challenge, trust, negotiation and compromise. The risk of diluting standards to achieve agreement is a concern that must be navigated with care, taking into consideration the sometimes-strong perspectives from long-established institutions and remaining open to co-create a collective way forward that is new and different to what has already existed.

The biggest challenge we face is being able to remain open enough to the possibility that a different way of working is possible.

Despite the challenges, the pursuit of regulated coaching standards is necessary. Only through collective effort and a shared commitment to excellence can we overcome these obstacles together and establish coaching as a respected and trusted profession for all.

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