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# CO-ACTIVE COACHING

## CHANGING BUSINESS TRANSFORMING LIVES

*The Book That Helped Define the Field of Professional Coaching*

THIRD EDITION

HENRY KIMSEY-HOUSE  
KAREN KIMSEY-HOUSE • PHILLIP SANDAHL

## Praise for *Co-Active Coaching*, 3rd Edition

“With its third updated edition, *Co-Active Coaching* remains the bible of coaching guides. Written with a powerful, distinctive approach, no other book gives you the tools, the skills, and the fundamentals needed to succeed in these delicate relationships.”

—Stephen R. Covey, Author, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and *The Leader in Me*

“In *Co-Active Coaching*, the dynamic Kimsey-House duo, along with Phillip Sandahl, have elevated coaching from an instructional tool to an art form! Picasso would be proud. Seldom have I seen such a clear road map for how to ‘overcome actions that sabotage desires, plans and dreams.’ Collaboration, cooperation, coalition — all necessary components of a successful working relationship. The Kimsey-Houses and Sandahl prove to us that *Co-Active Coaching* is vital as well. As a gym coach leads his trainee to a higher state of physical health and wellbeing, *Co-Active Coaching* provides business coaches a toolkit for helping their clients achieve professional and personal success. *Co-Active Coaching* should be required reading for every manager or employee who wants to succeed in the workplace.”

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“I applaud the new edition of this definitive text on transformational coaching. The authors and the visionary network they lead provide an effective methodology to work with change at personal and organizational levels. This is a must-read for professionals who value the process of discovery, awareness, and choice that empowers people to find their own inner wisdom and to act in service to make a better world for all.”

—Lynne Twist, Author, *The Soul of Money*, Founder, Soul of Money Institute, and Co-Founder, The Pachamama Alliance

“When designing our ICF ACTP coach certification program, we never considered any textbook other than *Co-Active Coaching*. This is the best, most comprehensive book for teaching the relevant skills of coaching. It should be required reading for all coach-specific training programs in any environment (profit, non-profit, executive, teams, etc.). With the enhancements made in the third edition, we look forward to incorporating this edition into our required reading list.”

—Donna Billings, PCC and Co-Founder, Professional Coach Certification Program, Duquesne University School of Leadership and Professional Advancement

“*Co-Active Coaching* insightfully reveals how to unlock a person’s potential and enlighten their past, present, and future. It’s a must-read for all self-empowered senior executives.”

—Michael Cheah, Former President, Xian-Janssen Pharmaceutical, China (A Johnson & Johnson Group of Companies)

“Transformational change — in ourselves or in the teams, organizations, and companies we lead — is ultimately all about relationships. The third edition of *Co-Active Coaching*, by the eloquent and compassionate founders of The Coaches Training Institute, will give you the tools, skills, strategies, and ethical frameworks to achieve the powerful goals of this work: changing lives and changing the world.”

—Celeste Schenck, President, American University of Paris

“Coaching basics are an essential skill set for any manager or leader who is interested in developing other people, so I use this material in most of the MBA courses I teach. Without fail, it engages the hearts and minds of people who care about acquiring meaningful and effective skills they can immediately put to use.”

—Heidi Brooks, PhD, Director, Yale School of Management Mentoring Program, Lecturer, Yale School of Management, and Clinical Assistant Professor, Yale School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry

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Changing Business, Transforming Lives

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Henry Kimsey-House

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# Co-Active Coaching Fundamentals

**F**rom day one, coaching focuses on the coachee/client.<sup>1</sup> People participate in or seek out coaching because they want things to be different. They are looking for change or they have important goals to reach. People come to coaching for lots of individual reasons. They are motivated to achieve specific goals: to write a book, to start a business, to have a healthier body. They come to coaching in order to be more effective or more satisfied at work or to develop new skills to help navigate life's changes. Sometimes people want more from life—more peace of mind, more security, more impact in their work. And sometimes they want less—less confusion, less stress, less financial pressure. In general, they come to coaching because they want a better quality of life—more fulfillment, better balance—or a different process for accomplishing their life desires. Whatever the individual reason, it all starts with a stirring of motivation within the coachee.

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<sup>1</sup> In this third edition we intentionally use the term “coachee” to indicate the person who receives the coaching. The term “coachee” (in wide use outside North America) implies any person who receives coaching, whereas the term “client” implies a professional coaching relationship. The model applies even when the coaching relationship is more informal, such as a manager and direct report. Using the term “coachee” covers all coaching relationships. In this third edition we will use “coachee” and “client” interchangeably.

Part I explains what the coach brings to this interaction and shows what the process looks like from a Co-Active coaching perspective. In this part of the book, we outline the elements and convey a sense of how they fit together in a comprehensive model. In later chapters, we expand on these major components to provide more depth and offer examples from coaching conversations.

# The Co-Active Coaching Model

The term “Co-Active” refers to the fundamental nature of a coaching relationship in which the coach and coachee are active collaborators. In Co-Active coaching, this is a relationship—in fact an alliance—between two equals for the purpose of meeting the coachee’s needs.

## Four Cornerstones

The four cornerstones form a container that holds the Co-Active conversation. In fact, the cornerstones make it possible to have a truly Co-Active conversation. In order for engaged and empowered *relationship* to exist—the “co” in Co-Active—and in order for life-giving *action* on the part of the coachee to manifest, these four form a necessary structure.

### ***People Are Naturally Creative, Resourceful, and Whole***

We start with this assertion: people are, by their very nature, creative, resourceful and whole. They are capable: capable of finding answers; capable of choosing; capable of taking action; capable of recovering when things don’t go as planned; and, especially, capable of learning. This capacity is wired into all human beings no matter their circumstances. In the Co-Active model it is more than a belief—it is a stand we take.

The alternative is a belief that people are fragile and dependent. With that belief, the coach's job would be to guide the coachee to the safest possible outcome. You can feel the difference. When we take a stand for other people's natural creativity and resourcefulness, we become champions on their behalf, not worried hand-holders. As coaches, when we assume resourcefulness and creativity, we become curious, open to possibilities, discovering with the coachee, not dictating. We expect to be amazed.

