

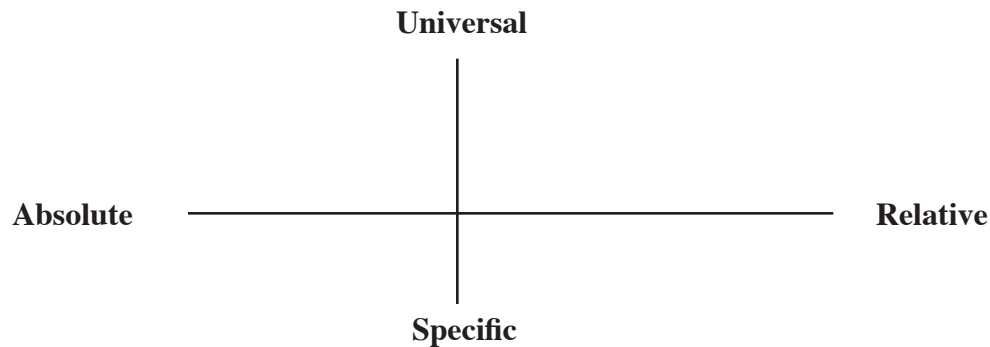
Ethics in Coaching

By Tim Hallbom and Nick LeForce

In a coaching practice (as well as any other kind of people helping practice) it can be helpful to have certain ethical questions already answered in your own mind before they ever come up in your reality. The goal of this article is to help you think through ethical problems that can arise in a coaching practice. You can test your ethical ideas by reviewing some potentially problem scenarios and comparing your answers with those arrived at by a group of coaches who pondered the same questions. Finding your answers for these sorts of issues is a great mental exercise and can save you from grief later. Formulating answers for yourself will help you establish and keep good professional boundaries, and will enhance your success as a coach.

Two or three months ago, our Institute received a request from the Ethics Committee from The International Coach Federation (ICF.) They were researching how ethics are being taught by the accredited Coach Institutes and were wondering how we were teaching ethics in our NLP Coach Certification Program. Beyond reviewing the ICF ethical guidelines we realized we were not really exploring ethics per se as a part of our curriculum. Yet we also realized how important exploring ethics is for each prospective or practicing coach.

One way to think about ethics is to break it down into two continuums:



Universal -- Some behavioral rules are universal. In other words, you would want them to generally always apply. Some examples of universal principles include: making certain that the work that you do with a client is ecological for him or her. Treating your client with respect. Following the Golden Rule. Being present and attentive to your client. Holding the client's agenda. Don't be putting your map of the world on your client. Doing no harm. Etc.

Specific -- specific rules only apply only in certain situations. For example, laws that may shift from state to state would be specific ethical rules. For example, in the State of Texas . you need to have certain licenses to call yourself a therapist. In Colorado , there's a special category of psychotherapists or not licensed, yet can legally practice psychotherapy.

Respecting cultural mores are also examples, but can be problematic. For example, marijuana smoking is legal in Holland, but not in the United States. Female circumcision has practiced in certain countries, yet most Americans are aghast at such behavior, and with think of it as tragic exploitation of women.

In a coach context, some examples of specific ethical conduct include:

Absolute -- These are rules and ethics principles that you would never violate. There is wide consensus on these rules. And they always apply. Some examples include such obvious rules as: No dating clients! No sex either! Do not give medical or legal advice.

Except for some weird or extreme exceptions Absolutes are true everywhere, all the time.

Relative:

These rules change with context. What might be ethical in one situation is not in another.

Conduct business other than coaching with a coaching client, i.e. You attend the art class that your client is teaching, or you accept your doctor as a coaching client. In the situations a might depend on the doctor and the kind of relationship that you have with him or her. There would not necessarily be an absolute rule.

So there are these two continuums to consider when you think about ethics in coaching . absolute to specific, and absolute to relative.

