

A FIELD GUIDE FOR LEADERS AND ORGANISATIONS



How to Hire a Coach

Seeing past the certificate



SUDHAKAR REDDY GADE

NIRVEDHA EXECUTIVE COACHING SOLUTIONS

“A coach's job is to walk beside someone while they do something hard. It's fair to ask — has this person ever done that to themselves?”

THE QUESTION THIS BOOK IS BUILT TO HELP YOU
ANSWER



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Sudhakar Reddy Gade

THE ORGANISATIONAL PHYSICIST

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A Note Before You Begin

Every year, more people call themselves a coach. Fewer of them can actually move a life.

This document is not a sales brochure. I am a coach myself, and yes — if it helps you find the right one, some of you will find your way to me. But that is not why this exists. It exists because I've watched too many capable leaders hire the wrong coach, pay real money, give real trust, and get nothing but a certificate on a wall and a slightly better vocabulary for their own stagnation.

Coaching is increasingly treated as a credentialing problem. Get the letters after the name, list the training hours, and the market assumes competence follows. It doesn't. I hold those letters myself — ICF, and Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder-Centred Coaching among them — and I can tell you plainly: the certificate told my supervisors I had completed a training programme. It never once told a client whether I could actually change their life.

This document is my attempt to hand you a better set of questions than "are they certified." Use it whether or not you ever hire me.

— *Sudhakar Reddy Gade*

Organisational Physicist, Founder, Nirvedha Executive Coaching Solutions

PART ONE · THE PROBLEM

CHAPTER ONE

01

The Certificate Trap

*Two coaches. Identical badge. A twenty-five-fold gap
you'd never see.*



The Certificate Trap

Two coaches sit across from you in back-to-back discovery calls. Both list “ICF Certified” on their website. Both show you the same badge.

One of them has completed roughly 100 hours of supervised coaching — the minimum required for the entry-level ICF credential. The other has completed over 2,500 hours — the threshold for the Federation's highest credential, Master Certified Coach. That is not a small gap. That is a twenty-five-fold difference in lived practice, sitting behind an identical badge.

You would never know it from the website.

This is the first thing to understand about hiring a coach: certification proves someone completed a training pathway. It does not prove they can hold a room, read a silence, or tell a CEO something she does not want to hear in a way she can actually receive. Coaching remains, in most of the world, a profession anyone can enter by declaring themselves in it. The credentialing bodies — ICF chief among them — have done real work bringing standards to a once-unregulated field, and that work matters. But a standard is a floor, not a ceiling. It filters out the worst. It says almost nothing about the best.

I hold both certifications this document will reference — ICF, and separately, Marshall Goldsmith's Stakeholder-Centred Coaching methodology. I pursued both deliberately, after four years of coaching inside a large organisation, because I wanted to see the

craft through two different lenses before I trusted my own. I don't regret either. But if you asked me which of the two made me a better coach — the letters, or the fourteen years of engagements since — the answer isn't close.

So here is the more useful question, and the one this document is built to help you answer:

Not “is this person certified” — but “can this person actually move you?”

Physics recognises four fundamental forces that hold the universe together — forces you cannot see, but whose effects you cannot miss. Coaching, done properly, rests on four forces of its own. None of them show up on a certificate. All of them show up, unmistakably, in a room.

“

A standard is a **floor**, not a **ceiling**. It filters out the worst. It says almost nothing about the best.

THE FOUR FORCES



FORCE 01

Motivation

Can they move you?

FORCE 02

Influence

Do you actually change?

FORCE 03

Partnership

Would you trust them?

FORCE 04

Proof

Have they tested their own limits?

*None of these show up on a certificate. All of them show
up in a room.*

PART TWO · THE FOUR FORCES

CHAPTER TWO · FORCE 01

02

The Force of Motivation

Can they move you — not just inspire you?



The Force of Motivation

Motivation, badly understood, gets confused with enthusiasm. A motivating coach, in the popular imagination, is someone energetic — someone who sends you off with a phrase you'll repeat in the lift.

That is not motivation. That is performance.

Real motivational force in a coach shows up later than the session — in the gap between a Tuesday conversation and what you actually do differently by Friday. It is the difference between a coach who leaves you inspired and a coach who leaves you unable to go back to the old way, because something in the conversation made the old way genuinely uncomfortable to keep choosing.

I have sat with senior leaders who could recite every leadership framework in circulation and still run their teams exactly as they did a decade ago. Knowing was never their gap. Moving was.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Ask a prospective coach to describe not a client who felt better after coaching, but a client who *did something differently* — something specific, dated, observable — because of a conversation. A coach who can produce this instantly, with detail, has been in that seat many times. A coach who reaches for something vague ("she found more clarity," "he felt more confident") may be a warm presence. Warmth is not the same force as motivation.