The key here is "naturally." Yes, of course, there are times when the circumstances feel overwhelming, when even the most resilient human being feels the mountain is too high, the road to cross too wide, the effort simply not in his power. Circumstances and that inner sabotaging voice that says, "Why bother?" or "You don't have what it takes," can leave anyone feeling less than creative, resourceful, and whole. On those days, more than on any others, it is our place as coaches to see the true, natural self who was and is still capable. We remind our coachees of their own inner light and help them find it again—because it is there. Naturally.

### ***Focus on the Whole Person***

For most people who want to be helpful, and for most new coaches or people in a coaching role, the question that's often foremost on their minds is this: "What's the problem to solve?" It's a question that comes from the best of intentions: a desire to understand and provide valuable assistance so that a problem can be solved. But when a coach is sitting across from a coachee (even by telephone), the coach is not sitting across from a problem to be solved; the coach is sitting across from a person. This person does have a problem to solve—a change to make, a dream to fulfill, a task to accomplish, a goal to reach. All of that is true. But this person is more than the problem at hand—or the goal, the dream, the task. This is a whole person: heart, mind, body, and spirit. And the issue, whatever it is, is not neatly isolated. It is inexorably entwined in the coachee's whole life.

Maybe "focus" is a little misleading in the title of this cornerstone. We are certainly not talking about a hard, tight, concentrated focus on the whole person. It is more of a broad attention, a soft focus that includes

the whole person and the whole life, and involves listening on many levels. Too often, in our eagerness to be helpful, we access only the place between our ears. We use the mind to probe and understand and then create logical, pragmatic solutions. Analysis and logic are worthy and useful attributes—but they don't tell the whole story. Sometimes a “correct” solution can have emotional consequences that are just as important; sometimes what the mind says “yes” to, the spirit feels as a loss. We are not suggesting that a coach focus on coaching heart, mind, body, and spirit independently, but a coach or anyone in a Co-Active conversation ought to be tuned in to the influences that are present in each of these different dimensions.

It was not so many years ago that talking about emotions was taboo, especially in the workplace. Today, courses in mastering emotional intelligence are commonplace, thanks to the groundbreaking work of Daniel Goleman. People have been just as sensitive about conversations that included references to the body. But awareness of body language and the exceptional work of somatic practitioners have paved the way to a much better and more widespread conversation about the role of the body in communication.

Surely the most sensitive of these dimensions is “spirit.” It is the most elusive to define but it is present within every human being. In coaching, we can say what it is not: it is not limited to a form of spirituality or religion. But there is a spirit dimension that influences human choices. It has many different names and different expressions, but at the core, it is the sense of living according to values or a calling or a power greater than oneself. Sometimes it is intuition, a gut feeling or a conviction that guides our lives. It is a spirit dimension that transcends this one decision; in fact, we know it is spirit because it feels transcendent.

Obviously, focus on the whole person also means that as coaches we are aware of all the ways the issue or topic before us is interwoven in this person's life. There is a vast ecology of people and priorities that are interconnected with the issue at hand. Of course, it is entirely possible for the coach and coachee to limit the conversation to a single, narrow subject: completion of a specific project, for example. The ability to take the conversation into any area that the coachee finds compelling doesn't mean the coach insists on declaring the destination and going

there. Again, the key is increased awareness, because no topic exists in isolation. A decision in one area of life inevitably ripples through all areas of life. An exciting career move may be very fulfilling—but it may also affect health, family relationships, free time, geography. A coach can work effectively with a coachee on a very narrow topic; but in the Co-Active way, there is a larger picture also at play that includes the whole person.

### ***Dance in This Moment***

A conversation is a powerful and dynamic interchange between people. It's natural to pay attention to the content of the conversation—the words, the positions, the ideas. The content is often what is most “visible” and easiest to respond to. And yet, as important as the words and content are, there is much more going on in every moment. Every conversation creates tone, mood, and nuance. There is as much information, sometimes more, in *how* the words are said versus the words chosen; sometimes there is more information in what is *not* said than what is said. For the coach, a conversation becomes an exercise in listening intently at many levels and, of course, choosing to respond, to intervene. The information about what to say or ask does not come from a script. It comes in the moment, in *this* moment, and then the next moment. To “dance in this moment” is to be very present to what is happening right now and to respond to that stimulus rather than to a master plan.

To “dance” is to respond from a *Co-Active* core—meaning both “co,” as in collaborative, and “active,” as in moving the dance forward. In a truly Co-Active conversation there are moments when the coach leads the dance, moments when the coachee leads the dance, and moments when it is not clear at all who is leading and who is following. All three states of the dance are natural; the third, the point where movement seems to lose leader/follower clarity, is a rare state of connection. It is a place of being tuned in to each other and a place, frankly, of vulnerability—a willingness, built on extraordinary trust, to go with the flow of the conversation. It does feel like an exquisite dance to the music, with both partners in tune with the tempo, tone, and steps. This agility is all for the sake of the coachee's learning and discovery.

### ***Evoke Transformation***

Coach and coachee meet in this Co-Active conversation for a common purpose: the coachee's full life. The topic of the coaching will likely be something quite specific—a fraction of the coachee's life that the coachee is focused on. But if we follow that leaf to the branch and then travel from the branch to the trunk and the roots—there is always a deeper connection possible. The goal of the coaching in one session might be clarity and action around a project. The motivation for the coaching could be a new job or promotion, improved fitness, or the execution of a business plan. In fact, the coachee may only have her attention on the specific goal for that specific topic. The coach, on the other hand, sees the tree and the larger, fully connected life. Coaches in this model hold a vision that sees the topic as an expression of something even more valuable to the coachee. This action at hand is the means to a higher end, life fully lived in whatever area the coachee finds important.

There is a yearning for the very best, the full potential that the coachee can experience. And when that connection ignites between today's goal and life's potential, the effect is transformative. Now the report or the job interview or the 5K race is more than a checked box on a to-do list. It is an expression of inner conviction. The accomplishment is a message about who the coachee can be. There is a shift from the satisfaction of “ahh” to the breakthrough awareness of “aha”—a new strength, a renewed capacity—like finding muscles he didn't know he had or had forgotten he had.

