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# Niche Learning and Professional Development as a Coach



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## Table of Contents

1. The Pyramid of Learning Experiences :	3
• Building the Picture of Niche Experience as a Coach	
2. Benefits of your Niche in relation to your Development as a Coach	5
3. How to choose the right Development for you as a Coach, in the Here and Now	8
4. How to build a basic Coach Development Plan	11
5. Different forms of CPD	14
6. About Claire	15

## The Pyramid of Learning Experiences: Building the Picture of Niche Experience as a Coach

As a coach, we don't start learning to be a coach from a vacuum. We start from where we are already in our lives. Even the fact of choosing to become a coach, is just that – a choice we make, probably built up from a combination of who we are and what experiences we have gone through in our life.

The Pyramid of Learning is a reminder that it's not just our formal learning and skill development that adds into "Who we are as a coach". We have a foundation based on:

- **How and where we are brought up** – influences from our friends, family, society around us. It's how we learnt things were done. Often, our values and beliefs stems from here, and may be things that we need to "unlearn" as we grow clearer about what really works for us.
- **Our life experiences** – how we perceive life has treated us, events which have shaped who we are today. For instance, some of my biggest learning's have been academic, along with my proudest achievement of getting into Oxford. Being "good at" learning set a lifelong love of learning. Other life experiences add into how and why and what we may want to coach, for instance, going through events like having children, redundancy, being in a job or situation you don't like and choose to leave, grief, all shape our decisions about how and where we focus our resources, and niche as a coach.
- **Our work experience** is one that is highlighted as one key to our niche as a coach. We bring with us to coaching our own wealth of experience in different sectors and industries. Even if we choose to work as a coach independently, bringing our knowledge, technical expertise, contacts and qualifications means we can show up with expertise as well as our coaching skills.
- **Our interests** may not seem to flow into our Professional Development as Coaches, however do add into how we like to learn, what information we retain and more importantly, focus on the fact that we are rounded people. And in turn, what starts out as an interest may over time, become the basis for a new niche as we build up knowledge, interest and experience.

So, all the above 4 stages of the Pyramid are both what has come before us in our learning, what shapes us as we respond today, and is also an ongoing and integrated part of what we bring to our clients as coaches.

Where this becomes really relevant for us in the context of Professional Coaching, is how to take that forwards and continue to develop mastery as a coach.

Once we have decided to become a coach, we then go through the next stage of the Pyramid, which is General Coach training.

Even though I have called this General Coach Training, your life and experiences may have caused you to focus on different types of Coach training – for instance, Life Coach training, Corporate Coach training, Business Coach training, or Executive Coach training. All will give you a good foundation in general skills required to become a coach.

The International Coach Federation highlights that their minimum expectations for their first level of accreditation, the ACC, or Associate Certified Coach, is 60 hours of Coach Specific Training, 10 hours working with a mentor coach, and 100 hours of coaching work.

So this General Coach training is your foundation to what you will go on to become as a coach.

An interesting article recently by Dave Buck of Coachville asked “Have you Earned the Right to Coach?”

<http://coachingcommons.org/featured/have-you-earned-the-right-to-coach/>

This really fits with what I talked about in the top section, that your past experiences and ongoing learning add up as really important as part of your energy and expertise that you bring with you to coaching.

What training as a coach, and using your niche as a coach to build expertise gives you over time, is Mastery as a Coach.

In the next section, we’ll explore this in more detail.

## Benefits of your Niche in relation to your Development as a Coach

When you have a clear niche, target market and solution, you stand out from the crowd. It also brings with it other benefits that you may not have thought about, having created your niche predominantly to be more targeted in your marketing.

In your development as a coach, there are many ways you could choose to develop, and many courses you could do.

Just looking at 2 sources, shows the amount of support, resources, training and professional development you could do as a coach – never mind how much money you could spend!

