

# What is Co-Active Coaching?

dancing in this moment  
Designed Alliance  
CURIOSITY reframing accountability clarifying confidentiality  
Fulfillment inquiry  
Balance Process championing creating trust  
bottom-lining meta-view  
people are naturally resourceful & whole  
structures visioning brainstorming  
FORWARD THE ACTION  
LISTENING  
taking charge powerful questions clearing  
asking permission holding the client's agenda acknowledgment  
DEEPEN THE LEARNING  
whole-person focus requesting  
challenging evoking transformation  
articulating what's going on metaphor holding the focus  
goal setting INTUITION  
creative clients

*One coach's summary of the powerful Co-Active coaching model*

**People often ask me: “What is Co-Active Coaching?” Great question! And so I wrote this summary of the approach I use, and which I find so powerful.**

*-- Deborah Hartmann Preuss, Professional Co-Active Coach, Germany*

## Origins

Life coaching is not entirely new. In its present form, it started developing in the 1970s, and in the 1980s it jelled into a few major schools of coaching<sup>2</sup>. One of these was outlined in the book, Co-Active Coaching<sup>1</sup> by Laura Whitworth, Henry Kimsey-House and Phil Sandahl. This book translated the coaching relationship into a number of understandable tools for coaches to use, shifting the emphasis from being a powerful coach to creating a powerful relationship, with the focus on the client:

*Coaching is defined as a relationship of possibilities. ‘Imagine a relationship where the total focus is on you ... on what you want in your life and on what will help you achieve it ... Imagine a relationship with someone who will absolutely tell you the truth ... This coaching relationship is one of trust, confidentiality and safety.’ “<sup>2</sup>*

The Coaches Training Institute (CTI) is the oldest and largest in-person coach training organization in the world. Its founders were among the initial pioneers of the coaching profession.<sup>3</sup> CTI has trained over 35,000 coaches worldwide. Their training program is widely recognized as the most rigorous coach training and certification program in the industry.<sup>4</sup> The book Co-Active Coaching: Changing Business, Transforming Lives, is a recognised reference text<sup>5</sup> for the coaching discipline. This paper describes CTI's Co-Active coaching model.

<sup>1</sup> Co-Active Coaching: Changing Business, Transforming Lives, [www.amazon.com/dp/1857885678](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1857885678) (link is to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> How Coaching Works: the essential guide to the history and practice of effective coaching. Ch 1

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/0713682612>

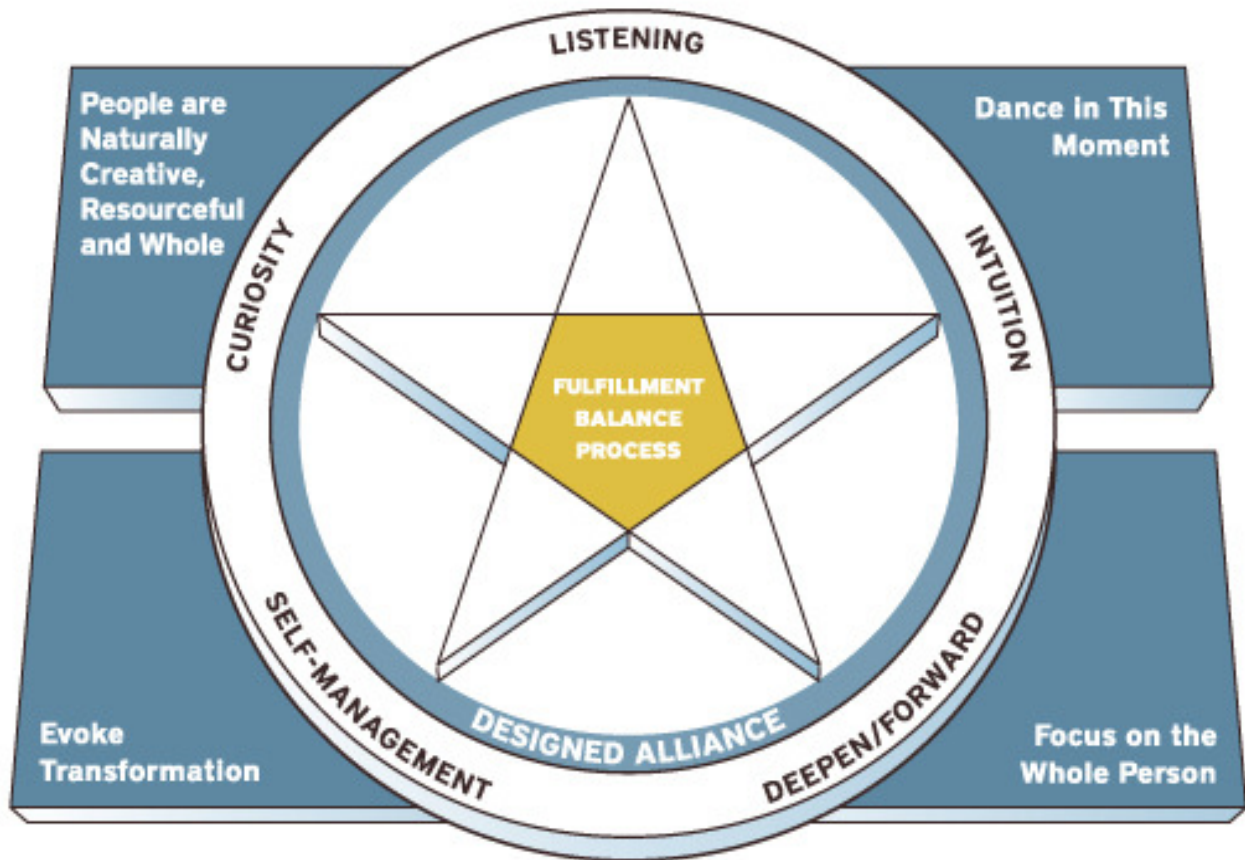
<sup>3</sup> More about CTI: <http://www.thecoaches.com/why-coaches-training-institute/>