And part of that “aha”—the deeper awareness—is the knowledge that the coachee has an expanded capacity to reach his potential. What he learned from this one experience he naturally applies to others.

And that is why we boldly take a stand for evoking transformation as a cornerstone of this Co-Active model. We see this as a hunger on the part of coaches for all that is possible, including gaining or recovering the inner strength and resourcefulness to evolve, grow, and expand from this one area of focus into many avenues of life. Coaches play a key role, by holding a vision of what is possible and through their commitment to transformative experience. Coachees still choose the topic, the action, and the results they want. But by taking a stand for the greatest possible

impact from even the smallest action, coaches encourage and ultimately evoke transformation.

## The Heart of the Model

The ongoing relationship between coach and client exists only to address the goals of the client—and so naturally, the client’s life is the focus at the center of the diagram in Figure 1. There are two ways to think about this. One way is to see the action of the day as part of the big picture for the client’s life. People make dozens, even hundreds, of decisions every day to do or not do certain things. The choices we make during the day, no matter how trivial they may seem, contribute to creating a life that is more (or less) fulfilling. The decisions we make move us toward or away from better balance in our lives. The choices contribute to a more effective life process or to a process that is less effective. And so at one level, the client’s action is always wrapped in these three core principles of fulfillment, balance, and process. They are principles because they are fundamental to the liveliness of life. In the same way that oxygen, fuel, and heat are necessary for fire, these three principles combine to create an ignited life—perhaps “Life” with a capital “L.”

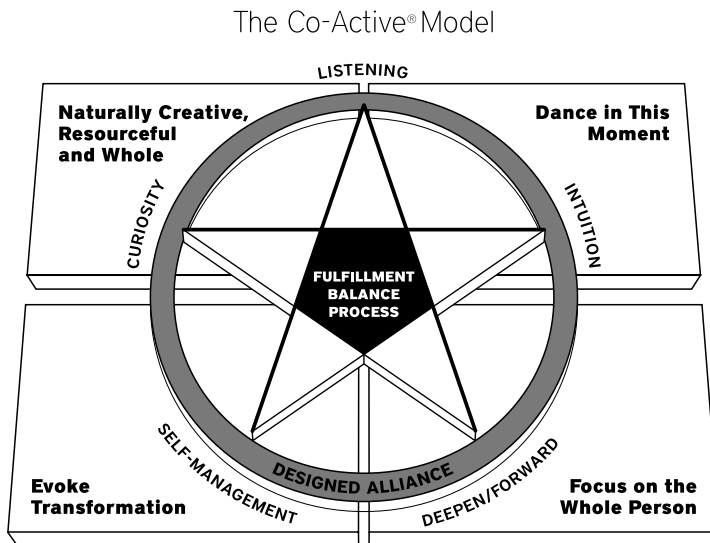


FIGURE 1 The Co-Active Model

The second way is to look at the specific issues the coachee chooses to work with in the coaching sessions. Clients bring all sorts of agenda items to their coaching. This issue of the day or week or month is about life today with an everyday “l” for “life.” Yet, whatever the specific issue, there is a way to link it to the larger, more fulfilling Life, to Life-giving balance, or better process.

### ***Fulfillment***

The coachee’s definition of fulfillment is always intensely personal. It may include, especially at first, outward measures of success: a great job or promotion, enough money, a certain lifestyle. Eventually, the coaching will progress to a deeper definition of fulfillment. It’s not about having more. It’s not about what fills the client’s pockets or closets—it’s about what fills the client’s heart and soul. A fulfilling life is a valued life, and clients will have their own definitions of what they truly value. If they value risk taking, is there enough adventure in their lives? If they value family, are they shortchanging themselves by caving in to the demands of work? What are the personal values they want present in their work? Sorting out values is a way of sorting out life choices, because when the choices reflect the client’s values, life is more satisfying and often feels effortless. Achieving a certain goal can be very fulfilling—especially as a benchmark—but most clients find that fulfillment is not the finish line. At its deepest level, fulfillment is about finding and experiencing a life of purpose and service. It is about reaching one’s full potential.

### ***Balance***

With so many responsibilities and distractions, and given today’s high-speed rate of change, balance may feel like an impossible dream. It’s especially elusive for most of the people who come to coaching. They tend to be dissatisfied with functioning at some minimum standard of being alive: they want more from life and want to give more back. They are passionate about the things that matter to them, focused in their commitment, and so intense that sometimes one corner of their lives is a model of excellence while the rest is in ruins. They understand the value of balance and have probably made attempts to achieve it—with good intentions to exercise

more, take time off, or reconnect with friends—and found that weeks or months passed without any change. Life is out of balance.

People often seem resigned to being out of balance, as if that's just the way life is. That's the real world, given the circumstances. There's only one way of looking at it, and it looks bad. Coaching for balance, however, focuses on widening the range of perspectives and, therefore, adding more choices. Ultimately, balance is about making choices: saying yes to some things and no to others. This can be challenging. Coachees often want to say yes to more in their lives without making room for it by saying no to something else. This impulse leads to an overwhelmed feeling—and to lives that are out of balance.

Balance is a fluid state because life itself is dynamic. Therefore, it makes more sense to look at whether clients are moving toward balance or away from balance rather than to offer them “balance” as a goal to be achieved. Like the seasons of the year, balance is best viewed over the long haul. It is also a perennial issue, one that coaches will see, in some form or another, many times over in the course of a coaching relationship.

### ***Process***

We are always in process. Sometimes it looks frantic; sometimes it looks graceful. Because coaching is effective at achieving results, both coachees and coaches can get drawn into the “results” trap—focusing entirely on the destination and losing sight of the flow of the journey. In fact, process is often compared to a river. As life flows, there will be fast periods of onrushing, white-water progress as well as days of calm, steady currents. But there will also be times of drifting, being stuck in job eddies and relationship whirlpools, and backsliding into treacherous swamps. There will be flooding and drought. The coach's job is to notice, point out, and be with clients wherever they are in their process. The coach is there to encourage and support, provide companionship around the rocks, and escort clients through the dark waters as well as to celebrate their skill and success at navigating the difficult passages. Coaching allows clients to live more fully in a deeper relationship with all aspects of their lives.