The Euro-Coach List <http://www.eurocoachlist.com/> a coaching networking list I am a member of, has had since the start of June 2009, and up to today, August 12<sup>th</sup> 2009, 46 separate adverts for some kind of professional development, from it's members. So mainly that doesn't include formal coach training, but includes more niche training and ongoing professional development.

The International Coach Federation lists on its list of approved courses and continuing coach education, a staggering 306 individual courses you could attend.

### **81 Accredited Coach Training Programs (ACTP)**

- A minimum of 125 hours of coach-specific training
- Training on all [ICF Core Competencies](#) and the [ICF Code of Ethics](#)
- A minimum of 6 observed coaching sessions with an experienced coach
- A comprehensive final exam that evaluates a student's coaching competency

### **59 Approved Coach Specific Training Hour Programs (ACSTH)**

- A minimum of 30 hours of coach-specific training
- Training on all [ICF Core Competencies](#) and the [ICF Code of Ethics](#)
- Students the opportunity to use pre-approved training hours for an ACC, PCC or MCC Portfolio application

### **166 Continuing Coach Education Programs (CCE)**

- Satisfy the renewal requirements for credentialed coaches renewing their ACC, PCC, or MCC credentials
- Further the on-going development of the professional coach
- Apply toward coach-specific training requirements for an ICF Credential

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So, how is this relevant when it comes to thinking about your professional development as a coach, in relation to your specific niche that you are marketing in?

Let's look again at the picture painted by Dave Buck



Source: <http://coachingcommons.org/featured/have-you-earned-the-right-to-coach/>

When you use your niche to focus your learning and development, you are adding to the Value you bring as a Coach.

### **And why is that important?**

- It increases your confidence when you know what you are talking about.
- You have more skills, tools and resources to offer your client when you are an expert in your area.
- You bring out your natural talents, the “who you are” because you are comfortable with how you are working
- Now that the definition of coaching as completely non directive is shifting, it gives you the opportunity to be as resourceful as you can for your clients.
- The fact that you are building your path to mastery as a coach means that you will start to stand out both as a Thought Leader in your Field, and as the “Go to” person for clients to work with.

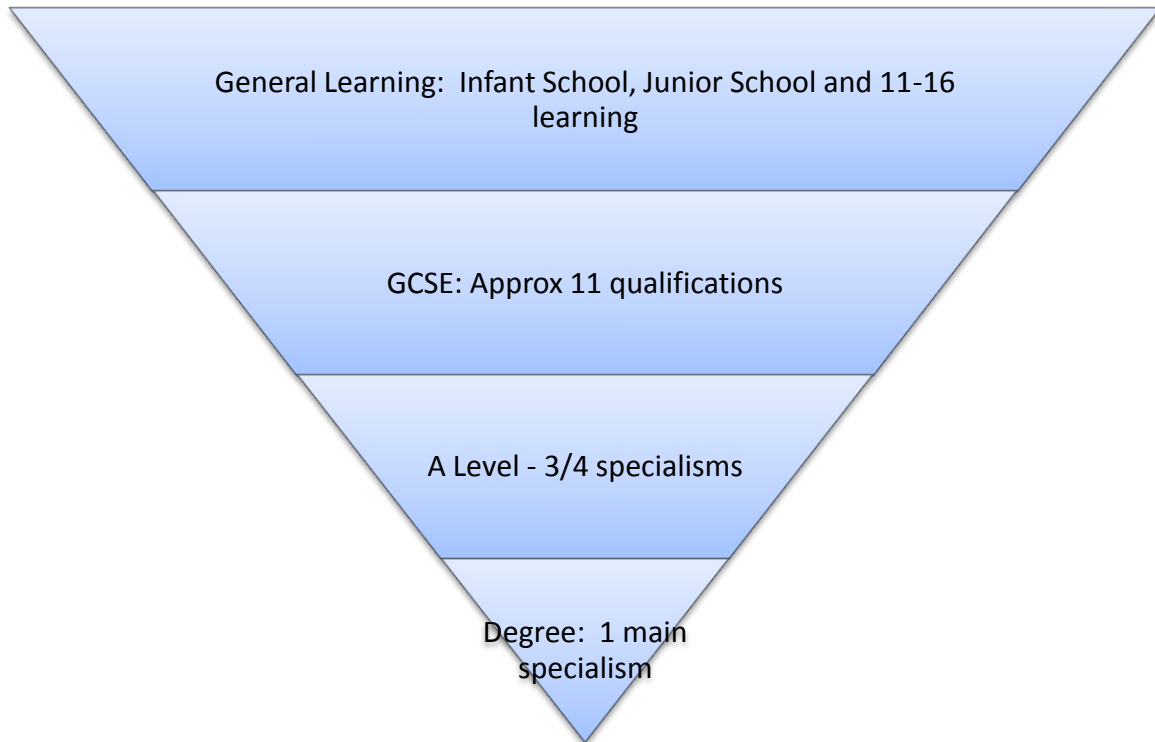
### **It also brings some other personal benefits to you as the coach:**