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.thecoaches.com/coach-training/> September 2012

<sup>5</sup> “With its third updated edition, Co-Active Coaching remains the bible of coaching guides.” — Stephen R. Covey.

Source: <http://www.thecoaches.com/resources/multimedia/two-free-chapters-co-active-coaching.html>

## The Co-Active Coaching Model, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition



*The model diagram is a mnemonic device for teaching and coaching, a reminder of the essentials of Co-Active coaching. It consists of*

***four cornerstones**, all of which must be present in Co-Active coaching,*

***three principles** the coach applies separately or in combination,*

***five contexts**, from which the coach works at various times to keep the coaching fresh and relevant, and*

***the designed alliance** between coach and client.*

## The 1<sup>st</sup> Cornerstone: *People are Naturally Creative, Resourceful and Whole*

The co-active coach works from a viewpoint that differs widely from that some other professions: the belief that the client is not in need of “fixing” and does not need us solve their problems. The client is and remains the expert in their own situation. The coach guides, but does not control the client's experience and the client is a full partner in creating coaching experiences of value to him or her.

As a result, there is no boring, useless or unsafe topic in coaching - whatever the client brings in is exactly right and the coach can work with it. Although it is sometimes labelled “work-life” coaching, it is more accurately called Whole Person coaching, and is suitable and helpful for a wide diversity of people and situations.

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Cornerstone: *Dance in This Moment*

Although co-active coaches are rigorously trained, they are offered no "templates" for excellent coaching sessions. Each session is a co-creation between coach and client, and the two “dance” together to create a session that brings the client the most value, in context.

The coach is vigilant for detours into the past or future, stories and complaints - all of which distance the client from their immediate experience. The coach uses the model and tools to bring the client vividly into the experience of what is important *now*, in order to explore and coach what is here in the moment.

This cornerstone makes coaching powerful – moving the client into action via their own dreams, experiences and intuitions.

## The 3<sup>rd</sup> Cornerstone: ***Focus on the Whole Person***

The coach simultaneously sees the client in their current state, and as the powerful and impactful person they are becoming, mirroring this bigger view to the client through championing and challenge, and always watching for confirming resonance in the client.

The coach discovers what is deeply meaningful to the client, and helps them create a more satisfying, if ever changing, life balance – by making choices that resonate better with their own values. The coach also observes areas the client avoids or fears, and can help them appreciate and learn from even these areas of their life.