Ask, too, how the coach sustains their own motivation on the days coaching itself feels hard — because a coach who has never had to move themselves has no real theory of how movement works in another person.

GREEN FLAGS

Specific, dated examples of behaviour change. A coach who can describe the moment resistance turned, not just the outcome.

RED FLAGS

Motivational language with no behavioural evidence. A coach who talks mostly about how clients *feel*, rarely what they *do* differently.

PART TWO · THE FOUR FORCES

CHAPTER THREE · FORCE 02

03

The Force of Influence

What's still holding, six months after the session ends?



The Force of Influence

Influence is motivation's more patient cousin. Motivation gets you moving in the room. Influence is what's still holding six months later, in a meeting the coach will never sit in.

This is the force organisations most often fail to measure, because it is the hardest to observe directly. You don't get to watch your coach's influence work on someone else. You only get to hear about it — which is precisely why the *quality* of what you're told matters so much.

A coach with real influence in their track record can tell you, unprompted, about a leader who walked into the engagement doing one thing and walked out — measurably, with a timeframe attached — doing another. Not “he grew as a leader.” Something you could put on a timeline: a promotion, a retention save, a team's attrition figure moving, a decision style that changed under pressure and stayed changed under the next pressure too.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Ask for a before-and-after, with dates. Ask what changed *structurally* — in the person's habits, decisions, or relationships — not just what changed in how they talk about themselves. Influence that only shows up in how someone narrates their own growth, and never in what they actually do, is closer to flattery than coaching.

GREEN FLAGS

Specific, dated, structural change — described with the same precision whether the story flatters the coach or not.

RED FLAGS

Influence measured only in testimonials about how the coach made someone *feel*, never in what changed in how they *operate*.

PART TWO · THE FOUR FORCES

CHAPTER FOUR · FORCE 03

04

The Force of Partnership

*Would you hand them the thing you haven't told
anyone?*



The Force of Partnership

Here is the test most people skip, because it's the hardest to run in a single conversation: would you tell this person the thing you have not told your board, your spouse, or your closest friend at work?

Executive coaching, at its most useful, sits exactly at that edge — the fear you cannot admit to your team, the doubt you cannot show your investors, the family pressure quietly shaping decisions you present as purely strategic. A coach who never earns access to that layer is doing something adjacent to coaching. Consulting, perhaps. Mentoring, perhaps. Not this.

Authentic partnership cannot be demonstrated in a sales call the way a framework can. But it leaves traces you can watch for.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Notice how a prospective coach handles silence in your first conversation. Do they fill every pause, or can they sit inside one without rushing you to speak? Notice how they respond when you push back on something they've said — do they defend the point, or get curious about your resistance to it? And notice, carefully, how they talk about other clients. A coach who name-drops, even flatteringly, or shares identifiable detail about someone else's engagement in a sales conversation with you, has just shown you exactly what they will do with your details in someone else's.

GREEN FLAGS

Comfortable silence.
Curiosity, not defensiveness,
when challenged. Airtight
discretion about other
clients.

RED FLAGS

Cannot resist filling silence.
Gets defensive under light
pushback. Discusses
another client's specifics,
however well-intentioned it
sounds.

PART TWO · THE FOUR FORCES

CHAPTER FIVE · FORCE 04

05

The Force of Proof

Has this person tested their own limits — with no one watching?



The Force of Proof

This is the force almost no hiring guide tells you to check, and it's the one I believe matters most.

A coach's job, stripped to its essence, is to walk beside someone while they do something hard — hold a mirror up, push past a comfortable ceiling, sit with the discomfort of changing a pattern that has worked well enough for years. It is reasonable to ask: has this person ever done that to themselves?

Not metaphorically. Literally. Has the coach in front of you ever chosen the harder path when nobody was measuring them for it — when there was no client watching, no fee attached, no professional reputation riding on the outcome?

I'll offer my own answer to this — briefly, as one example, not because it's the only kind of proof that counts, but because it's the one I can speak to honestly.

180/120

MY BLOOD PRESSURE, SOME YEARS
INTO A CORPORATE CAREER I WAS, BY
EVERY VISIBLE METRIC, SUCCEEDING AT

I was leading, delivering, succeeding by every metric that showed up in a performance review — and quietly falling apart in the metrics no one was reviewing. I had spent years telling other people to build sustainable habits while building none of my own. That gap became impossible to keep ignoring.

