

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification



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With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

[The Future Coach Podcast with Kara Loewentheil](#)

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If you're thinking about becoming a coach, you've probably wondered, do I need a certification? And if so, what certification should I get? You may have done some searching. You may have found some options. Some of them might have had impressive sounding names attached to universities you recognize. Some of them have acronyms that look like they mean something official. Some of them might be led by coaches you've heard of, and you're probably still not sure what you're actually looking for.

So that is what today's episode is about. Why you need a certification and what kind of certification is best. Now, obviously, I'm biased because I have a certification, but I promise this episode is going to walk you through how to think about certifications as a category, what to look for, and what kinds of questions to be looking for answers to when you are picking one. So let's get into it.

Welcome to *The Future Coach*, the podcast for independent coaches, in-house coaches, and the coach curious. I'm your host Kara Loewentheil, founder of The Socratic Coaching Academy. If you want to chart a new path, uplevel your skills, and build a successful career around coaching, you're in the right place. Let's go.

So the obvious first question is, do I even need a certification? Life coaching is not currently licensed by any state in the US, which means that legally, no, you don't need a certification. Legally, you can just call yourself a life coach. It is an unregulated term. That being said, I really don't recommend that. Now, I am someone who really believes that you are your own first and best client, that what you learn by really being present with your own thinking, practicing what you preach, practicing what you teach is all really valuable training and important. But it is not enough to base an entire coaching practice on, right, because not everybody is like you.

And everything you figure out the hard way is one thing, but there's a lot that you can learn from people who have studied this, have put together a methodology, have a systematic, systemic approach, know how the brain

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

works, understand the cognitive science behind it. So I think that it's important to get a certification. It is not just about the credential, although I think that most clients don't necessarily care where you got certified, but they definitely care if you're a certified coach.

I think most people, if they were thinking about hiring someone and that person, and they asked, like, "Oh, what's your training?" And that person just said, "Nothing," they'd have second thoughts. But more importantly, I think it's important to be educated and have a systematic proven approach when you're coaching a client. So your personal experience, absolutely important, relevant. One of the things I love about coaching is that you can share that experience with your clients. You don't have the same rules that therapists have about what they're allowed to disclose or talking about their personal lives.

So your personal experience is important, but again, it's not a substitute for a researched, organized, systemic method. And so I think it's really important to go through a certification to learn how to coach people who have different brains from you. And honestly, you're going to learn how to coach yourself better as well. But you might be really insightful in one area. You could be really insightful about thought patterns, but personally be totally ignoring your emotions, and so you would have no somatic tools to offer a client. Or you might know how to work with someone who's got a similar brain to you, but you're neurotypical, and then you're not going to know how to work with neurodivergent clients.

There are a lot of things that a coaching certification offers, a good coaching certification. We're going to talk about how to know what is a good coaching certification. But assuming that we're talking about a high quality, high-level certification, a certification is going to teach you a method and a system, so you are not just going to be kind of showing up each time to chat about the person's life and see what advice you can offer. Right? A good coaching certification is going to train you in a method that you can use with every client to deal with any issue.

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

It is going to give you that framework, that structure, that understanding of the mind, the body, and what tools will specifically work because it's very different to coach yourself to an insight and make a change versus be able to teach someone else how to do it. When they've got a different brain, they have different thoughts that work for them, their body responds differently. Those are things that you can't just bridge with your personal experience. You really need the structure and rigor of a coaching certification.

And ideally, your coaching certification is also including feedback on your coaching. No matter how good you are at coaching, and some people are naturally talented at it like anything else, raw talent is not the same as refined, skilled, practiced talent, right? And so getting the feedback that helps you refine, that helps you build your skills, that points out your blind spots, that is also really, really valuable. Plus, in a coaching certification, you meet other coaches.

One of the things about being a coach, well, really one of the things about going to any kind of continuing education or professional school, is that part of the benefit is you make a network, right? You meet colleagues and peers, and that is an important part of your community as a practitioner, whether you're a doctor or a lawyer, anything else. And the same is true of being a coach. Some of my best friends, the people who have been the biggest support to me over the last 10 years of my business, the people who are the reason that I haven't lost my mind and run for the hills, I met in my initial coach certification.