- It enables you to build your expertise deep, rather than across a wide range of areas
- By building your knowledge more deeply, you are building on what has gone before, rather than feeling like you are starting again every time you jump in to a new subject.
- You’ll start to build more contacts in the area you focus on, so you’ll have more referral partners, more contacts and more potential work.
- You’ll be able to build yourself criteria of what kinds of courses are necessary or relevant for your professional development
- You’ll be able to see / quantify how that course is a benefit to you in running your business. Do you need to do the course right now? It’s easy to get caught up in learning for the sake of learning. Considering it in terms of business value, and business return on investment, helps you to keep your feet on the ground.
- It helps save you money, as you consider not doing courses right now and integrating the learning
- You can start to play a longer game in your coaching and learning process – rather than thinking you have to do all the courses right now, today you can take your time and do the ones that fit with your personal circumstances.

**Focusing your Learning on your Niche area helps you move towards Mastery and Expertise as a Coach. And from there, to add Value to your clients and the Coaching Profession.**

Think about when you were at school. The path was set out to give you a wide understanding, and then to narrow that in to key themes.

Depending on where you left the education system, it looks like this:



So, we are used to the idea that we get more specialised as we want to learn more in depth about our subject, and gain mastery of it.

The focus and benefit for us in our business as a Professional Coach is to:

- Build our credibility through the fact we have both experience, and depth of knowledge in our chosen niche
- Build our visibility as we attend regular CPD events, talk and share what we have learnt with others
- Build our outreach as we share our knowledge through articles, speaking etc
- Keep us tightly focused where it will bring most benefit.

## How to choose the right Development for you as a Coach, in the Here and Now

What we have seen so far is that the road to Professional Development, where it meets expertise in your niche, is one of the road to Mastery.

2 examples here of what you may see as the road to Mastery.

### **ICF Coaching Definition.**

The ICF defines a Master Coach (MCC) as The Expert Coach.

- 200 documented hours of coach specific training
- 10 hours work with a mentor coach
- Minimum of 2500 coaching hours (2250 paid hours within that)
- 3 references
- Passing ICF exams
- Renewing at 40 hours of Continuing Coach Education a year)

### **Michael Neill – 10,000 Hours to Mastery.**

Michael Neill, well known coach and author, wrote a great post on his site relating to the search for Mastery. <http://www.geniuscatalyst.com>

It was based on research and said 10,000 was truly being world class in what you did. A highlight from what he said here:

- *at 1 hour . . . you know some basics*
- *at 10 hours . . . you have a pretty good grasp of the basics*
- *at 100 hours . . . you are fairly expert*
- *at 1000 hours . . . you are an experienced expert*
- *at 10000 hours . . . you are a master*

For me, both these come together to bring a picture of what building Mastery in your niche is all about.