Co-Active coaching therefore embraces this whole picture of the client: fulfillment, balance, and process. These are the core principles at the

heart of the coaching model. Together they create the heat and light of a Life that is fully alive.

## **Designed Alliance for an Empowered Coaching Environment**

With the client in the center of the Co-Active coaching model (see Figure 1, p. 8), we encircle the client and the client's agenda; we name this protective circle the designed alliance. In Co-Active coaching, power is granted to the coaching relationship, not to the coach. Coachee and coach work together to design an effective working relationship that meets the coachee's needs. In fact, clients play an important role in declaring how they want to be coached. They are involved in creating a powerful relationship that fits their working and learning styles. The relationship is tailored to the communication approach that works best for them. The process of designing the alliance is a model of the mutual responsibility of client and coach. Clients learn that they are in control of the relationship and, ultimately, of the changes they make in their lives.

## **The Five Contexts**

Visually, the coaching model illustrated in Figure 1 represents a five-pointed star. Each point of the star is a context that the coach brings to the coaching. Each is a point of contact with the coachee. The coach consistently draws from these contexts in the practice of coaching. In time, and through training, the coach develops these the way a musician develops musical technique. The five contexts are always in play. We present them in one order here in the book, but they are a constellation, not a sequence—essential elements of a complete coaching approach—like five spotlights that are always shining, illuminating the client's life.

### ***Listening***

Of course, the coach listens to the words that come from the client, tracking the content of the coaching conversation. But the most important listening of coaching takes place on a deeper level. It is the listening for the meaning behind the story, for the underlying process, for the theme

that will deepen the learning. The coach is listening for the appearance of the coachee's vision, values, purpose. The coach is also listening for resistance, fear, backtracking, and the voice of the saboteur, who is there to object to change, point out the client's shortcomings, and bring up all the reasons why this idea, whatever it is, won't work.

The coach listens at many levels simultaneously to hear where clients are in their process, to hear where they are out of balance, to hear their progress on the journey of fulfillment. The coach is listening for the nuance of hesitation, too, for the sour ring of something not quite true. (In Chapter 3, we look in depth at three levels of listening.)

### ***Intuition***

By listening below the surface, the coach finds the place where the hard data and soft data merge. Intuition is a kind of knowing that resides in the background and is often unspoken. It remains in the background because, for many people, it's not easy to trust. Our culture doesn't validate intuition as a reliable means of drawing conclusions or making decisions, so we hesitate to say what our intuition tells us. We hold back because we don't want to appear foolish. And yet intuition is one of the most powerful gifts a coach brings to coaching.

As coaches, we receive a great deal of information from the client and then, in the moment of coaching, combine it with previous information as well as experience, not only of coaching, but of operating in the world. Add to this one more factor: information that comes from our intuition. We may not call it "intuition." We may consider it a thought or a hunch or a gut feeling. Regardless of how we define it, the impulse emerges from our intuition. For most coaches, intuition is a skill that needs practice and development. It is enormously valuable because, time and again, it synthesizes more impressions and information than we could ever analyze consciously.

### ***Curiosity***

One of the fundamental tenets of Co-Active coaching is that clients are capable and resourceful and have the answers. The coach's job is to ask the questions, to lead the discovery process. The context of curiosity

gives a certain frame to the process of uncovering answers and drawing out insight. Curiosity is open, inviting, spacious, almost playful. And yet it is also enormously powerful. Like scientific curiosity that explores the deepest questions of matter, life, and the universe, curiosity in coaching allows coach and coachee to enter the deepest areas of the coachee's life, side by side, simply looking, curious about what they will find.

Because the coach is not an inquisitor but is on the client's side in this exploration, the coach can ask powerful questions that break through old defenses. When clients learn to be curious about their lives, it reduces some of the pressure and lowers the risk. They become more willing to look in the dark places and try the hard things because they are curious, too.

### ***Forward and Deepen***

The outcome of the work that client and coach do together is both action and learning. These two forces, action and learning, combine to create change. Because the notion of action that moves the client forward is so central to the purpose of coaching, we often make “forward” a verb and say that one of the purposes of coaching is to “forward the action” of the client.

The other force at work in the human change process is learning. Learning is not simply a by-product of action; it is an equal and complementary force. Learning generates new resourcefulness, expanded possibilities, and stronger muscles for change.

One of the common misunderstandings about coaching is that it is simply about getting things done—performing at a higher level. Because of this misunderstanding, coaching has been compared to hiring a nagging parent who will make sure your bed is made and your homework is done. In some organizations, it's the image of a schoolteacher with a ruler, poised to measure your failure and provide the punishment. But coaching is not just about getting things done; it is just as importantly about continuing to learn, especially to learn how the action is or is not contributing to the core principles. This connection between action and learning and the core principles is key. Gandhi is quoted as saying, “There is more to life than increasing its speed.” In the same way, there is more to life, at least in the Co-Active model, than increasing action.

### ***Self-Management***

In order to truly hold the client's agenda, the coach must get out of the way—not always an easy thing to do. Self-management is the coach's ability to set aside personal opinions, preferences, pride, defensiveness, ego. The coach needs to be “over there” with the coachee, immersed in the coachee's situation and struggle, not “over here,” dealing with the coach's own thoughts and judgments. Self-management means giving up the need to look good and be right—the light should be shining on the coachee, not the coach. Self-management is about awareness of impact. In the course of a coaching relationship, coachees also learn about self-management in their own lives. They experience the modeling and develop their own awareness of impact.

## **The Coach's Role in the Model**

The coach is a kind of change agent, entering the equation for change without knowing what the outcome will be. Goals and plans, new practices, new benchmarks, achievements of every kind are all part of the client's ongoing work, facilitated by the coaching interaction. The coach is a catalyst, an important element in the process of accelerating change.