So I am highly in favor of getting a coach certification, but you want to get the right kind of coach certification. So, first, I want to talk about the different types of coaching certification programs, and then in the second half of the episode, we're going to talk about what I think are the most important things to be looking for.

So, when we're talking about different kinds of coach certifications, I'm thinking of them in kind of three main categories. The first one are

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

university-based programs. So university-based certifications are certificates. These are programs that are affiliated with academic institutions, like graduate certificates or something like that. And they bring academic rigor and research to coaching. They tend to be more grounded in theory, very strong on research, and they, you know, are taken seriously in environments that are very formal, that have a high stress on institutional credentials. These can be weaker on practice because there's a significant difference between knowing the theory of coaching and being able to coach.

And university programs structurally can't really offer the same flexibility and dynamism that you get when a coach is sharing their own experience. When a coach who's lived through something helps a client navigate a version of that same territory, there's a particular kind of recognition and modeling that happens there. The client is not just receiving information, they're seeing proof that the thinking they need to do is actually possible for a real person. When you are learning it all in an academic environment, you are not really in touch with that living edge of coaching, I think. And the people teaching you aren't necessarily people who have worked through those issues themselves.

I think one of the reasons that I am so effective as a coach and as a coach instructor is that I have done all the work on myself that I'm teaching my students to do on themselves and with other people. When it's your academic field of research, that's not really the same thing. Patriarchal institutions, like major universities, have never accepted lived experience as valid evidence. That's why it's often missing from academic curricula. I mean, I remember, I went to Harvard Law School, and it was shocking how much we were supposed to leave real life at the door. The standards of those institutions are just not built to recognize it.

I also think that these institutions tend to lack the socialization lens that I believe is really important and an understanding of how the messages that clients have absorbed because of their identities and social programming

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

shapes the way that they think, and that's what coaching is trying to change. So academic programs that are really based on psychology might be strong at the individual level but less attentive to social and cultural forces that I think go really unrecognized in most mainstream psychology and coaching. And if they are going to talk about socialization, it's going to be probably more theoretical, structural analysis as an intellectual framework, which is not the same as understanding how socialization is actually impacting your client's brain during a session.

So I really believe like the cutting edge of coaching intersectionally, understanding how socialization impacts people's brains and how to help them change it is not happening in universities. It's really being developed in the practice of coaches who are doing this work with clients.

So, that being said, I think university credentials are a good fit if you want to teach in these kinds of programs yourself, right? If you want to be a professor or an adjunct or whatever in a university coaching certification, then that's an important credential probably. Or if your coaching inside a really large organization where, like I said, that's very formal, where university affiliation really matters to the institution. The one caution I want to give in addition to everything I just said, is that you have to look at also what is drawing you to that, right? I'm not saying it's never a good idea.

Like I just said, there are people for whom it is a good idea. If you're socialized as a woman, we're trained to treat institutional markers of legitimacy as the thing that gives us permission to take up space or be taken seriously. And so a university credential might feel like it's going to do that for you, right? Like it's going to help other people respect your decision more. And I definitely went through that process when I was thinking about leaving my career. I was running a think tank at Columbia Law School. I was, had been a federal appeals court clerk. I'd been a reproductive rights litigator. I'd had this very prestigious legal career, and I definitely at first was like, okay, well, if I want to be a coach, then I need to get like a

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

Columbia certificate in coaching or something because then other people will take it seriously.

But the truth is, when you make decisions based on invoking external authority to try to manage other people's thoughts, you're not actually managing your mind. And your number one responsibility as a coach is to be the person that you're trying to help your clients become as well. Like, you have to go first. So if there's an academic program that really speaks to you or there's a really specific reason that you would need that credential, it can absolutely be a good fit. But if you're doing it because you think it will make other people take you seriously, I don't love that as a reason for doing anything.

Okay, so that's bucket one. Bucket two is ICF credentials. So that is programs accredited by the International Coaching Federation, which is the closest thing that the coaching industry has to a like self-regulating community body. So an ICF accreditation just tells you that a program met a set of standards that the ICF established. It doesn't tell you whether the coach who completed it is actually a good coach. A lot of different certifications have this accreditation.

