

Venuto, Visto, Conquistare: The Full Report on the 2006 ICF-Sponsored Summit Meeting of Thought Leaders in Coaching*

by

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Remarkable ideas, bold propositions, deepened relationships, and concrete actions were the four predominant outcomes of “Evolving the Conversation: A Summit on the Future of Coaching” held in Vancouver, British Columbia, August 10–12, 2006, and sponsored by the International Coach Federation (ICF).

The first part of what follows is a description of the Summit that I prepared a few days after the meeting came to an end. But after the initial glow had subsided and I reviewed my Summit experience with my coach, I discovered that I had additional observations and perspectives that could also be included as part of the description. Rather than completely integrate these observations, I have decided to present them in the chronological order I experienced them.

The Summit Process

Forty-five coaching leaders from around world moved from being a group of individuals representing different, and in some cases, competing interests or beliefs to becoming a group of visionaries dedicated to a collaborative, intelligent, committed and action-centered approach to moving coaching forward.

While some participants may have wondered to what degree commercial interests, big egos, and positioning would dominate this meeting, their concerns appeared to be addressed as the group members established ground rules that maximized trust, sharing, ethical action, and understanding; and those self-imposed guidelines were implemented throughout the two-and-a-half days of meetings. One of the less substantial rules added by attendees cautioned participants that if their cell phone rang in the meeting room, they could take the call outside, and when they returned, they had to tell the group a funny story or joke.

The Summit, expertly facilitated by an experienced, professional group leader, moved back and forth between plenary (large group sessions) to small group sessions. Each of seven small groups was led by a volunteer facilitator — mostly ICF leaders — who helped the participating members develop or discuss topics, tune-in to one another, ensure around-the-table engagement, and report back to the plenary session.

Variations in small group composition maximized opportunities for participants to interact with a variety of attendees. And the generosity of the ICF in providing all meals during the Summit led to unlimited opportunities for informal interaction, typically the most highly prized form of discussion at such conferences, and also yielded wonderful food and refreshments.

Conversation Themes

For the most part discussion focused on vision, challenges, directions and actions to take coaching to the next level. The ICF stated that it will produce a comprehensive report about the Summit (the proceedings were recorded), but here are a few of the themes that emerged:

- Collaboration is essential between all member-based organizations or associations connected with coaching. While representatives from all such organizations were not present at the Summit, those that were there as well as virtually all other Summit participants placed this goal in high priority status. A group of volunteers took on the task to work out an action plan to turn this goal into a reality. One of the key aspects of their plan was to suggest a collaborative model that supported both a common foundation and healthy competition. The term "inclusion" became a mantra for virtually all participants. Participants recognized the importance of the dialogue at this Summit and at the same time believed the conversation was "bigger" than just one Summit. Partly in response, another organization announced it would sponsor the next Summit (likely to take place in Santa Fe, New Mexico next year.)

- A proposal was put forward to create enrollment plans for accredited coach training schools that would allow people to attend who could not normally afford the tuition. Such plans would be especially valued in countries where coaching is becoming more highly prized, but ability to pay the tuition for accredited coaching schools would be prohibitive.

- A new view of mastery of coaching is necessary. Some of the coaches attending the Summit, particularly those that had achieved the highest

While progress as a skilled coach is often marked by levels of certification, some participants suggested that true growth as a coach is more akin to how progress is marked in martial arts, where achievement is a journey, not a destination.

formal ICF credentialing available, expressed a restlessness or eagerness to learn "what's next?" Their desire to stretch themselves and remain challenged prompted them to question their commitment to coaching. It also led them to question, at times, the process being used to structure the Summit.

- Coaching needs a stronger foundation. "You can't reach the sky, if you don't have anything to stand on", was the way one participant framed this discussion about creating a more comprehensive body of knowledge. Considerable discussion took place regarding the use of the term coaching as a "discipline." Several participants described coaching as being in a state of evolution or development, and that it's progress was akin to how medical schools are now embracing integrative medicine as a required field of study. One small group took responsibility for creating an action plan to develop this area further, and one of their ideas was to recognize other disciplines outside of coaching and the influence those areas have had on coaching.

- Countries around the world are in various stages of developing a greater presence for coaching. Their development reflects their cultural traditions, and Summit participants learned more about how to ensure that their own way of speaking about coaching avoided absolutes (or a North American-centric approach) in order to learn from their colleagues in other countries. While participants were mostly from the USA and Canada, other participants spoke about their work in Colombia, Mexico, Sweden, Switzerland, Russia, Spain, France, Italy, China, Japan, and New Zealand. (Participants from other countries were invited, but were unable to attend.)