But this is more than a passive role. We see coaching, especially the form presented here, as a role of service that requires commitment and presence on the part of the coach. Whether the coach is working with individual private clients or has been hired to work with clients inside an organization, a sense of purpose, even a higher purpose, is definitely an underlying element. In the world of Co-Active coaching, we would say that coaching exists to serve the client's higher purpose. When we aim for this higher purpose, we create the means for transformative change in clients and, by extension, in families and organizations. The ripples of change in a client's higher purpose move out into the world.

To be present there, contributing to that change, is enormously gratifying. It fulfills a sense of higher purpose in the coach's life. Making a difference—helping others to achieve their dreams and reach their potential—this is why coaches are drawn to this work.

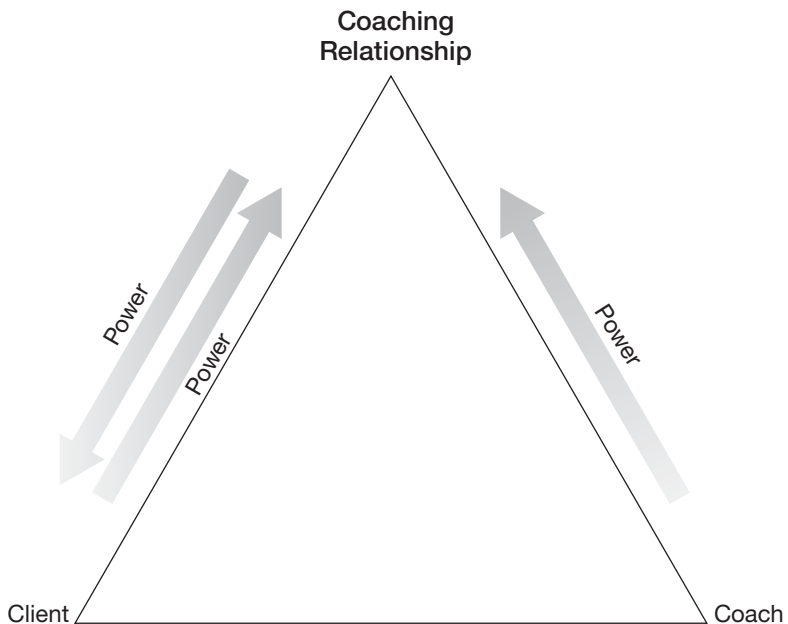
# The Co-Active Coaching Relationship

Coaching is not so much a methodology as it is a relationship—a particular kind of relationship. Yes, there are skills to learn and a wide variety of tools available, but the real art of effective coaching comes from the coach’s ability to work within the context of relationship. Every client is unique, with a unique set of circumstances, unique goals and desire for change, unique abilities, interests, even habits of self-sabotage. We can talk in very general terms about focus areas that clients often pursue—career change, life transition, performance improvement, leadership in the workplace, health and wellness issues—but only in the broadest terms. Add to this picture the fact that goals change over time as clients clarify what is important, as they dig deeper into what motivates them, and as they produce results (action and learning). There is no authorized universal reference manual with standardized diagnoses and coaching solutions neatly defined. Coaching is inherently dynamic; that is one of the fundamental qualities of coaching and a reason for its power as a medium for change. Coaching is personal; coaching creates a unique, empowered relationship for change.

In Co-Active coaching, we also emphasize the peer relationship—that coach and client have equal, though different, roles. They are Co-Active in the relationship, so they are cocreators, collaborators, in a way.

We can picture this relationship as a triangle (see Figure 2). The coach grants power to the coaching relationship. The client also grants power to the relationship, not to the coach. Clients are in turn empowered by the relationship—empowered to take charge of their lives and the choices they make. In this figure, all the power of the relationship exists to serve the client.

In fact, the Co-Active coach must make the shift from “I am powerful” to “the coaching relationship is powerful.” Powerful coaching is not about being a powerful coach; it is about the power the client experiences. Imagine that the coaching relationship is a recharging place where clients tap into the source of energy they need to get over the hurdles in their lives. They can’t get the work done if the energy level is low. The power comes not directly from the coach, however, but from the relationship—from the synergy of the energy clients bring in the form of desire and motivation and the energy coaches bring in the form of their commitment, skills, and understanding of human change.



**FIGURE 2** The Coaching Power Triangle

## The Coaching Environment

At its most fundamental, a coaching session is a conversation between a coach and another person or—in team or relationship coaching—a coach and two or more people. But this is no ordinary, everyday conversation. An effective coaching conversation gets to the heart of what matters. It is a focused, concentrated conversation designed to support the coachee in clarifying choices and making changes. The environment in which the conversation takes place is crucial.

By “environment,” we mean both a physical environment and a relationship environment made up of ground rules, expectations, and agreements. In Co-Active coaching, we talk about two core characteristics of an effective coaching environment: one, it is safe enough for clients to take the risks they need to take, and two, it is a courageous place where clients are able to approach their lives and the choices they make with motivation, curiosity, and creativity. By the way, “safe” does not necessarily mean “comfortable.” Significant change may be highly uncomfortable, and yet there are ways to ensure that the experience is safe. Like rock climbers ascending the cliff face, striving for the summit, clients may find the process exhilarating, exhausting, and scary. But knowing that there is the equivalent of a belay team holding their rope, ensuring their safety, gives them the confidence to keep climbing.

Certain qualities characterize an environment that is safe yet promotes courage in clients. These qualities give shape to what might be called the “container” for the coaching relationship.

### ***Confidentiality***

Making change means disturbing the familiar and well-established order of things. It may be deeply satisfying, maybe exciting, to embark on that change and yet still feel risky. Even if the client and the client’s world are completely committed to and supportive of the change, change by its nature is an unknown. If clients are going to risk making significant change, they must be able to risk talking freely with their coach. Disclosure is crucial because it leads to the discovery that is necessary for action. Without the safety and reassurance that confidentiality provides,

the coaching will be tentative, and there will always be an undercurrent of wonder about what is possibly being withheld.