The thing about this is that all industries start out with loose standards and over time, certain organizations in those industries kind of appoint themselves as governing bodies and begin setting the rules for what the field should look like. And that's not inherently bad. I think industries can totally benefit from self-regulation, but it also means an ICF credential is just a signal of one organization's set of standards that it came up with. It's not like a government issued license, it's not a guarantee of coaching competence, whatever.

If you're building a private practice, I really don't believe that the ICF credential matters. My experience is that clients don't research coaching credentials before they hire a coach. Like I said, I think people want to know that you're certified, right, that you did something, that you've been

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

trained, but they're not up on the ins and outs of different credentialing. Clients hire coaches who speak to them in a way that resonates, who seem to understand their situation, who seem to project confidence in their ability to help, who've taught them something useful. People hire you because what you've said or taught them has helped them and they want more. I have coached thousands of people, and literally no one has ever asked me if I was ICF certified. So I do think a certification is important, but I do not think that ICF accreditation is important.

The third bucket is independent certification programs. So that's just programs built by coaches outside the university, outside the ICF system. This is where you're going to find, quite honestly, the highest variance in the entire industry. Like the worst programs in this category can be genuinely a waste of money, like a weekend workshop and a digital certificate is not enough to make you a coach.

But this is also where I believe the most innovative, specific, and real-world tested training is happening. I think the best programs in this category are more practical, more thorough, and more transformative than anything in the other two buckets because they are built from the inside out by people who coach for a living, who are teaching what they think needs to be taught. Right? Part of the problem with needing a training to be accredited by one group or another is that means that the person creating the training doesn't get to create the training based on what they think is really important, what they think people really need, how long they think people really need to learn, how much practice they think people really need. It just has to match these standards that a group of people who self-appointed basically came up with.

So I think that the programs that are in this independent coaching bucket, like I said, greatest variance, some of them are not great, but many of them are very good, and they can be more customized to what the coach believes is the most helpful structure, format, content, et cetera, to train people in their work.

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

But the range in quality does mean you got to ask questions. So that's what the second half of this episode is going to be about. I'm going to tell you what I think are the important things to be looking for in a coaching certification. So stay with me.

Okay, welcome back. So let's talk about what the most important questions to ask about a certification program are. I'm going to tell you what I think they are and why they matter. Spoiler alert, these are obviously the things I think are important. So of course, our certification does them, but I built my certification the way I did because I think these are the most important questions, right? And I would say about 20% of the people we certify at the Socratic Coaching Academy are actually people who already have coaching certifications. Some of them have master coach certifications from other places, and they still come and get certified with us because they know that we are operating at this higher, more rigorous, more transformative standard. So all that is to say, I think that these elements that I've identified are really important, and they highlight the things that I have put together from my perspective on the coaching field after doing this for a decade.

So question one is, does this teach a specific, repeatable method that has been tested with real clients and produces measurable results? So a lot of certifications are teaching you kind of a grab bag of tools, and that is different from a method. A tool is not a method. A group of tools do not constitute themselves into a method. It's like a bunch of Legos, they don't build themselves into a house. A method is a coherent framework. It is a way of understanding what's happening in a client's mind. It's a sequence of steps for intervening, and it's a way of knowing whether what you did is actually working. When you have a method, you know what you're doing and why.

When you do not, you are improvising based on instinct, and your results depend entirely on your instinct that day or on what tool comes to mind from the grab bag. Good coaching should not be a mood or a random

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

guess. It should be a model you can repeat. And it needs to be a model that works even when things get complicated. So a model that only works on a certain kind of person or a certain kind of life experience or a neurotypical brain or only works if there's no resistance or difficulty, that's not enough to carry you through a successful coaching career.

Now, not all coaches are like me and have actually had their work included in double blind peer reviewed studies and published in national medical journals. Like, I'm not saying that has to be the standard. We have researchers studying our certification for academic publication, and not everyone's going to be able to say that, of course. But you should still be able to tell how a certification will help you handle a diverse reality of clients and what the method is and what it's based on that's been proven to work.

