

# The 6 Whats Coaching Model: A Practical Guide to Structuring Professional Coaching Conversations

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## Abstract

Coaching practice, which occurs largely in organizational contexts, has traditionally been seen as forward-looking dialogue that moves clients from intentions to goal attainment. Extensive research can be found attesting to the value of coaching experiences for personal and professional development. Yet, with exponential growth in this field, what is represented as coaching may take a wide variety of forms, thereby obscuring and problematizing what the nature of professional coaching is, especially as articulated by professional coaching organizations. As well, with such diversity in coaching approaches, how can organizations fully appreciate what they are inviting into their environment when they choose to employ coaching as an HRD strategy? The *6 whats model* aims to recenter awareness on the essential elements of a coaching conversation in order that the coherence of coaching practice is more consistent and that practice boundaries for this relatively new profession can be reaffirmed. It builds upon historical traditions within the coaching field and articulates the core elements of coaching conversations that are required so that coaching relationships remain within their legitimate domain of professional endeavor.

**Keywords:** coaching, process model, executive coaching, coaching structure, goal-centered coaching

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 A Need for Clarification

Recent data indicate that roughly 72% of coaching relationships either occur in organizations or relate to work and career matters (International Coaching Federation [ICF], 2020). Indicators of the prevalence of coaching in organizations are also reflected in its widespread use as a human resource development (HRD) strategy and in the growth of interest in creating coaching cultures (Knowles, 2022; Maltbia, Marsick & Ghosh, 2014; Rajasinghe & Allen, 2020). Outcome research on coaching provides sound rationale for organizational investments in this HRD strategy, with a number of meta-analyses pointing toward its benefits for performance and learning improvements (Burt & Talati, 2017; De Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma, & Van Vianen, 2013; Wang, Lai, & McDowall, 2022). Though such evidence is encouraging, the wide variety of coaching approaches represented in the literature raises significant concern about exactly what is meant by a coaching experience and thus what the independent variable is in different outcome studies. It would seem that continued corporate support for coaching requires that a coherent model of coaching be articulated so as to appreciate exactly what is fostering performance, learning and other benefits in the context of the sponsoring organization.

In truth, the field of coaching has been seriously challenged in presenting a coherent face that defines its methods and boundaries, as well as distinguishing itself from such other development processes as training, consulting, or counseling (Aboujaoude, 2020; Gavin, 2022; Greif, Möller, Scholl, Passmore, & Müller, 2022; Passmore & Sinclair, 2020; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). Variations in how coaching unfolds in practice continue to proliferate. Brock's (2008, 2014) seminal work on the history of coaching lends credence to an impression that 'coaching is what coaches do.' Detailed classifications of theoretical traditions and genres in coaching suggest a Tower of Babel with 156 distinct categories having been identified (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014; Bachkirova, Cox, & Clutterbuck, 2018).

Prominent coaching schools and professional coaching associations play a major role in maintaining a sense of

coherence about what coaching is and what it is not (ICF, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). On the other hand, organizations offering continuing education for professional coaches may unintentionally muddy the waters by promoting new trends and methods that sometimes appear far afield from what professional coaching associations identify as the legitimate domain of coaching (Coaches Rising, 2023; World Business and Executive Coaching Summit, 2023).

### *1.2 Foundational Elements of a Coaching Conversation*

Over the brief history of the coaching field, there have been several prominent models that made explicit the intentions of coaching. Arguably the best known of these was first articulated in the 1980s by Graham Alexander, Alan Fine, and Sir John Whitmore (Whitmore, 2017), founding figures in the coaching field. They termed their model GROW, which is an acronym for four concepts that guide coaches' interventions:

- Goal - What is the client striving for in their work in coaching?
- Current Reality - How does the client describe the current status of experiences, life circumstances and behaviors relevant to their goal?
- Obstacles (or Options) - What seems to stand in the way of goal attainment for the client (obstacles) and what are the different ways of addressing them (options)?
- Way forward (or Will) - What will the client do to address the obstacles and move toward the goal?