Coaches who work with clients inside organizations have to deal with a more complex environment. Confidentiality between coach and client is still a key condition for safe and courageous conversation, but because the organization has a vested interest in the result, it usually requires some form of reporting on the coaching. Often, clients are the ones who take responsibility for reporting the nature of the coaching work, which allows them to disclose what is most relevant to the organization while preserving confidentiality between themselves and their coach.

### ***Trust***

An agreement to hold the coaching conversation confidential is one key component in building trust. Trust is also built over time as client and coach learn that each can be counted on and the client learns that the relationship delivers results. Trust is built from small things like being punctual for coaching sessions and from a pattern of reliability. Because trust works both ways, it is as important for the coach as it is for the client. The coach must be trustworthy in her action.

Relationship is also built and trust expanded by coaches simply believing in their clients. We live in a culture that, for the most part, demands that people prove themselves, demonstrate their worthiness by performing to some standard, before they are accepted into the circle. The culture creates relationships in which the emphasis is on proving, explaining, justifying. A coaching relationship built on the premise that clients are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole and are capable of making the best choices is a relationship founded on basic trust in the client's capacity and integrity. Clients see that they have a person in their lives who believes they can do what they say they can do, who believes they can be the people they say they want to be.

It is a paradox that coaches believe completely in their clients and, at the same time, hold them accountable. But by "accountable" we do not mean a context of judgment, as in "prove it to me," but simply accounting for their promise of action and the insight of learning. Clients see that the coach is really on their side, respecting their vision and their action plans but also willing to be honest and direct for their sake.

### ***Speaking the Truth***

We could also call this attribute of a coaching environment “getting real.” A safe and courageous space for change must be, by definition, a place where the truth can be told. It is a place where clients can tell the whole truth about what they have done, and not done, without worrying about what the coach will say. This is an environment without judgment, and it is a place where the coach expects the truth from the client because truth carries no consequence other than learning, discovery, and new insight. Clients expect the truth from the coach because that is precisely the perspective for which the coach has been hired. Clients are often so close to their own situations, so wrapped up in their own histories and habitual patterns, that they are sometimes unable to see the truth accurately. This may be one of their reasons for seeking out coaching. They rely on the coach for the acuity that sees through the chaos and fog. This should be one relationship in which clients can count on straightforward and honest interactions.

Truth telling doesn't have to be confrontational, although it may confront. It can be handled with sharpness or softness, but it confronts the usual tacit acceptance of the client's explanations. Truth telling refuses to sidestep or overlook: it boldly points out when the emperor is not wearing clothes. There is no inherent judgment in telling the truth. The coach is merely stating what he or she sees. Withholding the truth serves neither the client nor the coaching relationship. A real relationship is not built on being nice; it's built on being real. When the coach has the courage to tell the truth, the client gets a model for the art of being straight. And in the process, more trust is built between coach and client.

### ***Openness and Spaciousness***

One of the qualities that makes the coaching relationship work is spaciousness. This is a place where clients can breathe, experiment, fantasize, and strategize without limitation. It is another world, a place of wide-eyed dreams. It is a space in which they can vent their anger, troubles, spite, perceptions of injustice. It is a place where failure is acknowledged as a means for learning, where there are no absolutes and few rules.

For the coach, spaciousness also means complete detachment from any particular course of action or any results clients achieve. The coach

continues to care about her clients, their agendas, their health and growth, but not the road they take to get there, the speed of travel, or the detours they might make along the way—as long as they continue to move toward the results they want. Ultimately, coaching is not about what the coach delivers but about what clients create. A coach may propose a course of action to get the results a client desires. That is fine. Brainstorming is part of coaching and can make a valuable contribution to the client's process. But in order to preserve openness in the relationship, the coach must not be attached to whether clients take her suggestions. The spaciousness of the relationship requires that clients have many channels open to creative inspiration and not be restricted to the coach's good ideas, no matter how sound or grounded in experience. In this way, clients are able to explore the widest range of possibilities.

## The Designed Alliance

So far we've been talking about this relationship between client and coach as if it were conceptual. Actually, we believe it is important for client and coach to consciously and deliberately design their working relationship and continue to redesign it as necessary up through and including its completion. The designed alliance surrounds the coach and client in the Co-Active coaching model (see Figure 1, p. 8) and represents the container within which coach and client do their work.

The form of the design will be different for different coaches and unique to each coach–client relationship. The conversation that creates the design focuses on the assumptions and expectations of coach and client. The purpose of this intentional conversation is to clarify the process and expected outcomes and provide a forum for negotiating the design of a relationship that is as powerful as possible for both client and coach.

In simplest terms, the design of the alliance looks at questions such as, *What are the conditions that need to be in place for the two of us to work together effectively? What are the obstacles or potential obstacles? What fundamental questions need to be answered in order to get the most out of this process?* And as the coaching continues, there will be ongoing questions: *What is working and what is not? What do we need to change in order to make the coaching relationship more effective or have more impact?*

This first conversation about consciously creating an effective working relationship is just the beginning. Continuing to be open, to find new or more effective ways of working together is an ongoing part of a Co-Active coaching relationship. In one way, the strength of a client's ability to make changes in his work and life is a measure of the strength in the coach-client relationship. And the strength of that relationship is measured by the commitment to an open, fearless, and continuously evolving design of their alliance over time.

## Coaching Format

Over the past decade, coaching as a practice and as a profession has taken root in myriad forms, and the variety of environments in which we find coaching and coaching skills being used continues to expand. Today you will find Co-Active coaches working from home offices and inside institutions and organizations. You will find Co-Active coaches coaching in prison cells and corporate boardrooms. Some coaches work as employees within organizations, often with job duties in addition to coaching. Others combine coaching with consulting work in order to provide ongoing implementation support and follow-up. Many coaches work individually with private clients. Some specialize in working with teams or with people in relationship. Coaching today is global and cross-cultural. Coaches and clients cover dozens of demographic categories: age, income, education, ethnic background, job position. Many coaches specialize in a select interest or career area and focus on working with CEOs, immigrants or expatriates, artists and musicians, or parents and their teenagers.

