



# THE ICC ACADEMY NEWSLETTER

THE NEWSLETTER FOR GROWING GREAT COACHES

FEBRUARY 2025

## Sense-making skills for your coaching toolkit



Hi everyone,

We hope you are enjoying the long, hot New Zealand summer.

In simple terms, to be a coach is to host powerful conversations. To help people explore and understand themselves better, along with their context and their options. To make change of some sort – whether that’s a shift in mindset, a small experiment in the world, or a bold new choice.

There are obvious skillsets that a coach needs – like building rapport, asking powerful questions, listening well, structuring plans, and holding clients gently to account. But in the middle of that process, at the pivot point between understanding how things are, and reorienting to consider how things might be, there’s a vital step. Sense-making. Sense-making skills are critical in coaching, and we’re going to unpack them today.

### What is sense-making?

The Oxford Dictionary define sense-making as “the action or process of making sense of or giving meaning to something, especially new developments and experiences.” When we sense-make, we reflect on our experiences and create theories or stories about who we are, and how the world is. Those stories then influence how we think about the world, and the choices we make.

But we’re faced with a constant stream of stimuli, every day. So how do we make sense of it all?

When we look back over our lives, we break up the steady flow of experiences into discrete events or periods of time, and then focus on certain moments or experiences, and ascribe them with meaning. These moments act as “seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring,” says Weick (1995) a founding author in this field.

The critical point here is that we have some agency about the moments we choose to focus on, and the meaning that we ascribe to those moments. For instance, say your client gives a presentation at work, and they speak clearly for 90% of it, but get a bit muddled during the other 10%. One person may focus on the 10% and berate themselves for being useless. Another may focus on the 10% and get curious about how they might improve next time. A third person might focus on the 90% of the talk that went well, and celebrate their performance. The scenario is the same, but the sense-making and the stories around the event are different, and they lead people to feel differently, and act differently in the world.

As coaches, we can help to stress-test the stories that our clients tell, and rewrite any stories or sense-making frameworks that are holding our clients back.

### How can you hone your sense-making skills?

Humans are innately motivated to make sense of the world, so our sense-making skillsets are naturally quite robust. However, as a coach you can still hone these skills, and we recommend the following steps.

#### 1) Listen deeply

When you’re sense-making, you’re not just listening to content, but also to:

- Speech patterns, for instance, any repeated word, phrase or theme
- Body language signals, for instance, a shift in energy or tone, when certain topics come up

You can then ‘dig in’ to anything you observe. For instance, “I notice that your energy level drops, when you talk about leaving the law. What is that bringing up for you?”

#### 2) Co-create simple, tangible representations of your client’s stories

Once you’ve listened deeply to your client, you’ll need to help them express their views, or the stories they’re telling themselves, in a shorthand form. You can use a range of tools to help. For instance:

- Fill-in-the-blank prompts, like “I have to \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_.”
- Flow charts or cause-and-effect diagrams. I expect this to happen, and then this, and then this.
- The Hero’s Journey template - where a character goes on a journey to a ‘promised land,’ and if they reach the promised land then they’ll experience some sort of positive outcome. But they experience setbacks, and to overcome those, they will need to change or grow in some way.
- Any visual that fits the situation. For instance, if your client is finding it hard to please everybody, they may feel they’re in an arena, with everyone shouting at them.

At this point, the story that your client is telling themselves may be adaptive and helpful – and if that’s the case, you can jump right to Step 5. However, clients often need help to replace unhelpful narratives about themselves or the world, and if that’s the case, Steps 3 and 4 will be helpful.

#### 3) Look again – for different data, for different meanings

Remember that sense-making involves choosing certain moments and weaving an enduring narrative or story around those moments. If your client has ‘made sense’ of the world in a way that doesn’t serve them, then you need to help them look for different data points, and create different meanings.

##### 3a) Different data

Imagine your client has an internalised story, that “I am not good enough for this role.” They’re focusing on a recent experience, where they ‘messed up’ at work. The first step is to ask - what other moments are there, that we’re missing or skipping over? What might a neutral observer have noticed? What evidence do we have to the contrary, against this ‘sense making story?’

##### 3b) Protective intent

The next step is to look for the positive intent behind any unhelpful ‘sense-making stories’, beliefs, or ways of being in the world, that your clients has held onto for a long time. These stories arose for a reason, and they persisted over time because they served your client in some way. You could ask questions like, how has this story protected or served you, until now? What are your fearful of, if you let go of this story?

##### 3c) Different meanings

The next step is to consider the other meanings that could be applied, to the same data or series of events. So if your client ‘messed up’ at work – what is a more generous, hopeful or helpful interpretation of these events? What would they like to believe?

Your goal here is to start creating a new mental model of the world, one that serves your client and leads to positive action.

#### 4) Road-test against reality

Now your client has a new mental model, it’s time to start road-testing that against reality, so they can genuinely believe and internalise it.

For instance, say your client’s story has shifted from “I am not good enough for this role” to “I am good enough and I am growing every day.” They could experiment with that new position – by offering their opinion in a key meeting, by asking their boss about their positive attributes and work-ons, or by signing up for a PD course.

Coaches need to be really supportive during this experimentation stage – particularly if you have a client who is highly self-critical or negative about the world. There’s a risk that clients have a ‘setback’ or negative experience, and revert to their old ways of seeing the world (“I’m not good enough”). Take your time, get curious about what happened and why your client feels that way, and know that this is not a one-and-done process!

#### 5) Keep updating your stories, so they serve you

Suzi McAlpine, a New Zealand-based leadership consultant, compares sense-making to cartography or map-making. As humans, the ‘sense’ we make of the world will never be as objective as physical geography and the lines on a map; however, like map makers, we can keep refining our maps / stories, over time. We’ll know we’re onto a good thing if:

- The stories we tell align with reality – we’re not just making things up
- The stories we tell increase our sense of agency in the world
- The stories we tell have positive ecology – meaning they are good for us and either positive or neutral for those around us

### In summary

Sense-making can help clients to better understand their past and their present, and to shape their future. It’s a powerful skill, and we trust this guidance will aid you in your efforts!

Until next time,  
The team at ICC Academy

## 2025 DATES FOR COACH TRAINING

FOUNDATION COACHING CERTIFICATE

#### JUNE/JULY 2025

- Module 1:**  
4th and 5th June
- Module 2:**  
18th and 19th June
- Module 3:**  
2nd and 3rd July
- Module 4:**  
16th and 17th July

#### AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2025

- Module 1:**  
13th and 14th August
- Module 2:**  
27th and 28th August
- Module 3:**  
10th and 11th September
- Module 4:**  
24th and 25th September



### ICC Academy

545 Parnell Road, 1052, Auckland

This email was sent to {{contact.EMAIL}}  
You've received it because you've subscribed to our newsletter.

[Unsubscribe](#)