- Although coaching is relatively new, there are now a number of leaders who have been engaged in this work for considerable time. Many of these "movers and shakers" were in attendance at the Summit. Participants suggested that there ought to be a council of elders or a way to bring experienced leaders together and create an avenue for their wisdom to be distributed throughout the coaching community.

Participants often used the analogy of the Periodic Table of the Elements when describing the need to provide a solid foundation for coaching. One person took this further and suggested that a new element, 'Coachium,' be added to the basic elements of society.

- Coaching ought to become a household word. This vision was of strong interest to all participants, not because their livelihood relied on generating more clients, but because a focus on a wholistic approach to being, doing, and having in the world would generate greater understanding, greater tolerance, and more fulfilling lives. Coaching was also considered relatively unique in that the majority of practitioners "walk the talk", leading to greater credibility and attraction.

Participants also believed that meetings like this Summit must not only examine what's working, but they must also provide an opportunity to discuss what's not working, what's questionable, or what's in the "muck." The facilitators encouraged participants to identify the "elephants they saw in the room." (This expression typically refers to a topic that is "big" or emotionally-charged, but people often ignore or act as if they do not see it.) Some (but not all) of the topics that emerged included (1) the degree to which standards or quality control results in a restraint of trade, innovation or creativity; (2) how private frameworks sometimes interfere with the ability to discuss "best practices;" (3) the fact that some key coaching leaders were either not invited or did not attend this Summit; (4) the role and experience of the client was missing from the more predominant discussions about coaches and coaching; (5) that the ICF ought to get out of the certification business and instead focus on services to coaches and promotion of coaching; and (6) the discrepancy between what research shows clients want from a coach and the emphasis the ICF places on the need for certification.

Personal Reflections: Landing at the Oasis

Participants had many opportunities to individually address the group and share their own reflections, stories and perspectives. One metaphor I found helpful to summarize my experience at this Summit was based on what I learned from the book by Steve Donahue, "Shifting Sands: A Guidebook for Crossing the Deserts of Change."

Attending the Summit was like finding an oasis in the desert. That is, for the most part the work I do requires considerable effort and energy and is

During the conference a crisis occurred at Heathrow Airport in London. Air traffic around the world was impacted and regulations regarding carry-on baggage were significantly altered in both Canada and the USA. The ICF Management Team responded swiftly and expertly keeping Summit delegates informed with up-to-date briefings and assisting with potentially altered travel arrangements as well as the possibility that Summit participants may have to leave earlier than expected. By easing the anxiety of delegates, the ICF Management Team significantly contributed to the quality of interactions despite worries about travel back home.

often unmarked by signposts, roads or a known future. I've learned to enjoy the journey and be less concerned about the destination. This isn't always easy to do in a world filled with goals and outcomes. This doesn't mean that goals are less important; it's just that in my work I often have to stop in order to go further. And it's best to stop at an oasis.

The Summit was such an oasis. First, it gave me time to relax and rejuvenate. The

facilities were comfortable; the meals were nutritious, healthy and

plentiful; the schedule allowed for leisure time, and I was away from the extensive demands of office, coaching, mentoring, and consulting work.

Second, the Summit was structured to provide considerable time for reflection and review. The facilitators never pushed attendees to stay on task; they encouraged comments; and participants often asked each other to share more personal opinions during breaks and meals.

Third, I was able to connect with other travellers. I met many people who I had previously only known by telephone, email or book jacket. I also met many others for the first time. It was clear from the moving around that several people at the Summit made a conscious effort to have discussions with people new to them. In addition, the ICF Management Team took special care to welcome and recognize all the participants, including those that were not ICF members.

Unsettling Reflections

After returning home from the Summit I became aware of a number of additional reflections, which, for the most part, are troubling. (Sometimes you have to “step away from the campfire” in order to see more clearly.)

1. While the facilitators made significant efforts to create an atmosphere of trust for deeper level conversation, several individuals were unable to fully share their convictions, views or passion. While the group leaders could only open the door for such sharing, some participants ignored the ground rules established at the opening, became outright dismissive of other participant contributions, and actively shut down genuine dialogue. Group leaders varied in their ability to effectively manage the small group process and some appeared to be intimidated by the reputations or status of group members. Other small group leaders were highly successful in managing the variety of participation styles in order to maximize true dialogue.
2. In some cases there was strong discord between the behavior expected of a leader in coaching and how that leadership was demonstrated at the Summit. Some leaders needed exceptional coaxing to speak their truth, and other leaders didn't know when to stop

One small group in reporting back to the plenary session used the opportunity to make fun of the “commercialism” associated with coaching. After reporting on only one of the seven points they had discovered in their small group, they announced with tongue-in-cheek that “the remaining six points were now available in an e-book that could be purchased online for \$29.95.”