2 different elements:

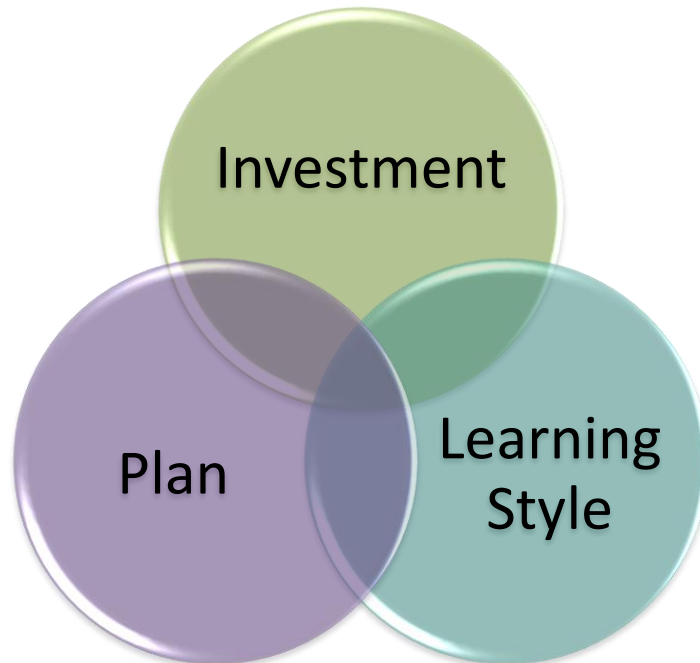
- Taking Action to build experience coaching in your specific niche
- Learning in your specific niche to build up additional learning, knowledge and skills to apply back into your business.

If you are going to work towards either picture of Mastery, it will help you to focus on your niche clearly so that you can build up that depth of knowledge.

So, how can you get started with that?

That's what we will cover in the next section on Coaching Development Plans.

Before we do, let's talk about how you can assess what is the right development for you.



When you invest in your Professional Development, it's not just about the Finances. Key elements to think about when you are planning are:

- ✓ **Financial Investment.** Total Cost for the Learning Experience, including any accommodation, mentoring support, reading materials, travel etc. It is surprising how much you may add on to the cost that you first look at
- ✓ **Time Investment.** You only have a limited amount of time. What is the right level of course or learning for you right now? Considering this can stop you getting overwhelmed by taking on too much studying for your individual circumstances.
- ✓ **Energy:** Even if it looks like you have enough time, consider whether you have the energy for this as well as your coaching business development and other roles you have. When will you fit in the learning?

Working with your energy helps when you learn in a way which fits with your **Learning Style**. Things to consider are:

- ✓ How recently did you do formal learning and what level is the course at?
- ✓ How do you like to learn – doing, or observing? Does your chosen course meet those learning styles?
- ✓ If you get stuck, can you get support?
- ✓ Do you prefer to learn face to face, or via phone or reading?

- ✓ How much practical work is there in the course? Coaching skills specifically, are very experiential. Will you get the chance to try them out in a safe environment?

Finally, it's good to think about how what you want to learn fits into your **Coaching Development Plan and Long Term Learning**.

We'll head onto the next section to look at this in more depth.

## How to build a basic Coach Development Plan

When you are working towards Mastery as a Coach, you want to consider up front what you want to be a master in. You'll probably find that there are a combination of skills that you want to include within your plan in order to not only be a great coach, but continue to stay in business effectively.

Some elements you may want to consider mastering, and build into your learning and development plan, are:

1. **Coaching Skills.** Building on your basic coach training with advanced coaching skills and techniques. Keeping up to date with what is happening in the coaching industry and best practice.
2. **Niche Specific Knowledge:** Keeping up to date and at the top of your game. Learning specific skills and techniques for your audience and industry. Keeping up to date with news and events.
3. **Business and Marketing Skills:** It's great to be a great coach, however if you don't at least know the basics of this, you may find that it's tough to get clients and therefore tough to build up your practical coaching experience. No good being a master of learning and no actual coaching!