Since the initial presentation of the GROW model, a number of similar models have sprung up, mostly captured in acronyms and circling around similar elements of a coaching process. Examples include CLEAR (Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action, and Review) and OSCAR (Outcome, Situation, Choices, Actions, and Review), among others. These models not only bear likeness, but they also conform to what most coaching associations identify as essential inquiries in the work with coaching clients (ICF, 2024a, 2024b). Models of this nature are typically incorporated as core structures in the formation of professional coaches by training entities accredited by global coaching associations.

### *1.3 Providing Clearer Guidance*

The prevalent understanding of coaching describes a goal-focused conversation where coach and client collaborate to develop a client's agenda into some form of action plan that will purposefully guide the client toward achieving their desired outcome (Clutterbuck, 2013; Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017; Grant, 2006, 2012a, 2012b; Ives & Cox, 2012; Jarosz, 2016). As such, the conversation is intentionally structured by coaches to guide the process from clients' concerns to actionable plans for goal realization. While models like GROW (Whitmore, 2017) suggest a structure, we believe they insufficiently illuminate the pathway of coaching conversations. Such models provide useful reminders, but they fail to adequately articulate the requisite elements of a coaching dialogue. In contrast, when coaching associations such as the ICF detail critical elements of a coach's interventions (ICF, 2024c), the sheer volume of necessary description involving technical and intricate distinctions can be dizzyingly complicated to comprehend even for highly experienced coaches.

The model presented in this work represents a middle ground between the brevity of acronyms and the exceptionally well-detailed descriptions such as those offered by the ICF (2024c). Its purpose is to create clarity both for consumers so they understand exactly what a coaching experience represents and for coaches so they can continually monitor their behaviors to remain true to what coaching is without trespassing the boundaries of other professions, notably psychotherapy and consulting.

The *6 whats model* was developed over the past two decades in the training of professional coaches as a straightforward rubric offering a clear structure enabling coaches to intervene in purposive and timely ways to foster clients' goal attainment. It has not only enabled novice coaches to assess in real-time whether they are appropriately guiding the conversation such that each point of focus is robustly represented in the dialogue, but it has also allowed clients to learn the structure of a coaching experience so they can become increasingly autonomous in coaching themselves when confronted with novel work and life challenges. Principles and practices underlying this model strongly adhere to those generally espoused within the coaching profession (Cox, 2013; Grant, 2012a; ICF, 2024c; Ives & Cox, 2012; Jarosz, 2016).

## **2. Details of the 6 Whats**

The model as seen in Figure 1 depicts the structure of a single session though it may also be viewed as a meta-perspective of a more extended coaching relationship. In its intention to capture the main elements of a session's structure, some parts are not included, for instance, welcoming the client at the outset and ending the session.

Each *what* represents a significant area of focus in a coaching session. Even though the *whats* are sequenced according to where they are likely to occur as a session advances, the model is not necessarily linear. There may be recursive or oscillating movements among the *whats*. For instance, as clients disclose new details, they may reconsider comments stated earlier in the session. Each *what* is framed as an area of exploration, rather than a single question to be answered.

### 2.1 First What—What's the Topic?

Following an appropriate welcome, the first order of business in any coaching session is for coaches to explore the client's intention for the session; this is what is meant by the term topic. Coaching clients are encouraged to arrive at each session with a concern, interest, agenda, or problem they want to address. Usually, the focus that a client identifies represents a facet of the client's overarching objective for the coaching relationship (Gavin, 2022). For example, a client may begin with an intention to find ways to discuss promotion opportunities with management, while their broader coaching objective may be to become more assertive at work. Coaches remain mindful of the alignment of each session's coaching topic with the overarching coaching objective to ensure coherence within the coaching relationship.