Every profession must adhere to certain ethical guidelines. For example, the International Coach Federation (ICF) has formulated a set of guidelines for coaching -- go to [http:// www.internationalcoachfederation.org](http://www.internationalcoachfederation.org) to have a look. Guidelines, however, do not always tell us how to act ethically in specific situations. You must use your conscience to determine appropriate actions in real life situations. Moreover, you may be called upon to justify your action.

The following scenarios are designed to help engage ethical decision making and encourage you to apply ethical thinking when dealing with real life situations. Each of the situations below provides an opportunity to discuss ethical issues. For each one, talk about how you would act.

Your goal is to identify the values and criteria that help you determine how to act as well as to determine a course of action. Consider the potential conflicts or problems that may arise, how the action may affect you, the client, your relationship with the client, and the larger systems in which you and the client participate.

1. A coaching client asks you to become a member of the board of directors of her company. Do you accept?
2. A client knows you are traveling in his hometown and invites you to dinner. Do you accept the invitation?
3. A coaching client is about to launch a business that will directly compete with and potentially negatively affect a personal friend of yours. How do you respond to your coaching client? Do you tell your friend?
4. A friend of yours whom you have known for a long time asks to be a coaching client. Do you accept? What factors would you consider in making your decision?
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5. You are setting up your fees and know that business clients will pay more than personal clients.
 - a. Do you set up different rates? If so, how do you justify it?
 - b. Imagine you charge different rates for business coaching (\$200/hour) and personal life coaching (\$125 per hour). A business client completes the contracted cycle and now wants to continue working with you for life coaching. Do you lower the rates?
6. A client feels she has been mistreated on her job and quit. She reveals that she stole about \$500 worth of company equipment. How do you respond?

7. A coaching client reveals that his doctor had prescribed prozac to him some time ago. He reports that he is feeling much better as a result of the coaching and asks your opinion about reducing his medication. How do you respond?
8. In addition to coaching services, you have a separate multi-level networking marketing business selling herbal vitamins. A new coaching client is a perfect match for this other business. Do you tell the client about it?
9. You have a contract with a large company to provide coach services to a group of employees. The manager who hired you requests your assessment of the company loyalty of one of the employees that you coach. He says that he has a right to know since he's paying the bill, and that your job is to help the company.
10. (Assuming that you are single and available) -- You run into a client that you have not worked with for couple of years at a party. (S)he suggests that you go somewhere and have a drink together. What do you do?

Discussion

These questions were all considered by a group of coaches in a coach training. The italicized portion of the text includes some of their comments and ideas. See if you agree with them.

1. A coaching client asks you to become a member of the board of directors of her company. Do you accept?

*This might be flattering, and your client has good reason for asking - he or she knows you and trusts you. Accepting the offer could certainly set you up for potential conflicts of interest, however. For example, the Board of Directors may be required to determine how much your client gets paid which may put you in a conflict of interest; you might have to vote about whether to fire your client; you might have to oppose your client on a policy decision, etc. Furthermore, it may appear that you wiggled your way in to this choice Board position because you're cozy with your client. Your client may also have different expectations of you than of other board members, since you are his/her coach. Our group voted an **absolute** no on becoming a member of the Board of Directors*

2. A client knows you are traveling in his hometown and invites you to dinner. Do you accept the invitation?

*This is more of a **relative** issue. The purpose of the dinner would determine whether or not joining your client is appropriate. Our group felt that if the meeting was for certain business purposes it could be appropriate. For example, one member of our group had a client who wanted to write a book about his coaching experience. The dinner was an informal way were they could actually meet in person, rather than on the phone to discuss the book, so made sense to get together for this other purpose. However, if the dinner is just for a social meeting it is inappropriate, and could create problems later. You know a lot about your client. Your client knows very little about you. This makes for an unbalanced relationship.*

3. A coaching client tells you and confidence that she is about to launch a business that will directly compete with, and potentially negatively affect, a close personal friend of yours. For example, your client intends to open a store right next door to your best friend store. How do you respond to your coach client? Do you tell your friend?