X steps to setting up an effective development plan:

### 1. Define where you want to go.

It may be over time that this is something you review and do again, however having an end in mind means you can start to plan in what your learning goals are and when you'd like to achieve them by. For instance, if you are, or planning to be, a member of a Professional Association, you may want to look at their definitions of Competence. If you want to be an MCC in the International Coach Federation ultimately, what level do you need?

### 2. Create Key milestones.

As Michael Neill pointed out, it's daunting to think about becoming a ten thousand hour master of a subject, especially if you are just starting out. So what are key points for you? If you are a member of an association such as the ICF, then these may be set out to help you, in the different membership levels, ACC and PCC.

Once you know what the key levels are, you can think about when you want to achieve them by. This will be the start of a timeline for you.

You can then test to see how realistic these are for you, by breaking down the tasks into what you'd need to do each year, or each month, in terms of training requirements, continuous learning, and coaching practice.

### 3. Think about what "good enough" looks like and what level you want to be at.

It may be for instance, in the Business and Marketing area, that you want “just enough” to understand what you need to do and be a business person in the way you run your Coaching Business. Whilst as a Coach in the Career Sector, you may want to become expert, and also to share that expertise through to other people by becoming an author and speaker.

How you put your expertise across may also bring to your mind other skills you need to learn in order to attain that goal successfully. For instance, you may also need to learn about publishing, or about effective public speaking.

#### **4. Take a Success Audit of where you are starting from.**

Get a clear picture of where you are now, and celebrate it.

Do you log all your coaching hours and training/ CPD hours? If not, now is a great time to start! It can be very hard work applying for Professional Accreditation if you aren't tracking and keeping documents as you go. I always recommend putting together a folder for this, along with contact details of your clients, so you have all this information to hand. It's also a great way to set yourself up for success, to remind yourself how far you have already come on the journey to Mastery, and what results you already got.

#### **5. Brainstorm what you need to do to attain your goals**

Get creative – give yourself some quiet time and think about all the things you could do, would like to do, and love to do. Think about if money was no object. Think about how you could find out more. Get it all down on paper. Build yourself a wish list.

#### **6. Get clear about what you can invest in your path to Mastery.**

Don't just think about financial cost of courses, think about how much energy you have, other commitments, time to work with clients, time to market, time to learn, anything which may be a factor in your path to mastery. As I said before, it's no good spending all the time learning and none earning!

Doing this up front will help you set a more realistic picture of what you can invest in terms of your Professional Development Plan, before you set it up.

#### **7. Create yourself specific Goals to work on in the here and now.**

Having the big picture is great, so it's really good to document all the thoughts you had so far and your long term plans to mastery.

It is also really important to make this a tangible action plan – what will you aim for this year, both in terms of coaching hours, and in terms of learning and development?

You can then put these down as your top goals, maybe no more than 3-5 for the year.

#### **8. Research your goal more thoroughly to make the best investment.**

No matter what investment you are making you want to be making the best one possible for your time, money and effort.

This is where research into CPD is key. A few questions to get you started:

- ✓ How does it fit in with your schedule?
- ✓ Is it a recognised qualification, who by?
- ✓ What are other coaches in your niche studying? (Linked IN profiles can and websites are a good place to look)
- ✓ Can you afford it, right now? If not, when?
- ✓ What return on investment are you looking for from it?
- ✓ What purpose does it serve in your plan?
- ✓ Is it recognised in your industry?
- ✓ Does it fit with how you like to learn?
- ✓ Does it fit with your professional association guidelines on CPD?
- ✓ Will you get the support you need?
- ✓ Who else did the course? Could you speak with them about it?
- ✓ Who leads the course? What reputation to they have?
- ✓ Does the location work for you?

#### **9. Reflect on your learning**

As you go along, use that log we mentioned. Use your coach and your supervisor to reflect on what your learning is doing for your professional development. How is it changing the way that you work? What would deepen your learning, even further?