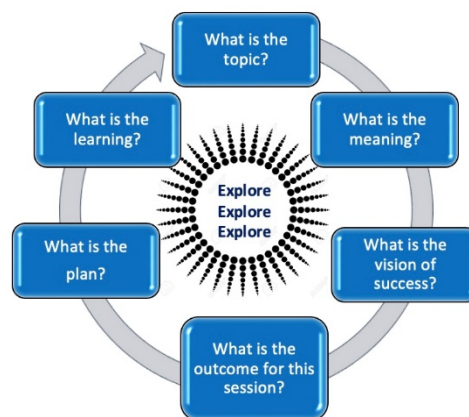


Figure 1. The 6 *Whats Model* for Guiding a Coaching Conversation (Gavin, 2022)

Exploration pertaining to the *first what* includes a determination of whether the client's topic is one that can be appropriately or effectively addressed through coaching. A more complete expression of this simple question might sound like this: "In our time today, what do you wish to explore in order to advance your thoughts and actions?" The intention of this *first what* is to have the client articulate a clear domain for the session's conversation. Following exploratory questioning, the coach might ask the client to use laser language (Gavin, 2022; H. Kimsey-House, K. Kimsey-House, Sandhal, & Whitworth, 2018) to capture the topic in a headline or simple sentence. By doing so, both coach and client will have a mutually understood direction for the conversation. However, before coach and client can reach this point of focus, the coach will likely need to explore the way clients frame their topics. For instance, a client may state the topic as, "I want to look at the obstacles on my path to a more satisfying career." It is easy to imagine a myriad of questions a coach could then ask to identify the client's intention more precisely.

### 2.2 Second What—What's the Meaning (of the Topic)?

Once clients identify their session topic, coaches need to explore the importance or meaning of the topic at this moment in time. Exploration of meaning not only increases awareness of the client's current state but may also surface critical sources of motivation. Coaches guide the conversation toward meaning so clients can access insights about the deeper significance of their topics.

Human beings are meaning-making creatures (Frankl, 1969; Gergen, 2009; Novak, 1993). Exploring meaning and importance moves the conversation beyond linguistics into an existential realm. Coaching goals are neither devised nor pursued as isolated concerns. Issues rooted in the client's current topic are tied to other elements in the person's life. Exploration around the *second what* helps clients pinpoint the location of the topic in their life space (Lewin, 1935) and recognize how it might impact other dimensions of their worlds. Even when topic statements seem transparently evident in their meaning or importance, this question needs to be asked and explored. Oftentimes, asking this question yields clues to the client's motivational base to pursue a particular

goal (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

### 2.3 Third What—What's the Vision (of Success)?

A topic becomes more fully evident as coaches inquire about the client's imagining of goal success. Inquiring about the vision of success guides attention toward the world clients want to create. Moreover, examining a positive future realized through goal attainment often reveals actionable steps. Clients may discover what they need to do to achieve their goals. As well, they may identify the myriad implications that changing one thing has for the rest of their reality. A sample question focused on the vision of success might be as follows: "What would be different about you and your life X months from now should you achieve your goal?"

The purpose of exploration here is to elaborate a picture of what the client desires. The vision statement acts as a beacon that guides goal pursuit and strengthens client determination (Biswas-Diener, 2020; Palmer & Green, 2018; Richter, Zyl, Roll, & Stander, 2021). At this moment in the session, coaches encourage clients to describe a future vision that is both challenging and attainable. Future projections may be located months or years away, but regardless of when that future is projected, the more concrete and comprehensive the vision, the more informative it will be for the client.

### 2.4 Fourth What—What's the Outcome (for this Session)?

Once a future vision has been thoroughly explored, the client will likely have generated ideas about what needs to happen. This *what* identifies desired takeaways from the session. Even when the client's goal requires multiple initiatives, what is the action that is most essential and feasible now? The client needs to start somewhere. What does the client want to achieve in the time remaining in the session? Which aspect of that future vision is the client most ready to address? Occasionally, the topic framed in the *first what* may be concise enough so that all of it can be explored and brought to an actionable plan within a single session.

Coaches need to be mindful of how realistic the session outcome is. As partners in the process, coaches may offer perspectives and help shape achievable takeaways. As well, session outcomes need to be phrased in concrete and measurable ways. In essence, there are two parts to the *fourth what*: First, the identification of a clear objective for the remainder of the session and, second, a determination of what would constitute a measure of the attainment of the session's objective. So, it's not only, "What do you want to leave with?" but also, "What will you have concretely realized or experienced by the end of this session that will tell you that you have it?" Hopefully, the conversation related to the *fourth what* will be completed by mid-session, thereby allowing ample time to create an action plan.