- talking. When leaders spoke from their heart and mind, the energy level of the group was lifted to a higher level.
3. There was too much emphasis on self-interest and too little emphasis on curiosity. Some participants in the small groups and some that took the microphone to speak to the large group seemed more interested in making their own point compared to fully understanding or building upon what someone else had said. Some participants seemed like they were uninterested in listening and were only waiting their turn to talk.
 4. Some of the facilitators became confused about the outcomes of the Summit. They allowed groups to problem-solve or develop action steps when in reality there was no organization to take the solutions or use the actions. While the ICF was the sponsor for the meeting, and the majority of participants were ICF members, the Summit was not an ICF think-tank or strategy building session. The purpose of the Summit was to generate thought about the future, but too many participants bypassed the “so what” or meaning-making phase of discussing the future and jumped into the “now what” phase and instead focused on action steps. While this might have helped some participants experience a sense of closure or completion, others questioned whether the Summit was a waste of time. Considerable time and energy was spent engaging in small group work that is likely to have no impact. However, a few participants vowed to “keep the fires burning.”
 5. While the ICF acted as host and recorder at the Summit, it was unclear as to any other role they would play. The ICF made no public commitment to any of the ideas, discussions, or recommendations made by participants. This is not a fault; but given the number of current and former ICF executives in attendance at the Summit, one might expect a more open reaction to the ideas presented. Perhaps a discussion of the ICF post-Summit role would have provided greater illumination about the future of coaching.
 6. While not unique to this meeting, a number of comments were made that reflected too little understanding of what currently exists in coaching today. For example, when one person presented the idea for coaching schools to offer free tuition, the proposal made no mention of schools that already do this. Or when the Summit was described as a historic meeting, there was no mention made of other coaching associations that have also held such gatherings. When facts were presented about the number of

coaching schools currently in operation, or the extensive number of certifications available, or even the number of competing coaching associations, many delegates to the Summit expressed surprise. One delegate described this as an “ICF-centric” reaction; that is if it didn’t originate with the ICF or isn’t part of the ICF, it is barely acknowledged or recognized as part of the coaching world.

7. Some participants demonstrated considerable leadership and coach-like interactions. They showed passion, genuine curiosity about others, provided clear feedback, minimized any commercial talk unless specifically requested, and encouraged others to speak from their own hearts.

These seven reflections should not be construed as a criticism of the Summit. Some of the things I observed are inherent in almost any meeting; they reflect typical group dynamics. At the same time these reflections could be part of what the future may hold for coaching. New leaders may emerge who are more concerned with clients and less concerned with selling coaching. Only those individuals and organizations who can truly walk the talk in both private and public will rise to the surface as the coaching leaders of the future. Individuals and organizations in countries outside the US will likely play a stronger leadership role in creating the coaching of the future.

I was glad to be invited. While I don’t know exactly why I was selected to attend, other participants, who might have influenced the selection, seem to characterize me as a critic who only had “bad” things to say about the ICF. I can understand where that view would come from since I’ve written at length about ICF practices and policies. ICF Board members have categorized me as “polemical” (I had to look that up in a dictionary), “a gadfly,” or a troublemaker. Such characterizations are typically used to dismiss rather than discuss the issues raised. I can only hope that this document will not be perceived as yet another polemic (now you can look that up in a dictionary). Instead I hope that the observations and reflections contained here can act as a catalyst for further discussion about the future of coaching.

(See next page for references and final anecdote.)

Reference

Donahue, S. (2004). *Shifting sands: A guidebook for crossing the deserts of change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

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The title of this article, in Italian, is meant to reflect the international nature of the Summit meeting. Translated into English it pretty much means: “We met, we saw, we conquered (our barriers).” I say “pretty much” because it’s been many years since I studied the language.

The university I attended for doctoral work required all candidates to pass a one-hour examination in a language other than their native tongue. I had studied German in high school and college, so I thought it would be a snap to take the test in German because of the close relationship between psychology (my undergraduate major) and German.

I tried a sample test, translating from German into English. After I was able to translate the first sentence to my satisfaction, I looked at my watch and found out that an hour had gone by. I had 45 more sentences to go. The “it’s a snap” prediction quickly disappeared.

I heard from some other candidates that taking the German brush-up prep class was very difficult and the instructor was highly demanding. I also heard that the Italian class was fun and took place mostly in local Italian restaurants with ordering and chatting in Italian. I loved Italian food.

My friends were right. The Italian class was taught by a Sophia Loren look-a-like, who in addition to helping us learn how to order in Italian, also helped us to learn how to dance, sing, and curse in Italian.

Fortunately or unfortunately, near the end of the Italian class, the university dropped the requirement of having to take an exam in another language. *Alea jacta est*