This cornerstone helps the coach guard against trying to solve the client's *specific* problems. Instead, the coach enlarges the client's self-awareness and capabilities, and offers encouragement and accountability as the client designs their own new solutions .

## The 4<sup>th</sup> Cornerstone: ***Evoke Transformation***

Clients want to apply their learning to practical matters, but in doing so they also break old habits and learn new ones, transforming into stronger, more satisfied and resourceful people in *all* areas of life.

As the coach poses open and truly curious questions to reveal new perspectives, the client can safely explore, to discover invigorating new options and responses not previously accessible to him or her.

Transformation depends not just on the coach, who evokes, but on the client (the first cornerstone): the creative, resourceful and whole client, who finds and chooses new ways of being in the world.

The co-active coach stands within all four of these cornerstones at all times when coaching. This is the “what” of coaching.

The “how” is described by the **three principles**, three approaches used separately or in combination, to help the client reflect, experiment, learn and move into action:

***Fulfillment***

***Balance***

***Process***

---

### The Principle of ***Fulfillment***

Fulfillment is the joy of living a life of one's own choosing – living with actions and responses congruent with one's deepest values.

The coach may use Fulfillment coaching when they notice strong emotions under the surface, indicating that core values are being offended. The coach helps the client develop their own vocabulary of language or metaphor, which allow them to understand everyday life in the context of their own unique purpose and values.

The client learns to see values dissonance as a resource; energy formerly wasted in denial or anger can now be applied to make desired changes and improve daily life. In this way, even before problems disappear, clients can become more satisfied people.

### The Principle of ***Balance***

The coach may use Balance coaching when they notice stuckness in words like "must, can't, have to, should." And when the client does not draw clear distinctions between facts and perspectives, Balance coaching helps by making perspectives visible and returning them to choice. Co-Active teaches Balance as a verb, and develops the client's skill of continual re-balancing to respect their core values.

Balance coaching helps the client recognise and enjoy the diverse aspects of their life as parts of a whole, not incompatible competing demands. Where they once felt threatened or overwhelmed, the client starts to adjust naturally whenever they see imbalances developing that do not support their own values.

The coach helps by raising awareness of any habitual stance that keeps a client in behaviours that frustrate or harm them, encouraging them to discover their own alternative perspectives and co-designing useful new experiments, for which they will be held accountable by the coach.

### The Principle of *Process*

Clients who cannot experience life in real time are missing critical lessons and growth opportunities. Situations that might lead a coach to suggest a Process coaching approach include: rationalisation, talking about emotions rather than feeling them; avoiding key experiences, downplaying their importance (ex: not wanting to celebrate success, or denying anger, fear or disappointment).

Process coaching slows the client down long enough to see what they are avoiding, and really feel it. The coach provides guidance and a safe place for the client to experience strong, difficult emotions such as joy, longing, pride, fear and rage, so they can again add these to their range of potential emotions, to use and learn from them. This speeds up coaching, by giving the client and coach access to more accurate internal information and intuition.

By giving the client access to more of their own experience, clients learn to coach themselves, which accelerates their learning and creates new resources for dealing with problems and relationships.

In addition, the **five contexts** of the model provide different perspectives, or windows, through which the coach may decide how to intervene (or not) during a session. The coach moves in and out of these and they work together fluidly during any single session:

***Curiosity    Listening    Intuition    Self-Management***  
***'Deepen the Learning / Forward the Action'***

---

### Coaching through *Curiosity*

This is not "didactic questioning," in which leading questions set up a learning scenario; even if the coach has an idea of where a question could lead, she holds it very loosely, waiting to see and follow where the client goes. Recognising the client as the expert, the coach asks questions to surface what the client knows, guesses, and feels.

This honest curiosity is a gift to clients - the coach directs intense energy on being with and knowing the client, helping the client also to value and be interested in his own inner workings.

### Coaching through *Listening*

The coach listens to body language, tone, breathing, pacing, and what is, and is not, said. While the client stays in the "now", the coach listens deeply and broadly, holding the client's agenda, aware of the client's values, their past and their future goals. She listens for and surfaces the "voices" of the client to inform their work together.

In parallel, the coach is aware of her own distracting thoughts, ideas and voices, and sets these aside in order to be fully present. By listening intently and sharing observations, the coach teaches the client to listen to their own emotions, body signals, intuitions.