### 2.5 Fifth What—What's the Plan?

By this point in a coaching session, both parties are likely to have a sense of where clients currently are in relation to their goal's attainment. The *fifth what* represents collaborative efforts between coach and client to convert understandings and insights emerging through earlier discussions into actionable steps. Their work in this moment is to identify and design action plans, determine commitment, and cocreate ways in which clients will hold themselves accountable for the actions to which they commit.

Guidance regarding action planning normally incorporates suggestions related to goal difficulty (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017), goal specificity (Bandura, 2001), timing or immediacy (Locke & Latham, 2006), and goal type (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). These aspects of planning have been captured in such acronyms as SMART (Raia, 1965; Doran, 1981) and SuPeRSMART (Donatelle & Kolen Thompson, 2011). In this regard, the *fifth what* is not a single question but rather a series of inquiries intended to create a robust and realistic plan that the client is able and willing to undertake. A potential question focused on the coaching partnership that initiates action planning may sound like this: "How would you like us to work together in this part of our process?" Coaches may be invited to guide the conversation, to capture ideas or to contribute where appropriate. Essential here is the principle that the plan needs to emerge from the client or, at the least, be cocreated with the client (Cox, 2013).

### 2.6 Sixth What—What is the Learning (from the Session)?

Recent revisions to the core coaching competencies by the International Coaching Federation (2024a) brought greater focus to learning outcomes, which would include personal insights, new understandings, and a wider perspective of the goals clients are pursuing. To help anchor new learning and make it more available to clients in future situations, coaches invite clients to voice what they have learned in each session.

Learnings tend to cluster in two categories: Learning pertaining to who the client is and that related to the coaching topic. Unlike action planning, which normally arises in the second half of the session, learning

moments might occur at any moment of a coaching session, representing “lightbulb” moments when clients see something for the first time, or connections are made among issues. As the session draws to a close, the *sixth what* deliberately surfaces and reinforces learnings gained in the work through explicit requests for clients to articulate what they have learned. Moreover, exploration related to the *sixth what* guides the client’s attention to future applications of learnings to relevant contexts and issues.

### 3. Principles of Application for the 6 Whats Model

The *6 whats model* is inherently collaborative. Coaches facilitate a partnered experience that empowers clients to chart their own course toward the goals they identify. They sensitively structure a process wherein clients generate the material for discussion. The model offers a map of a session’s structure and serves to guide coaching explorations from goal identification toward learning and action planning. It acknowledges that coaches will likely assume responsibility for navigating the process, while the client will fully own the agenda. Another awareness is that a client-centered coaching relationship (Gregory & Levy, 2012; Greif et al., 2022) always proceeds in a way and at a rate appropriate to the client’s needs and way of being. This means that adaptations of the model may be beneficial or that a session may only get so far. It is counter to the foundational principles of coaching to preference the structure of a coaching process over the needs of the individual.

This model explicitly addresses the structure of coaching while only implicitly referencing the style or manner of coaching. The International Coaching Federations’ core coaching competencies (ICF, 2024a) provide clear guidance about the way of the coach. It is not the intention of this paper to articulate the coach’s way of being since this has been thoroughly described in numerous other publications (Gavin, 2022; Kimsey-House et al., 2018; Passmore & Sinclair, 2020; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017).

### 4. Some Evidence

A recent study of the types of interventions made by coaches in sessions with their clients lends support for the *6 whats model* while also raising questions (Gavin, Bernardi, Thomas, & Chacra, 2023). The study was a mixed methods investigation of coaches’ verbal behaviors (interventions) in 142 coaching sessions, where most participants were aligned with the International Coaching Federation’s (2024a) coaching methodology. Four general categories of coach interventions were determined: listening, inquiry, influencing, and miscellany. Average percentages for all sessions are indicated in Figure 1.

Inquiries associated with the intentions of the *6 whats* accounted for 53.6% of all inquiries. Coaches inquired about the goal or topic in 5.2% of their interventions (*1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> whats*) and asked about the meaning or importance in 3.8% of verbal expressions (*2<sup>nd</sup> what*). Action design, planning, resources, commitment, and progress matters totaled to 5.3% of their remarks (*5<sup>th</sup> what*), while learning questions were evident in 0.5% of coaches’ interventions (*6<sup>th</sup> what*). Coaches also devoted 2.9% of their input to structuring the process and design of the session itself. Other types of interventions, such as listening and influencing efforts, were also implicated in moving the coaching agenda forward in ways suggested by the *6 whats model*.