The environment within which coaching takes place is equally varied. Many coaches work with clients by telephone, with regularly scheduled, often weekly, appointments, although there are many variations. Some coaches and clients prefer in-person coaching, whether at the client's site, at the coach's office, or off-site. Coaches may contract with clients for a fixed period of time, such as three months, six months, or a year. Other coaches establish ongoing, open-ended relationships with clients. Coaching takes place in paneled boardrooms, inner-city homes, and mountain retreats.

Within that framework, coaches bring their coaching training and experience, along with a wide variety of tools and assessments. The permutations of forms and environments continue, inspired by the imagination of coaches and the interests of clients. And yet, no matter what form the coaching takes, we believe that it will be most effective when coach and client create a safe and courageous space for the work and when both parties consciously design their working alliance.

## Getting Started

Coaches typically begin a working relationship with an initial process that is part client orientation and part self-discovery work for clients. This foundation-setting process familiarizes clients with the coaching process, provides an opportunity to design the alliance, and begins the work of clarifying client issues and goals. There is no standardized form for this. With some coaches, it is a brief interview or a page or two of basic questions, all handled in the initial coaching session. Other coaches might use several sessions, assessments of various kinds, and interviews with the client's coworkers, direct reports, or family members. Or this discovery process might be done as visioning work at a retreat center.

In this initial work, clients learn what to expect from coaching. It is also a time for them to clarify where they are, where they're headed, the strengths they will use to get there, and the obstacles that often interfere.

The coach typically covers these four areas:

- Logistics
- You are here. Where is here?
- Designing the future
- Orientation to coaching

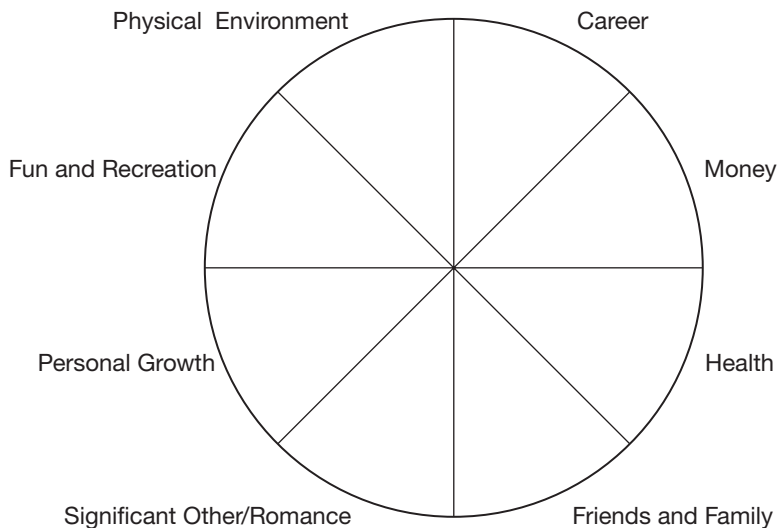
### *Logistics*

One of the first, obvious elements in getting started is communication and agreement on fundamental ground rules and administrative procedures. Settling such details as appointment schedules, cancellation

policy, and payment arrangements (when appropriate) is part of getting underway, but it is also key in creating relationship. Clients will begin to set expectations of their coach and the coaching based on the coach's handling of these administrative procedures. How coaches "handle the details," especially in the area of getting agreement, sets a tone and creates a particular environment.

### ***You Are Here. Where Is Here?***

This discovery phase focuses on where clients are today and how they got there. It's a conversation about where they are and the issues at hand, what is at stake, what moves them, what blocks them. The conversation might address such issues as life purpose or mission, values, principles, or personal beliefs. Often, the coach will make an overall assessment of satisfaction in the significant areas of the client's life using a tool like the Wheel of Life (see Figure 3) or a version of the wheel created specifically for a client's situation. (See the Coach's Toolkit online, at [www.coactive.com/toolkit](http://www.coactive.com/toolkit) for more information on using this and other tools for discovery.)



**FIGURE 3** The Wheel of Life

Clients and coach might talk about previous disappointments and successes in order to get an idea of what does and doesn't work, where clients are fulfilled, and the strategies they use to handle obstacles and derailment. In this phase, client and coach are beginning the process of really getting to know this person, the client, from the inside out: the bright places, the dark places, the effective places, and the not-so-effective places.

The coach may use assessment tools or exercises, but at the heart of the discovery process are answers to simple, powerful questions: *Where do you want to make a difference in your life? What do you value most in your relationship with others? What works for you when you are successful at making changes? Where do you usually get stuck? What motivates you? How do you deal with disappointment or failure? How are you about doing what you say you'll do?*

The answers also point very clearly to the design of the most effective coaching relationship. For example, the question *Where do you usually get stuck?* leads to a logical next question, *How would you like me to respond as your coach when you're stuck?* In that exchange, clients experience and contribute to the design of the alliance.

### ***Designing the Future***

A third area of this initial work involves the outcomes and desires clients bring to coaching. Here the focus is on having clients describe what they want to change or what they want to achieve. Most clients have one or two primary areas of focus. Chances of success are better when clients concentrate on one or two key points of change, so part of the foundation-setting conversation is designed to clarify those key areas. These future outcomes will be the result of achieving goals, fulfilling commitments, changing habits, and bringing a compelling vision to life. The initial conversation also explores who the client will be in order to create that new future.

**Desired Outcome and Goals.** Clients bring a desire for change to coaching. The results they have in mind may be vaguely defined or crystal clear, but in either case, clients have not yet been able to achieve the results they want. Desired outcomes may be as specific as a particular goal, or clients

may want to move toward a certain state of being, such as “balanced,” “living well with a life-threatening illness,” or “more fulfilled with my work.” Part of the initial process will be devoted to clarifying outcomes and, in many cases, refining broadly stated desires into specific goals: What will happen? In what timeframe? And how will clients know they have achieved the results they want? Coach and client work together to clarify the goals as well as develop strategies for achieving them. Just as important to achieving results is putting new practices in place. Eliminating life-draining habits while implementing sustaining, life-giving practices is another important focus of the coaching process.