While this is situation can put you on the spot as a coach, it is an absolute no-no to tell your friend. This

would violate the confidentiality rule that is so important to your credibility as a coach. One member of our group did say that she would tell her client that she has a close friend with store nearby . just in case are clients are going to her friend store, rather than the client's store.

4. A friend of yours whom you have known for a long time asks to be a coaching client. Do you accept? What factors would you consider in making your decision?

Our group uniformly agreed that it's not appropriate to work with friends as a coach. The obvious reason for this is that the coach client relationship is a professional relationship, where one person, the client, is sharing lots of information with you as a coach that you do not reciprocate, at least if you are competent ethical coach who is holding the client's agenda. Everyone our group did agree, however, that they might use certain coaching skills with friends at times with friends or to help friends sort through a specific issue using coach tools and techniques.

A coach relationship is helping another person to live more consciously across time. This is very different than a single intervention removed several single intervention is to help somebody resolve a problem, which is with friends they do

5. You are setting up your fees and know that business clients will pay more than personal clients.

a. Do you set up different rates? If so, how do you justify it?

b. Imagine you charge different rates for business coaching (\$200/hour) and personal life coaching (\$125 per hour). A business client completes the contracted cycle and now wants to continue working with you for life coaching. Do you lower the Rates?

This scenario generated more conversation than any of the others. So do you set up separate rates? Our group agreed that if you set up different rates, you need to justify a different rate structure. For example, if you are charging more to business you need to be able to justify that more services, more effort or more time is required. One coach said that he did charge the same amounts for business and private clients, but had a sliding fee structure for private clients who could not typically afford his rates. This way he could include a wider range of clients.

6. A client feels that she has been mistreated on her job and quit. She reveals that she stole about \$500 worth of company equipment. How do you respond?

*One of our group immediately responded by saying , “ I would hang up the phone and immediately call the police.” Then, of course, issue of confidentiality came up. Under these circumstances, do you maintain confidentiality? Do you coach around the issue of her behavior? Our group agreed that this was a **relative** issue.*

Note: As coaches, we have no legal rights to confidentiality, as do clinical social workers or psychiatrists. However, it is important to know which kinds of issues we need to contact the police about. This may vary from state to state, but virtually all states and provinces in Canada require that we would report child abuse, elder abuse, or the selling of narcotic drugs. As a coach, it would be wise to know your own state, provincial or national laws regarding confidentiality.

Let us make this a little more complicated. What if your client told you that she had not been paid for over a month, and that her boss in the small-business where she worked had treated her miserably, making

*inappropriate and coercive sexual advances. Furthermore, she had lent him money to help him out, which he had never repaid. Does that change how you, as a coach might deal with this particular issue? It certainly doesn't make her theft right, but it may change how you respond to her. There is certainly no **absolute** right way to deal with this as a coach. Our group decided they would help coach around this is an issue for her terms of her own character and ethics and that she wanted to be in the world. One of our group members said they still wouldn't keep her as a client, however, because the clients values would not be compatible with her own.*

7. A coaching client reveals that his doctor had prescribed Prozac to him some time ago. He reports that he is feeling much better as a result of the coaching and asks your opinion about reducing or eliminating his medication. He does not like the side effects that the medication gives him. Your sense of him as his coach is that he is a high functioning person. It doesn't make any sense to you why he would have been on medication in the first place. How do you respond?

*This scenario has simple and **absolute** answer. Refer him back to his doctor. Advising him on his medication would mean that you are practicing medicine without a license. You could coach with him, however, around the issue of how to communicate more effectively with his doctor.*

8. In addition to your coaching practice, you have a separate multi-level networking marketing business selling herbal vitamins. Your new coaching client is a perfect match for this other business. Do you tell the client about it?