## Coaching through *Intuition*

Intuition is a deep way of knowing that operates faster than logical thought, integrating information gathered through listening and feeling. It suggests to the coach where to go next: when to pose questions, where there is dissonance, how to challenge, and when to be silent and wait. However, unlike logical thinking, it can be rather difficult to interpret – so the coach brings it into the session openly, immediately, asking the coachee to help interpret it (since the coachee is the expert in their own life). This brings the speed of intuition into the service of the client without the false steps of the coach's interpretations. By modeling this fearless and reasonable use of intuition, the coach teaches the client to listen for and trust their own intuitions.

## Coaching through deliberate cycles of *Deepen the Learning / Forward the Action*

This is a kind of dance, informed by intuition, which the coach judiciously guides. One client may more easily spend time in deep reflective learning, another in practical active learning, and the same is true of each coach. Both of these bring growth, and both are needed. They operate best in a cycle, the one informing the other, and the coach works to keep a balance between them.

New client “action” brings new evidence to inform the “deepen” phase of learning. On the other hand, the slower “deepening the learning” creates rich, broad learning, which impacts the client's whole life the most when it is put into use by “forwarding the action”. So Balance coaching may end with concrete action items, and Process coaching may not produce anything immediately tangible, but both feed into the learning cycle in important ways.

## Coaching through *Self-Management*

This is a coaching practice that goes on quietly in the background, as an expression of the coach's commitment to put the client's whole person first. The coach notices her own distractions - such as opinions, assumptions and inner voices - and simply redirects her attention back onto the client. If she detects an assumption, she can defuse it by asking the client to confirm it. If something important comes up for the coach, she can park it (for example, a hint that there is an ethical situation to consider), to be handled later, so that she can return her attention to the client in this moment. This is a judgement call - should she bring it into the session now or not? Intuition is required to distinguish information useful in the session from distractions.

This is a useful general life skill for all people, and when the coach is transparent about doing this, for example, saying "I'm sorry, I was distracted by the doorbell, would you please repeat that?" she teaches the clients to accept their humanness and work with it unapologetically. In french we say: "être bien dans sa peau."

## The Co-Active Designed Alliance

Co-Active coaching takes place within the safety of the Designed Alliance, a critical aspect of the model. The Alliance builds trust, and makes visible the “co-“ in Co-Active - the intentional collaboration of coach and coachee in shaping the unique coaching sessions needed to advance toward that client's goals.

In its most concrete form, an Alliance is a set of working agreements, designed to make a coaching relationship work. It is unique to that relationship, co-created initially and adjusted over time. The coach may propose some general working agreements at the beginning of the relationship, to model how it works (ex: "is it ok if I challenge you, even when it is uncomfortable?" "Yes, as long as you are polite."). As situations come up, the coach continues to gently but openly re-design the relationship (ex: "When you go silent for a long time I am unsure whether you are thinking or distracted. Is it ok if I ask 'where are you?'"), and she invites the client to do the same.

This design is not only at the overarching level of the relationship but at the detailed level of creating a path through the session. Rather than quietly controlling the flow of the session, the coach invites the client to help shape it ("Where shall we go from here?" "What do you want to do with this metaphor?" "How will you keep this learning alive this week?"). The coach consistently communicates “we are co-creating this coaching experience”.

The designed alliance is a tool that builds trust. It is also a key coaching strategy to teach the client about their own power to design a fulfilling life.

## Coaching Paradigm and Ethics

The ideas and skills of Co-Active coaching are, of course, neither new nor unique. You may have used these skills yourself, or seen them used in a church, a business meeting, a doctor's office. Perhaps that's why coaches are commonly asked: "What makes the work of a coach different from the work of a consultant or a therapist?"

### Paradigm Shift

Participants in coaching, familiar with these other fields, are often surprised by the distinctly *client-centric* coaching paradigm.

For comparison: a consultant (a hired expert) evaluates the client's current state (against pre-set ideas and norms) and recommends actions to realign the situation with these norms. If the consultant remains, to guide implementation, they act as an agent of the sponsor, and report back to the sponsor. Consultants represent "best practices" and give advice... sadly, one frequent outcome is that any unpopular recommendations are framed as belonging only to the consultant, whereby they lose their power to truly help.

