



Institute of Coaching

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The ideal self is a fluid, fuzzy, desired future drawn from many sources including dreams, fantasies, values, life philosophy, personal strengths, and one's life and career stage. Going further, unpacking the "ideal" component of the ideal self draws forth clarity around one's life purpose or calling.

How to envision one's ideal self

In their classic 2006 article, the *Ideal Self as the Driver of Intentional Change*, Boyatzis and Akrivou open by noting: "Much has been written about the

importance of our dreams or aspirations in motivating change and development.” They summarize related research: “From the perspective of positive psychology, the ideal self is a core mechanism for self-regulation and intrinsic motivation.”

The authors describe the ideal self as a home for desires, aspirations, dreams, purpose, calling, and hope. The force of the ideal self, when activated, brings clarity and mindfulness, and stimulates motivation, self-monitoring, and focused action toward a new state of being or self-actualization. It serves as a positive emotional attractor which supports self-regulation – making ongoing choices that sacrifice immediate rewards and support longer-term aspirations.

The authors then expand our thinking by proposing a theoretical model of the “ideal self” – which they define as the driver of intentional change, also a key component of **Intentional Change Theory**. This model provides a framework for coaching inquiry that we outline in this research dose.

Ideal Self as a 3-legged stool

The ideal-self theory defines three components that converge to manifest one’s ideal self, a personal vision or image of who you want to be and what you want to accomplish. The three components make a three-legged stool that guides coaching inquiry:

1. **Mental image** - the cognitive leg is a mental image of one’s desired future, a fluid articulation of one’s dreams and aspirations. The images that reflect the ideal self can be novel, or they can amplify or make consistent existing best states. The images of ideal self can also be continually evolving.
2. **Core identity** - the identity leg, largely unconscious and fairly stable, is one’s core identity. The images of ideal self can be unpacked to expand awareness of the variety of identity components implicit in the vision. It’s also vital for the notions of ideal self to be holistic and inclusive across the full range of one’s life domains.
3. **Hope** - the emotional leg is fueled by hope – how the aspirations are made realistic, aspirations of becoming one’s ideal self or making one’s ideal self a consistent norm. The positive emotions that emerge from the experience of hope are the power source for the journey toward the ideal self.

These three legs offer (at least) four directions of coaching inquiry to support the emergence and cultivation of clients’ ideal selves.

1. Envision images of future ideal self

The authors see imagining a mental picture as providing the “content” for the ideal self. It is a fluid, fuzzy, desired future drawn from many sources including dreams, fantasies, values, life philosophy, personal strengths, and one’s life and career stage. Envisioning the *ideal* component of the ideal self draws forth clarity around one’s life purpose or calling, which can also change over time.

It’s important that the images of ideal self aren’t based on avoiding risk or bad outcomes, which triggers fear and a stress response that inhibits learning. It is also important for people to accept their visions with an open, accepting heart as the authors note *“evaluating or judging the worthiness of one’s dreams immediately invokes stress. This results in limiting openness to new ideas and possibilities.”*

Opportunities for coaching inquiry include:

- help clients use their imaginations to envision the ideal self, which can be new or can be an existing ideal state that is maintained or made more consistent
- mirror, appreciate, and expand without judgment clients’ emerging mental images of ideal self and what ideal means
- help clients reflect on the origins and sources of values, passions, purpose, and callings

2. Clarify ideal self as emerging from internal values rather than external social values.

Coaches can help clients make an important distinction between their ideal self and their *“ought”* self, a false version of self that emerges more from external social expectations than internally from one’s own agency, values, and purpose.

The authors note that it’s important to help clients discern the ideal from the *“ought”* self as they can ultimately feel frustrated or disappointed if they spend time working toward a version of their best self that is driven by external social forces or internal limitations, rather than their own internally derived values, strengths, and capabilities.

Coaching inquiry includes:

- consider the possibility of social values and expectations inherent in professional and personal lives that may pose limitations on visions of ideal self

- explore the extent to which visions might reflect any self-biases or limitations
- unpack any internalized oppressions including racism or sexism

3. Help clients connect their ideal self to identity

The authors describe one's core identity as a relatively stable compilation of motives, roles, identity groups, habits, socialization, and other personality and character traits that give rise to individuals in their current context. Clients can feel low levels of control over shifting these, often subconscious, components of their identities. Their identities have the "leash," controlling degrees of freedom and opportunities.

The authors note that generating awareness and articulation of a client's identity components, that contribute both resources and opportunities for change, helps anchor a clear starting point for the journey toward a desired future. A clear starting point improves clarity and interest; it also provides direction for new experiments that may generate learning and shifts.

As a result, coaches have plenty of inquiry possibilities:

1. expand a client's self-awareness of their identities through assessments, self-observation, and reflection
2. unpack the role of their identity components in their visions of ideal and ideal self
3. explore how components of identity can be resources or opportunities for learning and growth
4. consider how the ideal self can be applied and be coherent across most or all personal and professional life domains
5. continually expand awareness of their visions of ideal self

4. Cultivate hope, efficacy, and optimism around realizing the ideal self

When a client gets in touch with a desired future emerging from internal values and purpose, it can elicit a mix of new emotions. A coaching opportunity is to explore how the envisioned ideal self can first be supported by amplifying positive emotions, particularly the experience of hope.

The authors note that *"hope emerges when efficacy merges with optimism."* In other words, one's dreams go to sleep if the dreams feels out of reach, making it important for coaches to explore diverse and creative ways to improve a client's efficacy and optimism. A key focus is on amplifying the positive – for example,

drawing out confidence-boosting strengths, past successes, along with internal and external resources.

A client's negative emotions that might emerge around considering their ideal self may signal what is reducing confidence, optimism, and hope, and nicely surface growth opportunities. Coaches can help clients cultivate a growth mindset by appreciating that gaps between current and future mindsets and skills are interesting and valuable opportunities to grow. The growth mindset becomes a bridge of hope, from today's self to the future ideal self.

Coaching inquiry to consider:

- Explore positive emotions and negative emotions that emerge from the exploration of the client's ideal self.
- Use motivational interviewing rulers to help clients self-assess on a scale of 1-10 their levels of confidence, optimism, and hope. Explore what a 10/10 would look like and possible ways to improve ratings to a 7/10 or above.
- Unpack all of the potential sources of confidence, optimism, and hope in becoming or sustaining the ideal self.
- Ask the client to describe a growth mindset for themselves.
- Explore opportunities for learning and growth on the journey to ideal self.

Takeaways for coaches

1. Coaches have the opportunity to be role models and envision and process fully our own future ideal selves.
2. Help clients “dream big” through nonjudgmental inquiry and reflection that expands possibilities.
3. Help clients uncover external social expectations or other limitations which may lead them away from their true compass of values and purpose.
4. Help clients complete a full process of “*ideal selfing*” including envisioning, unpacking identity components of the ideal self, integrating the ideal self into all life domains, and generating efficacy, optimism, and hope as fuel for the journey.

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**"Always be a first-rate version
of yourself."**

-Audrey Hepburn



Citation

Boyatzis, Richard E., and Kleio Akrivou. "The ideal self as the driver of intentional change." *Journal of management development* (2006).APA

IOC Resources from Richard Boyatzis
