

ICF Saudi Arabia Chapter - ICW 2026

The Coach as Catalyst: Unlocking Potential in Uncertain Times

1. Session Details

Field	Details
Session Title	The Coach as Catalyst: Unlocking Potential in Uncertain Times
Speaker	Dr. Zeina Ghossoub El Aswad / Zeina Ghossoub, PhD, MCC
Event	International Coaching Week 2026 - ICF Saudi Chapter
Date & Time	Friday, May 15, 2026 8:30 PM - 9:30 PM (KSA Time)
Language	English
Primary Theme	Coaching in uncertainty, human-centered leadership, resilience, emotional regulation, mattering, and transformational presence

YouTube Link: https://youtu.be/sj4u_ydLtjY

2. Executive Summary

This session explored the evolving role of the coach during times of accelerated uncertainty, disruption, emotional overload, and identity questioning. Dr. Zeina Ghossoub positioned coaching not as a space for quick answers, advice, or performance-only support, but as a human-centered space where clients can reconnect with clarity, resilience, meaning, and their own internal resourcefulness.

A central message was that many clients today are not lacking motivation, capability, or intelligence; they are emotionally overloaded and cognitively exhausted. Uncertainty is no longer occasional. It has become a daily operating environment shaped by rapid technological change, AI disruption, job security concerns, economic instability, decision fatigue, and constant adaptation.

The coach as catalyst was described as someone who creates movement without forcing it. The coach does not rescue, fix, or become the expert in the room. Instead, the coach offers grounded presence, reflective partnership, deep listening, powerful questions, and a space where the client can hear themselves clearly again.

The session also introduced the concepts of “defiant aliveness” and “mattering.” These concepts invite coaches to support clients beyond coping or surviving, helping them reconnect with the belief that their existence has impact, that they still have meaning, and that they can choose life and movement even while uncertainty remains.

3. Core Learning Thread

- **Uncertainty has become the environment:** Clients are living inside continuous change, not simply responding to occasional disruption.
- **Coaching conversations are becoming deeper:** Clients bring fear, confusion, stress, job security concerns, identity questions, loss of passion, overwhelm, and emotional exhaustion.
- **The first work is regulation, not action:** When the nervous system is overloaded, pushing immediately toward action may bypass the client’s real need for safety, clarity, and grounding.
- **The coach creates movement without forcing it:** The catalyst role is to hold presence, mirror, question, and trust the client’s capacity rather than rush to rescue or advise.
- **Resilience is evolving:** It is not only bouncing back. It is remaining emotionally present, rebuilding self-trust, finding meaning, and moving while things are still unclear.

4. Best Highlights from the Session

- **Coaching is no longer only performance support:** The speaker emphasized that clients are coming with uncertainty, overwhelm, transition, identity questions, meaning questions, and adaptability challenges.
- **Emotional exhaustion is often silent:** People may continue functioning, giving, performing, smiling, and leading while internally feeling lonely, disconnected, or exhausted.
- **The nervous system matters in coaching:** Uncertainty affects people psychologically, neurologically, physiologically, and emotionally. Coaches need to recognize that a client may be overloaded, not unmotivated.
- **The temptation to fix is real:** The speaker acknowledged that coaches may want to help, guide, or relieve the client quickly, but rushing to solve can remove the client’s opportunity for self-discovery.
- **Presence is the intervention:** The quality of the coach’s presence, silence, listening, and groundedness creates movement, especially when the client is overwhelmed.
- **Defiant aliveness reframes resilience:** The session introduced it as the human decision to continue living fully and meaningfully despite uncertainty, pain, or ambiguity.
- **Mattering goes beyond purpose:** A client may have goals and success but still feel emotionally invisible. Coaching can help them reconnect with their significance and impact.
- **The key question shifts:** Instead of “How do I control uncertainty?” coaching invites “Who do I become within uncertainty?”
- **Transformation happens in relationship to uncertainty:** The goal is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to help clients relate to it differently and access inner capacity.
- **Human coaching remains deeply relational:** In the Q&A, the speaker strongly emphasized that AI cannot fully replace the human experience of being seen, although it may replace some basic coaching functions.

5. Coach as Catalyst Map

Client Experience	What It May Reveal	Catalyst Coaching Response
Fear, stress, and confusion	The client may be seeking safety, predictability, and inner grounding before they can think clearly.	Slow down the conversation, hold presence, invite naming of emotions, and help the client identify what is certain today.
Overwhelm and decision fatigue	The client may be cognitively exhausted from adapting nonstop.	Avoid pushing too quickly into action; help the client separate controllable from uncontrollable elements.
Loss of clarity or identity	The client may be disconnected from self, meaning, and personal value.	Use identity-oriented questions such as: Who are you becoming through this experience?
Desire for the coach to give answers	The client may be looking for rescue or external certainty.	Stay curious, resist the expert role, and help the client hear their own thinking more clearly.
Trying to control outcomes or people	The client may be fighting what cannot be controlled.	Shift the inquiry from external control to internal capacity, emotional regulation, and intentional action.
Surviving but not fully living	The client may be functioning but disconnected from aliveness, meaning, or mattering.	Explore defiant aliveness, mattering, and the client’s continuing impact despite uncertainty.