#### **10. Act on, and Leverage your Learning for even more Mastery and Credibility.**

Don't hide your learning under a bushel! Get out there and start using it, and working with clients using your skills, where it is appropriate to do so. Mastery comes not only in the learning, but the application of your learning so you become unconsciously competent in the way you work.

Leverage your niche skills and learning not only in the way you directly work with clients, but how you can continue to add value to them, share resources.

Leverage by becoming a thought leader in your niche by sharing best practice, writing articles and ideas that help you become THE person to work with.

## Examples of Professional Development:

I thought I'd finish with a list of some of the kinds of Professional Development you may want to consider. Your Coach training organisation or professional association may cover others.

Read through the guidelines for your specific case, to check you have the right sort of documentation for what you personally need!

### **Formal Coach Training**

These initial coach training courses will cover the skills needed for training as a coach. Some will also cover skills to run a coach training business.

Courses may be face to face, or distance learning, or a combination.

This is where you build your solid foundation that your specific niche builds onto.

### **Formal Coach Training in your niche area.**

After your initial qualification you may research and discover that there are courses which give you either advanced coaching skills and techniques, or skills and techniques in a specific area. Examples include Career Coach training, Small Business Coach training and Parent Coaching.

### **Formal Continuing Coach Education.**

This may include short courses in your niche coaching subject, teleclasses relating to your area, classes run by your coach training school or professional association. Some may only count for CCE with your Professional Association if they are live classes (rather than recordings)

### **Conferences**

Conferences are a great way to learn as well as to network with others in your area. This may include general coach conferences, or specific industry expertise.

## Informal Learning

### **Articles and Journals and Trade Magazines.**

There are a number of coaching journals, articles – reading these will help you seek out further courses, reading and keep up to date. The same is true of finding Journals and trade magazines relating to your niche or industry sector.

### **Books**

One of the easiest and cheapest ways to continue to grow your knowledge. If you use a library or swap with other coaches, it can be even more low cost!

## About Claire Chapman



Claire Chapman is “The Coaches Coach and Supervisor”

She works with coaches who want to, or need to, create a breathing space to explore who they are as a coach, develop approaches to client situations and grow into masterful coaches.

Claire is on her own journey, both to mastery as a coach, and to build mindfulness into her coaching work and the way she live her life. A constant “doer” and high achiever, Claire knows how to get things done and how to deliver, and has had both success academically as an Oxford graduate, lifelong learner, and in the corporate world as a successful and authentic people manager in retail and financial services.

Finishing in the corporate world in November 2008 to take her coaching business full time, Claire knows many of the challenges facing coaches, from starting coach training, to understanding how to run a business and market your business successfully, as well as how to continually and with presence, improve the work she does to add real value and transformation to her clients.

**Claire offers mindful coaching and supervision for coaches who want to work on their coaching practice via [www.supervisionforcoaches.com](http://www.supervisionforcoaches.com)**

**Mindful Coaching Supervision:** Supporting coaches on their journey as coaches, giving a confidential space to explore client issues, reactions to coaching situations, and developing their coaching career.

**Claire offers practical coaching support for coaches via [www.growasacoach.com](http://www.growasacoach.com) including:**

**Accreditation coaching for trainee coaches:** Helping coaches clearly understand accreditation requirements, create documentation to meet requirements, coach through challenges and difficulties and support growth of coaching skills.

**Get Clients Now™:** Claire is a licensed facilitator of the 28 day Marketing Program created by leading coach C J Hayden.

**Linked In and Social Media Coaching:** How to practically set up your profile in line with your business aims as a coach.

**Mindful Coaching for Coaches:** If you are working on personal transitions or business goals yourself and would like to do so in a practical and mindful manner. Includes looking at vision, values, mission, and who you are as a coach and how that shows up in the work you do.

**Business Coaching for Coaches:** Ongoing work with coaches at all stages of development on running their business successfully.