By contrast: In ICF-accredited coaching (including Co-Active coaching) the coach does not use a pre-conceived standard of behaviour or belief - it is the client who is the expert on their own life, work and business. The coach offers no advice, but helps the client to build *their own* model of success, and to discover what stands in the way of this success. The client becomes more self-aware, and creates their own norms. The coach offers perspectives and accountability along the way, but *responsibility for designing and executing actions, and ultimately responsibility for success, failure and learning, remain with the client alone.*

Each coachee sets their own goals, moves at their own pace. A coach measures progress only against the coachee's values & satisfaction.

## Coaching is Not Therapy

Many coaches include this phrase in their client agreements, as do I, though its meaning may be obscure to a new client.

Some therapists may use a coaching model, but the traditional illness model of therapy places the therapist in a more parent-like role, where they guide and direct the client because the client is deficient in ability to do so safely, at least for now. Traditional therapy comes from a medical paradigm, which assumes "patients" are "broken", incapable of moving forward on their own, in need of "help". This help may include re-examining past experiences and remedial homework assignments (neither of which is part of the coaching method). Once the client is deemed functionally "normal," therapy ends - a judgement call, made or approved by the therapist.

This therapist-directed method may be needed by some people, some of the time, but many do not need such directed interventions.

In contrast: coaching assumes the client has, or can get, what's needed for a healthy, satisfying life. She helps create new experiences and teaches tools the client can use to create this desired life. The coach works, not to bring the client to "normalcy," but to excellence, to help the client discover and amplify their own unique brilliance. There is no "normal" outcome in coaching - only ever more awe-inspiring clients. Normally, it is the client who ends the coaching relationship: as long as coachees are actively growing, coaching may continue.

Deeply "stuck" coachees are another matter - coaches need to be aware of clues suggesting a client belongs to the minority who will benefit from therapy; clients who need to get unstuck in a way that the coach cannot accomplish with coaching tools. Coaching may still proceed in conjunction with therapy, with the therapist's knowledge, or might halt, to continue again afterwards.

## Ethics

Coaches, like other professionals, need to know and declare the boundaries of their professional practice, so they can distinguish situations where clients are more appropriately served by other professionals. ICF coaches in particular agree to a code of ethics<sup>6</sup> governing conduct, including confidentiality and finances.

---

<sup>6</sup> The ICF Standards of Ethical Conduct may be found at <http://www.coachfederation.org/ethics>

Thank-you for your interest! I hope this summary has brought you some new and useful ideas.

*Deborah Hartmann Preuss*

Karlsruhe, Germany, 2013

<http://abiggerga.me>



## a bigger game

***An invitation for you:***

*As you go about your work, I invite you to get curious about your peers and clients: their passions, their dreams and what's holding them back from reaching them.*

*Ask and really listen. I wonder what will happen to your interactions, as you start to frame each individual as the expert in their own life, work, needs and methods?*

*Stay Curious!*

## Still Curious? Learn More...

### *Read more about coaching on the ICF site:*

Benefits of coaching:

<http://www.coachfederation.org/find-a-coach/benefits-of-coaching/>

The coaching paradigm (core competencies):

<http://www.coachfederation.org/icfcredentials/core-competencies/>

Research repository:

<http://www.coachfederation.org/icf-research/icf-research-portal/>

### *Add coaching skills to your toolkit:*

The web abounds with articles on applying basic coaching skills to leadership, management and teamwork.

For something more orderly and coherent, pick up the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Co-Active coaching text that is footnoted at the start of this article (available in paper and kindle editions).

If you (like me) prefer to learn by doing, then invest in the richly interactive “Co-Active Coaching Fundamentals” workshop, offered worldwide by highly trained, practicing coaches. Each workshop provides three full days of practicing new skills!

### *Find a coach:*

Use the “Find a Coach” search at [www.thecoaches.com](http://www.thecoaches.com) to identify coaches who speaks your language, in your price range. You can apply a regional filter, but you should remember that most Co-Active coaching is done on the phone, so location need not be your primary search criterion. Do ask for a free sample session!

### *Become a coach:*

The ICF evaluates and credentials diverse programs worldwide:

<http://www.coachfederation.org/icfcredentials/program-search/>