Second question to ask, does this certification teach you how to self-assess and keep improving after the program ends? So getting certified is not the end of your development as a coach. It is the beginning of the part where you start coaching people and refining and building your skills, which you're going to continue doing for your whole life.

So a program that gives you a set of tools and then sends you out in the world without a process for evaluating your own coaching would be like a culinary school that teaches you a set of recipes but never teaches you to taste and adjust seasoning for new ingredients, right? Or doesn't teach you how to figure out what's going wrong if your soufflé collapses. The best programs build in a framework for continual self-assessment. You should know after every session whether your coaching was actually effective. You should have a way of diagnosing what went wrong when a session goes sideways. You should have the skills to coach yourself through the inevitable moments of doubt, frustration, and second guessing that come with being a new coach.

This is something a lot of programs do not address because it requires them to acknowledge that what makes a good coach is more than just the

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

grab bag of tools, that you need to be able to approach coaching confidently and handle with emotional maturity, the self-evaluation that's required to improve. A program that is serious about producing excellent coaches will have a process for this.

Question three, and this is related, does the certification teach you how to address what's happening in your head as a coach, not just your clients? Most certification programs, maybe all of them other than ours, focus almost entirely on the client's inner experience. Very few address the coach's inner experience, but it is crucial because what determines how well you show up to coach, your own mind. When you're new to coaching, you have to manage your mind about your coaching and your new identity of being a coach because otherwise you will be constantly triggered by a client seeming to zone out or seeming upset about something you said or getting emotional or someone saying no to working with you.

Your brain is going to create a lot of drama about that. You need to have tools to deal with it. Coaching is a relational experience. So what's happening in your internal state as the coach affects what is available to you in the room or on the Zoom with a client. The most sophisticated approach to coach training recognizes that the coach is not part of the background. They're not part of the wallpaper, right? The coach is a person, and their psychology is part of the dynamic. So a program that takes this seriously should be giving you tools for coaching yourself in real time and coaching yourself to show up confidently. It should be treating the coach's mindset as part of the curriculum, not like an afterthought or a thing that's not even thought of at all.

All right, question four. Does the certification teach you to work with the mind and the body, and is that well-balanced? So most certification programs make a choice because everybody wants to have the one thing they're known for. So some of them go deep on cognitive tools, and they barely mention somatics, and some of them center intuition and body-based work, but then they leave coaches without the analytical framework

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

to actually lead a client through a targeted change process or diagnose what's going wrong if that's not working. If you focus too much on cognition without the body, it can make sense theoretically, but your clients are going to get stuck, and they won't be able to actually change their thinking.

They're going to be using coaching to try to get away from their feelings, and nothing will really come of it because they're avoiding their emotions, and their nervous systems are activated, and so they actually can't create new neural pathways. But on the other side, some certifications focus too much on somatics as if just doing whatever feels calming or good or "quote-unquote regulated" is an effective way to live your life. A lot of growth feels uncomfortable, and just only doing what feels easeful or feels aligned is going to keep you playing small, and it's not going to be helpful when something dramatic or a crisis happens. You can't just let the body lead with no brain involvement. And if you keep thinking the same thoughts that are causing the suffering or the emotional distress, your body will keep responding to them.

So the best you can do is like discharge that stress each time through somatics, but then it just gets created all over again. The brain and body operate in constant relationship and conversation with each other, and the best coach training reflects that. So you need to be getting real depth in cognitive tools and somatic tools, and you need to be learning how they work together. So you want to ask specifically how the curriculum addresses that and make sure it's not just like a single lecture on breath work or something, nor do you want to be in a somatic-based certification that doesn't even talk about the brain or the mind or cognitive reframing.

Okay, question five. Does the method have a real-world intersectional approach? So I believe this is what separates good coaching from genuinely transformative coaching. And there are two levels to this. It's understanding the socialization that shapes people's brains, and then it's coaching on people's lives within the context of those systems. So a client who can't stop apologizing to everyone all the time, it's not just a personal

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

quirk, right? It's likely a woman who has navigated decades of conditioning about what women are supposed to sound like and how she should not take up space and how she should constantly second-guess herself. A client who feels guilt every time she goes to work is not just operating based on her personal family system, it's also all the messages she's gotten about motherhood.