Though an emphasis on learning agendas has become more central to coaching over the past decade, the study suggests that these coaches invested relatively little time (0.5%) in such explorations. This seems reminiscent of an earlier coaching philosophy that advocated action planning as the dominant focus of sessions. Current thoughts about the purposes of coaching such as those represented in Stelter’s (2013, 2014, 2018) third generation coaching would place learning in the coaching experience at the core of the process.

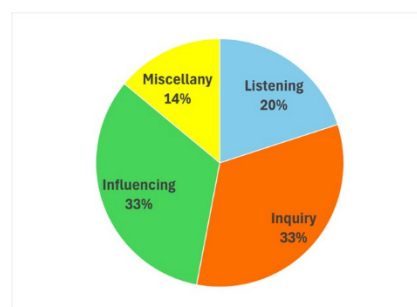


Figure 2. Percentages of four types of coaching interventions in 142 sessions

Another intriguing study result was the negligible attention given to the *third what* (vision of success). The International Coaching Federation's (2024a) core competencies provide little guidance regarding explorations of a vision of success in coaching experiences, even though, in our perspective, they can be central to a coach's understanding of what clients want to achieve through the changes they contemplate. As Passmore and Sinclair (2020, p. 142) state, "Future focus is at the core of the forward-moving philosophy of coaching." Moreover, creating a vision of success is thought to be foundational within the realm of sport coaching (Martens & Vealey, 2023), which represents a root discipline of professional coaching. Commenting from the perspective of complexity theory, Boyatzis's (2008; Boyatzis & Jack, 2018) interest in discovering the 'ideal self' in coaching brings sharp focus to a client's vision of success. Though somewhat afield from coaching, Senge's (1990) considerations of the learning organization place visions of success at the root of his model of change. From a practical perspective, if questions about a future vision are asked mechanistically, the information revealed may not seem overly worthwhile. In contrast, when coaches take time to cocreate rich stories about a future world that clients may realize, the dialogue will likely create broader understanding of client dreams, a greater sense of possibility, and a deeper yearning for its realization.

## 5. Conclusion

Given the rapid growth of the coaching field, the need for remaining true to the inherent nature of coaching conversations seems paramount. The contribution of the *6 whats model* is that it reaffirms the long-standing intentions of the professional coaching world and provides an explicit and practical framework for guiding these conversations so they remain within the legitimate domain of the field.

Currently, coaching represents an unregulated profession; anyone can claim to be a coach. Professional coaching associations invest significant energy in advising individuals and organizations about the nature and limits of professional practice. Yet, novel coaching techniques and approaches continue to proliferate, mostly without empirical evidence related to their value or outcomes. Coaches, in their desire for career advancement, are often drawn to these new approaches and, consequently, may stray considerably from industry standards for coaching practice.

Our recent research (Gavin et al., 2023) was encouraging in that only a small portion of coaching interventions that we coded raised concern; predominantly, coaches in our sample intervened solidly within the framework described by the *6 whats model*. Unfortunately, our sample was not only small but it also consisted entirely of coaches who held membership in one of major professional coaching associations. There is a clear need for more research on what coaches actually do in their sessions with a broader sample of coaches who may either have little formal training in coaching or who practice by their own principles (Brock, 2008, 2014). As well, future research needs to be mindful of the essential evolution of coaching relationships. Not all the innovative methods emerging within the coaching field are problematic. As a noteworthy example, recent contributions by Stelter (2013, 2014, 2018) concerning third generation coaching processes merit significant attention. Such advances may indeed imply different structural models for coaching, depending on clients' needs and intentions.

For now, the *6 whats model* can be seen as explicitly framing the realm and nature of coaching processes as ones representing a goal-focused, guided dialogue shaped by the client's intentions for change and shaped by the coach's structuring of the conversational flow. The model offers clear guidance to professional coaches about essential areas of focus in sessions, and it informs potential consumers of the nature and boundaries of legitimate coaching conversations.

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**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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