What followed wasn't dramatic. It was slow, and it was mine to do. I started running because I couldn't yet run. Years later, I stood at the start line of a half marathon with a personal best that would eventually reach two hours flat. I moved to distances I had no business attempting on paper — a Randonneur 600-kilometre brevet, ridden solo, self-supported, against the clock, the way that discipline demands. Later still, races most people wouldn't attempt with a support crew, let alone win: the Great Himalayan Ultra, six hundred kilometres through Leh, Drass, and Thicksey; the Deccan Cliffhanger, six hundred and forty-three kilometres from Pune to Goa. I finished both No. 1, alongside a young rider I'd had the privilege of coaching — someone who had never ridden seriously before I met her, and who stood on a podium in the Himalayas a few years later.

That isn't the point I most want you to take from this chapter, though. The point is smaller, and more useful to you as a reader evaluating a coach who isn't me: a community of ordinary cyclists I trained alongside, in Kharghar, went from an entirely sedentary lifestyle to completing Ironman triathlons and ultra distances beyond fifty kilometres. Not because I told them to. Because the principles that moved me — small, honest, unglamorous, repeated — turned out to transfer. The same discipline that gets a leader

through a difficult quarter gets a body through a mountain pass. I didn't design that transfer. I only noticed it, and it changed how I coach.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

You are not looking for an athlete. Most excellent coaches have never run an ultra marathon, and that's entirely fine. What you're looking for is evidence — in whatever form it takes for that particular person — that they have chosen a difficult, unglamorous, self-directed path with no audience and no fee attached. Ask directly:

“What's something difficult you've done in the last two years that had nothing to do with your coaching business?”

Watch the answer. A coach with real proof answers immediately, specifically, without needing the question reframed as flattering. A coach without it reaches for something abstract — “personal growth,” “my own journey” — that never quite lands on an actual, nameable thing they did.

GREEN FLAGS

A specific, self-directed challenge, chosen without an audience, described in concrete detail.

RED FLAGS

Vague gestures at “continuous growth.” A coach whose only evidence of self-development is more coaching certification.

PART THREE · THE EVIDENCE

CHAPTER SIX

06

What Real Evidence Looks Like

*Testimonials are curated. Ask for the paperwork
behind them instead.*



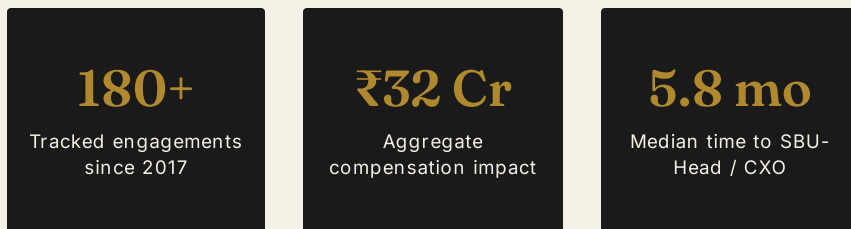
What Real Evidence Looks Like

By now you have a framework for the conversation. This chapter is about the paperwork behind it — what a genuine track record should be able to show you, and what should make you pause.

Most coaches will hand you testimonials. Testimonials are curated by definition; a coach chooses which three sentences make the website. They tell you almost nothing you couldn't have guessed a good coach would collect.

What you should ask for instead is specificity: how many engagements, over what period, with outcomes you could independently verify if you wanted to? Not vague enthusiasm — numbers, dated, attributable.

In my own practice, that specificity looks like this:



I share these not because a number alone proves anything, but because *this is the kind of specificity a genuine track record can offer, and vague enthusiasm cannot*. If a coach cannot give you anything like this — a number, a timeframe, an outcome you could ask to verify — ask why.

Then ask for a reference the coach did not choose: a past client you can call directly, with permission to ask about outcomes, timeline, and whether they would hire the coach again. A coach confident in their own work will make this easy. A coach who stalls, deflects, or offers only curated quotes has told you something important without saying a word.

PART FOUR · THE TOOL

CHAPTER SEVEN

07

The Hiring Checklist

A working scorecard, question bank, and red-flag list — yours to use on anyone.



The Hiring Checklist

Use this as a working tool — in a discovery call, in an internal evaluation for a senior leader's coaching engagement, or simply as a private scorecard while you decide.

SCORE EACH FORCE FROM 1 TO 5

FORCE	WHAT YOU'RE RATING	SCORE
Motivation	Specific, dated behaviour change — or only a feeling?	
Influence	A structural, timelined before-and-after?	
Partnership	Comfortable with silence, airtight on other clients?	
Proof	Named something hard, chosen with no audience?	