So a coach who doesn't see that socialization is going to be trying to help a client change an individual thought while leaving the entire belief system that keeps generating that thought completely intact. The best programs teach you how to meet a client in their actual reality. So that means understanding how social, political, and cultural systems shape their inner life. And it means knowing how to hold space for what is real about a client's circumstances while still holding the vision for what is possible for them. And that's the second piece of this, right? It's not just understanding how socialization impacts the brain, it's understanding how to coach people who are living in a real world that has some constraints in it, has systems that affect them without telling them that it's all just their thoughts, right, and without telling them that because the system's bigger than them, they can't have the life they want.

Naming the systemic forces shaping a client's thinking is necessary, but it's not sufficient on its own. So the most skilled coaches can hold both simultaneously. This is real, and you still get to create a meaningful, empowered life. And this is a lens on both how the brain works, what the brain absorbs, and also how to coach the brain in a real world that most coaching certifications do not even mention or talk about. This is something that like wasn't being discussed in the coaching world when I became a coach. This is what I have been working on for 10 years. And often when I get already certified coaches coming through our certification, this is one of the things that they flag as being the game changer for them. Understanding why people think the way they do, how that socialization impacts them, and then how to acknowledge that and take account of it and

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

take account of real-world systems without defaulting to disempowering them.

Okay, so now I've got one bonus one because the other five I really believe are like as close to objective as you can get. Everybody's thoughts are optional, but I really feel that a coach really believe that a coach really is not effective without those five things and that a coach training that doesn't have those things is doing you a disservice. This sixth one is like a little more reasonable people can disagree. So that's why I'm calling it a bonus. This is my personal philosophy, but I do think it's important for you to think about for yourself what kind of coach you want to be, right? And what training is appropriate.

So I'm offering this as something worth asking about. It's not disqualifying, but it's something to think about. My belief based on a decade of coaching thousands of women is that the most powerful coaching is deeply collaborative. The coach's job is to help the client access their own knowledge about themselves, their own values, their own sense of what they want, and build genuine trust in that. So a client who leaves coaching having developed real self-authority has been more fundamentally transformed than one who has just learned to apply a specific tool. And traditional coaching is often operated on an authority model where the coach directs and the client defers.

And you can get short-term results that way. But for people who have spent their lives having their self-knowledge dismissed and their judgment questioned and overriding their instincts, right, which is a lot of women and other marginalized people, that kind of coach is the guru model can really inadvertently replicate the dynamic that they need to heal from.

A collaborative approach shows up in how a program teaches goal setting, how it frames the coach's role, and whether it encourages coaches to really question assumptions behind the client's goals and how it teaches coaches to give clients say and buy-in into the process and into the goals and the

## 5: How to Evaluate a Coaching Certification

techniques. So even if it's not a deal breaker for you, it is important to understand a program's philosophy about the coaching relationship. That's going to tell you a lot about what kind of coach it will train you to be.

So now you know what I think is important in a coaching certification. Needless to say, obviously, the Socratic coaching method takes all of this into account. Our coaching method and our certification is based on four pillars: cognitive psychology that's grounded in radical inquiry, systems-based analysis that produces reality-aware coaches, collaborative, non-hierarchical coaching, and the somatics and brain balance. Those are my beliefs about what's most important in a coaching certification.

You are going to develop your own, but I encourage you to think about not just what kind of coach you want to be in terms of, like, business coach or a parenting coach or whatever, when you're picking a certification, but really what kind of coach do you want to be in terms of the philosophy behind the way you coach, the evidence base that you're coaching on, the method and the system that you want to have as the spine of your coaching. These are all things that are equally if not more important than a certification that is in a specific niche because my belief is you can always niche down, but you can't backfill not having a deep, solid base in method and philosophy. I should probably do a whole episode about whether or not you need a niche.

So we can talk about that another time. For now, I hope that these questions helped you think about what you're looking for in a certification because I know so many of you would make amazing coaches, and I want you to go get certified and bring what you've got to the world. I'll talk to you next time.