Now that you've considered these analogies for yourself, read some of our thoughts. There are no right answers here. Consider underlining the elements that feel truest to your own developing vision of coaching and adding your own ideas in the margins.

Farmers are the original systems thinkers. Like coaches, they must be closely attuned to the optimal conditions for growth. A farmer knows that many factors impact growth and so considers soil quality, water, sunlight, and wind. A coach also considers a client’s “climate”—their working conditions, identity, capacity, demands, and the like. Farmers operate with patience and optimism, knowing that the seed planted today might not bear fruit for months or even years.

Chiropractors likewise think in systems—internal systems. They understand that adjustments in one part of the system can have ripple effects throughout, much like the coach who helps the new teacher clean up their classroom routines in the fall, knowing this will create the space for more student-led learning later on. The chiropractor also highlights the client's responsibility in the adjustment process—offering at-home exercises, knowing they both have a role in making the change stick.

Tour guides are adept at leading and supporting others on their journey. They can offer reassurance and guidance along the way. The best tour guides, like the best coaches, understand that the journey is mutual. Clients will see things they've missed and through new eyes, and learning is enhanced by exchanging these perspectives. They will say both, “Yes, you can make it up this mountain!” and “Hey, it's time to stop and rest.”

Yeast is the ultimate catalyst. Just a little yeast transforms the potential of flour and water. Coaches use their words like yeast, sharing a question here or a reflection there to help clients grow into their full potential. Yet yeast requires certain conditions to thrive: moisture, a little heat, food. Likewise, coaches build the trust and credibility needed for their words to nurture, not bruise.

Athletic coaches are masters at helping others improve their physical performance. They break skills down into discrete parts and offer modeling and bite-size feedback to fuel incremental progress (“Move your elbow a centimeter to the right”). In doing so, they help athletes build the muscle memory needed for top performance come game time. Many of the best professional sports coaches were not themselves star players. Like skilled leadership coaches, they have a respect for and deep understanding of the underlying science of their field and use that to guide others to excellence.

Mirrors offer a nonjudgmental reflection of what is. So it is with coaches, who reflect what clients may not yet see in themselves: word choices, nonverbal cues, posture, patterns. While the one looking in the mirror may distort what they see to fit their mental image, the mirror remains impartial. Over time, through reflection without judgment, a coach can support clients to shift their self-image and build the ability to critically examine their own mental models. Reflect At its core, coaching is a way to help all of us get better and better, to grow into our most expansive and capable selves.

Consider: Which analogy do you most relate to? Why? What other analogies can you think of? How do they add to your definition? How do these analogies lend nuance to your definition of coaching?