FIFTEEN QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING

MOTIVATION

1. Describe a client who did something differently within a month of working with you — what, specifically, changed?
2. How do you sustain your own motivation on the days coaching feels hard?
3. What's the difference between a session that felt good and a session that actually worked?

INFLUENCE

4. Tell me about a leader whose behaviour was still different six months after you stopped working together.
5. What's an engagement where the change didn't hold? What did you learn?
6. How do you know when influence has taken root, versus when a client is telling you what you want to hear?

PARTNERSHIP

7. What's your confidentiality boundary, in practice?
8. Describe a moment a client pushed back hard on you. What did you do?
9. What do you do in a session when the client goes silent?

PROOF

10. What's something difficult you've done in the last two years that had nothing to do with your coaching business?
11. What's a limiting pattern in your own life you're actively working on right now?
12. Who coaches you?

GENERAL DILIGENCE

13. Can you give me a reference I can call directly — not one you've curated?
14. Describe a situation where coaching wasn't the right fit for a prospective client, and you said so.
15. What's your process, in one or two sentences — not the marketing version?

RED FLAGS THAT SHOULD END THE CONVERSATION

- Cannot name a single specific, dated outcome
- Shares identifiable detail about another client, unprompted
- Gets defensive rather than curious when you push back
- Has no answer to "what's hard that you've chosen for yourself"
- Cannot produce a reference you didn't have to ask twice for

PART FOUR · THE TOOL

CHAPTER EIGHT

08

Before You Hire Anyone

Including me. A closing question, turned back on the reader.



Before You Hire Anyone — Including Me

If you've read this far, you already have a better framework than most people bring to this decision. Use it on me, if you're considering it. Use it on anyone.

But there's a mirror worth turning on yourself before you close this document. Every Force in this guide has a version pointed inward. Not "can my coach motivate me" but "am I willing to be moved." Not "will they influence me" but "will I let something actually change, past the point where it's comfortable." Not "can I trust them with my unspoken truth" but "am I willing to say it out loud to anyone." And not "have they tested their own limits" but — have you tested yours, lately, at anything?

Coaching is not, at its core, a service you purchase. It's a passion the right coach cannot help but live — in how they run their own life, not only in how they run your sessions. If it doesn't show up in the coach when nobody's paying them to perform it, it's unlikely to show up in you either.

I hope this document has been useful, whoever you eventually choose to work with. If it turns out to be me, I'd be glad of it. If it isn't — ask the questions in Chapter Seven anyway. They're yours now.

— *Sudhakar Reddy Gade*

**Has this person ever tested
their own limits?**

Have you?

A Short Glossary of Coaching Credentials

ICF — International Coaching Federation

The largest global coaching body. Credentials run ACC (Associate, roughly 100 hours minimum), PCC (Professional, roughly 500 hours), and MCC (Master, 2,500+ hours). All three can appear as “ICF Certified” on a website; the practical experience behind that phrase can vary by a factor of twenty-five.

Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder-Centred Coaching

A methodology, not a credentialing body in the ICF sense, built around gathering ongoing feedback from a leader's actual stakeholders rather than the coach's own observation alone.

EMCC — European Mentoring and Coaching Council

A second major international body, with its own competency framework and credentialing levels, more established in parts of Europe than ICF.

“Certified Coach”

A phrase with no legal protection in most jurisdictions. Anyone can use it. Always ask which body certified them, and at what level.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sudhakar Reddy Gade

The Organisational Physicist

Sudhakar Reddy Gade is the Founder and Executive Director of Nirvedha Executive Coaching Solutions, an executive coaching and leadership advisory practice based in Hyderabad. He applies classical and quantum physics, Vedantic philosophy, and empirical behavioural science to leadership transformation — an approach he calls Organisational Physics.

Before founding Nirvedha in 2017, he spent two and a half decades in corporate leadership across pharmaceutical sales, KPO operations, and global IT delivery. He holds credentials from the International Coaching Federation and in Marshall Goldsmith's Stakeholder-Centred Coaching methodology, and is the author of five books, including *The Physics of Leadership*.

He has coached over 180 tracked engagements since 2017, working with senior leaders and CEOs across industries. Outside the practice, he is an endurance cyclist and the coach behind two outright wins at the Great Himalayan Ultra and the Deccan Cliffhanger.

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Most guides on hiring a coach tell you to look past the certificate. Almost none tell you what to look for instead. This one does — four forces, fifteen questions, and a scorecard you can use on anyone, including the author.



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