**Compelling Vision.** We can be pushed down the road by deadlines and expectations and to-do lists. We can be driven by the desire for money or accomplishment or by the promises we make. Or we can be pulled down the road by the gravitational force of a compelling vision, like water running downhill. You can feel the difference between these two forces: pushed or driven on one hand, or pulled irresistibly on the other. Discovering what draws us has the power to overcome the bonds of lethargy and fear. Finding the compelling vision can take any goal, action, or outcome and invest it with new power. An important element in the initial discovery work with clients is uncovering or igniting this vision.

**Who You Need to Be.** The classic definition of “crazy” is to continue to do things the same way and expect different results. The truth is, if nothing changes, nothing changes. Very often, something new on the outside, like a new outcome, includes the creation of something new on the inside. In order to achieve the results they want, clients very likely will need to change attitudes, paradigms, or underlying beliefs. The beginning of a new coaching relationship is an ideal time to peel back the accumulated layers of identity and old roles to uncover the authentic person within.

### ***Orientation to Coaching***

Another outcome of the foundation-setting process is orienting the client to coaching. Even clients who have worked with a coach before could use the opportunity to talk through assumptions and concerns and openly share expectations of coaching and the coach/coachee relationship. In this

way both coach and client take a stand on behalf of the coaching relationship. A clear, forthright conversation helps reinforce frank, unrestrained, and hence Co-Active groundwork.

## Homeostasis

Part of the orientation to coaching ought to include a few words about homeostasis, a natural, often subconscious resistance to change. “Old habits die hard,” as the saying goes. So do old beliefs and old ways of relating to others. Particularly in the middle of change, when the old way is undone and the new way not yet embedded, there is a strong pull back to the familiar, the known, even if it didn’t get clients the results they wanted. Change requires the expenditure of energy, and continuing the process of change requires sustaining energy. Some change will be easy; other change will not be so easy. There will often be a tendency, or a temptation at least, to backslide. It’s better for clients to be aware and prepared, so that if the temptation appears, it does not feel like they are failing. Homeostasis, the natural tendency to keep things just as they are, is also inherent in the system. Every individual—whether a private client or one coached in an organizational setting—lives within a system, and the system itself often contributes to the resistance to change. Again, an awareness of the system’s power can help clients as they move through changes.

And finally, there is a specific counterreaction to change that appears fairly consistently with clients, which might be called “the dip.” For coaches who work with clients on a weekly basis, it often shows up between weeks three and eight, either because change is not happening fast enough or because the initial euphoria of commitment has worn off. Clients realize that talking about action is one thing and actually taking action is quite another. Many coaches start clients with a three-month commitment to help them get past the dip.

## The Bigger Picture

In order for coaching to work, there must be commitment: commitment on the part of the client to exploring, changing, learning, taking risks; commitment to persevering even when it is difficult; commitment to

investing the time and energy. Clients must be willing to go beyond their comfort zones and step into the unknown for the sake of change. Without this commitment, coaching drifts and devolves into chitchat or to-do lists that often don't get done. Fortunately, most clients are energized and willing when they start. This is the perfect time for clients to clarify and declare their commitment.

Coaches, in turn, need to be clear about their commitment to their clients. It is a commitment to dig deeply and courageously, to listen intently to the words spoken and those unspoken. Coaching with this level of commitment can be exciting and inspiring. It will not be trivial. The coach who is committed to clients and their ultimate goals is willing to challenge, incite, motivate, encourage, and sometimes insist that clients take charge. This is the cornerstone "Evoke Transformation" in action. When coaches bring 100 percent of their effort and expertise, and match the client's commitment with their own, there is a truly Co-Active relationship. And it is this mutual commitment and the designed alliance between client and coach that create the safe and courageous space in which clients can do the important work of their lives.

# About the Authors

## **HENRY KIMSEY-HOUSE**

Henry Kimsey-House, CPCC, MCC, and one of the first professional coaches in the 1980s, is the cofounder and lead designer of the provocative, experiential learning programs of The Coaches Training Institute (CTI), the foremost coach training school in the world. CTI and its Co-Active philosophy have revolutionized the lives and careers of more than 35,000 managers, leaders, and coaches throughout the world. An actor since age nine, Kimsey-House honed his insights into human emotion and the narrative process through classical theatrical training and years of stage, television, and film experience. With deep conviction that education should be driven by immersive, contextually based learning and not dry information dumps, Kimsey-House is committed to creating richly engaging and transformative learning environments where retention approaches 80 percent rather than the traditional 20 percent. He continues to develop innovative curricula and collaborate with other dynamic thought leaders, and he is completing a book about transformative leadership. He lives with his wife, Karen Kimsey-House, on the coast of northern California.

## **KAREN KIMSEY-HOUSE**

Karen Kimsey-House, MFA, CPCC, and MCC, is the cofounder and CEO of The Coaches Training Institute (CTI), the foremost coach training school in the world. One of the earliest recognized luminaries in the coaching profession, she founded CTI in 1992 with Laura Whitworth and Henry Kimsey-House. They created the Co-Active philosophy of relationship that informs CTI's world-renowned coaching and leadership

programs. A successful entrepreneur, Kimsey-House founded and directed the Learning Annex San Francisco adult education program in 1986 and grew it into one of the most admired programs under the national Learning Annex brand. She received her MFA in Communications and Theater from Temple University in Philadelphia. Committed to pioneering co-activity in challenged environments and troubled populations, Kimsey-House continues to lead CTI workshops and is a dynamic keynote speaker around the world. On a mission of global, transformative change, she lives with her husband, Henry Kimsey-House, by the Pacific Ocean.

## PHILLIP SANDAHL

Phillip Sandahl is cofounder of Team Coaching International (TCI), which helps organizations excel through the power of teams. Sandahl and cofounder Alexis Phillips are developers of the Team Diagnostic™ team effectiveness model and a suite of four integrated assessment tools used with hundreds of teams worldwide. The original Team Diagnostic™ assessment is available in eighteen languages, and there are now trained, certified coach/facilitators in thirty-three countries.

Sandahl is also a former senior faculty member for The Coaches Training Institute. He has played an important role in the international growth of coaching and is a pioneer in the field of team coaching. Sandahl is an internationally recognized coach, trainer, author, and speaker.

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