6. Key Insights

- **1. The client’s “stuckness” may be nervous-system overload.** The speaker repeatedly warned against interpreting clients as weak or unmotivated. In uncertainty, the brain seeks certainty and safety. When that safety is missing, the client may move into fear, reactivity, overthinking, paralysis, or avoidance.
- **2. Coaching begins by restoring internal stability.** Before clients can take meaningful action, they may need to reconnect with emotional regulation, breath, presence, and inner resourcefulness. The coach’s role is to help the client regain access to their own capacity.
- **3. The coach must notice the impulse to rescue.** Wanting to fix often comes from empathy, but it can reduce ownership. Masterful coaching requires trusting the client’s capacity even when the client cannot yet see it.
- **4. Mattering may be a hidden agenda behind many goals.** Clients may present goals, plans, and problems, while underneath they are asking whether they are seen, valued, and significant. Coaching can restore the feeling that “my existence has impact.”
- **5. Uncertainty can become transformational.** Growth may occur not when uncertainty disappears, but when the client stops only resisting the unknown and begins relating to it with courage, acceptance, adaptability, faith, self-awareness, and meaning.
- **6. Presence is built over time.** The speaker emphasized that presence is not something a coach activates only before the session. It is developed through ongoing self-work, practice, regulation, and mastery.

7. Deep Concepts Introduced

Concept	Meaning in the Session	Implication for Coaching
Coach as Catalyst	A coach creates movement, awareness, and transformation without forcing, fixing, or rescuing.	Hold a space where clients can hear themselves, reconnect with their inner wisdom, and generate their own movement.
Emotional Overload	Many clients are not lacking competence; they are exhausted from adapting nonstop.	Treat overwhelm as a signal to slow down, regulate, and reconnect before action planning.
Defiant Aliveness	The decision to continue living fully and meaningfully despite pain, ambiguity, or uncertainty.	Invite clients to explore what keeps them alive, meaningful, and forward-moving even in difficult periods.
Mattering	The felt sense that one is seen, significant, and that one’s existence has impact.	Explore not only what matters to the client, but how the client matters in the world.
Internal Capacity	The client’s ability to remain grounded, adapt, regulate, and act intentionally when external certainty is limited.	Shift from controlling uncertainty to strengthening the client’s inner capacity within uncertainty.

8. Coaching Questions Shared / Inspired by the Session

- **For clarity:** What truly matters right now to you?
- **For grounding:** What do you know for certain today?
- **For identity:** Who are you becoming through this experience?
- **For mattering:** Where have you forgotten your own mattering?
- **For possibility:** What opportunity exists inside this challenge?
- **For transition:** What if this transition is preparing you for something greater?
- **For self-awareness:** What inner strengths emerged when you stopped resisting the unknown?
- **For coaching presence:** What kind of space do people experience when they are with you as a coach?
- **For coach identity:** What kind of catalyst do you want to become for others during uncertain times?

9. Practical Takeaways for Coaches

- **Pause before moving to solutions.** When a client is overwhelmed, create safety and clarity before action planning.
- **Regulate yourself first.** The coach's nervous system influences the quality of the space. Grounded presence supports the client's regulation.
- **Listen for hidden human needs.** Behind goals, clients may be seeking safety, hope, significance, support, trust, meaning, or identity.
- **Avoid becoming the expert too quickly.** Even when you believe you know the answer, stay curious and allow the client's insight to emerge.
- **Use questions that reduce emotional noise.** Questions about what is certain, what matters, and who the client is becoming help restore grounded thinking.
- **Explore mattering, not only purpose.** Help clients reconnect with their sense of value, contribution, and impact.
- **Normalize uncertainty without minimizing pain.** The coach does not deny the difficulty; the coach helps the client relate to it with more capacity and possibility.
- **Support defiant aliveness.** Invite clients to identify where life, meaning, courage, and movement still exist despite challenge.

10. Implications for Leaders and Organizations

Although the session was framed for coaches, the insights are highly relevant for leaders and organizations navigating transformation, AI disruption, workforce anxiety, and rapid change.

- **Leaders need to be seen as humans, not only performers:** High achievers may carry uncertainty silently while continuing to deliver results.
- **Emotional safety supports performance:** People think more clearly when they feel grounded, heard, and supported.
- **Uncertainty requires capacity-building:** Organizations should not only communicate change; they should build resilience, emotional regulation, adaptability, and meaning-making skills.
- **Human-centered leadership is urgent:** The more technology and AI accelerate work, the more leaders need to protect spaces for reflection, presence, belonging, and mattering.

11. Memorable Statements

“People are no longer coming only with goals and action steps. They are coming with uncertainty, overwhelm, transitions, identity, meaning, and adaptability.”

“Coaching today is becoming much more than performance. It is becoming a space where people reconnect with themselves.”

“Most clients are not lacking motivation, capability, or intelligence. Very often, they are emotionally overloaded and cognitively exhausted.”

“A catalyst is someone who creates movement without forcing it.”

“It is not rescuing, fixing, or becoming the smartest person in the room.”

“Presence is what creates movement.”

“Resilience is not only bouncing back; it is staying emotionally present while things are still unclear.”

“Sometimes the greatest gift coaching offers is not motivation. It is helping someone reconnect with the feeling: I matter.”

“Transformation does not happen when uncertainty disappears. It happens when people begin relating to uncertainty differently.”

“Our role as coaches is not to remove uncertainty from their lives. It is to help them remember who they are within uncertainty.”