Our group uniformly agreed that it would be a conflict of interest to include your client as a part of your multi-level marketing business. One person suggested that you refer him to the vitamin business, a to check it out for himself, but in away where there's no economic tie back to you at all.

9. You have a contract with a large company to provide coach services to a group of employees. The manager who hired you requests your assessment of the company loyalty of one of the employees that you coach. He says that he has a right to know since he's paying the bill, and that your job is to help the company.

Our group uniformly agreed that this is a confidentiality issue, and thus could not respond to this specific question. We felt that the coach's job would be to help the manager understand the importance of confidentiality in the coach -- client relationship -- that should it be breached, the coaching would not be effective, nor would the practice be ethical.

10. (Assuming that you are single and available) -- You run into a client that you have not worked with for couple of years at a party. (S)he suggests that you go somewhere and have a drink together. What do you do?

*This question was not actually discussed in the coach training group. However, in an informal discussion with several of students, we had a 100% **absolute** agreement that it is unwise and unethical to date someone who has been a client. Many clients return for coaching as needs arise, so in a sense, you might think of clients as "permanent". Beyond that, there's again the issue of the unbalanced relationship where you know much more about the client than he or she knows about you. Finally, it could be perceived that you somehow set your client up for a romantic relationship.*

Coaching with integrity and ethics often includes making hard decisions. Sometimes the decision that you make to stay in integrity may not be immediately intuitive. Thinking through these kinds of issues ahead of time can help you to stay in integrity in your coaching practice. This will contribute both to your success and your own

sense of well-being. For further thought, here are the we have

Professional Conduct At Large

1) I will conduct myself in a manner that reflects well on coaching as a profession and I will refrain from doing anything that harms the public's understanding or acceptance of coaching as a profession. 2) I will honor agreements I make in my all of my relationships. I will construct clear agreements with my clients that may include confidentiality, progress reports, and other particulars. 3) I will respect and honor the efforts and contributions of others. 4) I will respect the creative and written work of others in developing my own materials and not misrepresent them as my own. 5) I will use ICF member contact information (email addresses, telephone numbers, etc.) only in the manner and to the extent authorized by the ICF.

Professional Conduct With Clients

6) I will accurately identify my level of coaching competence and I will not overstate my qualifications, expertise or experience as a coach. 7) I will ensure that my coaching client understands the nature of coaching and the terms of the coaching agreement between us. 8) I will not intentionally mislead or make false claims about what my client will receive from the coaching process or from me as their coach. 9) I will not give my clients or any prospective clients information or advice I know to be misleading or beyond my competence. 10) I will be alert to noticing when my client is no longer benefiting from our coaching relationship and would be better served by another coach or by another resource and, at that time, I will encourage my client to make that change.

Confidentiality/Privacy

11) I will respect the confidentiality of my client's information, except as otherwise authorized by my client, or as required by law. 12) I will obtain agreement with my clients before releasing their names as clients or references or any other client identifying information. 13) I will obtain agreement with the person being coached before releasing information to another person compensating me.

Conflicts of Interest

14) I will seek to avoid conflicts between my interests and the interests of my clients. 15) Whenever any actual conflict of interest or the potential for a conflict of interest arises, I will openly disclose it and fully discuss with my client how to deal with it in whatever way best serves my client. 16) I will disclose to my client all anticipated compensation from third parties that I may receive for referrals or advice concerning that client.

Part Four: The ICF Pledge of Ethics

As a professional coach, I acknowledge and agree to honor my ethical obligations to my coaching clients and colleagues and to the public at large. I pledge to comply with ICF Code of Ethics, to treat people with dignity as independent and equal human beings, and to model these standards with those whom I coach. If I breach this Pledge of Ethics or any part of the ICF Code of Ethics, I agree that the ICF in its sole discretion may hold me accountable for so doing. I further agree that my accountability to the ICF for any breach may include loss of my ICF membership or my ICF credentials.