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Coaching Ethics

by Michael Wright

Ethics are critical to protecting the integrity of the client, the service-provider, and the coaching profession at large. The International Coach Federation (ICF) maintains the most widely recognized Code of Ethics for the profession. This code provides the foundation for ethical decision making in coaching.

Considering what is ethical is an ongoing process, from the initial contact with a potential client through to the conclusion of the relationship and the handling of client information after we are no longer working together. The following list provides a few ethical tips. This list however is not exhaustive and does not replace the ICF Code of Ethics and ICF supplemental guidance as a primary resource.

ETHICS TIPS

Consult ICF Standards and Supplemental Ethics FAQs. When in doubt, ask a mentor or peer for additional support.

The ICF Guidelines are a rich resource for coaches. However, they do not account for the nuances of every situation, so it is important to have a mentor or peers to lean on when inevitable questions arise.

Know when to refer clients for mental health services and take action when psychological issues present themselves.

As coaches, we make it clear that coaching is not therapy and it is not designed to treat or heal psychological problems. As such, when psychological problems arise (such as depression, chronic anxiety, addiction, or dangerous behavior to self or others, etc.), we acknowledge the situation and make referrals.

We can also get guidance on red flags from mentors, mental health professionals, or associations, such as the American Psychological Association or the American Psychiatric Association. When in doubt however, refer.

When a client is seeking treatment for psychological issues with a therapist, coaches do not necessarily have to cease work with the client. In fact, the coaching relationship and approach could be value-added to the work done in therapy. However, a coach needs to make sure the client is functioning at a level that makes a coaching approach fruitful.

Getting emergency contact information at the outset of a coaching engagement may be useful should more urgent issues arise, such as a client having suicidal thoughts.

Depending on the circumstances, it may be necessary to reach out to an emergency contact. In addition, if the client has a therapist, we might also reach out to the therapist with the client's permission to assure the therapist is aware of any urgent circumstances.

Be clear in agreements and discovery sessions about what confidentiality covers and what it does not.

The ICF Code of Ethics mandates that coaches keep coaching sessions confidential, including content, times, and client names. Clients can however grant exceptions to confidentiality. Coaching agreements are an optimal place to spell out those exceptions. For example, if a coach is working with a minor and the parent wants to be apprised of details, all three parties—minor, parent and coach—should agree on what information will be disclosed and the minor should be present for those conversations. The same is true in an organizational context, where the parties include a supervisor, employee and coach.

The law however does not protect coaching sessions and contents in all jurisdictions. Therefore, should a client face a legal issue and the coach receives a subpoena for client records, a coach is generally required to divulge records as well as the contents of those sessions. Many coaches alert the client to that limitation in their agreements or verbally during the discovery session.

Also, while not legally obligated to do so, we are ethically inclined to report to authorities or others if we become aware that someone is being harmed or will be harmed, including the client. So that it doesn't come as a surprise, we can alert the client to this possibility during the discovery session.

Secure in contracts with administrators or vendors their understanding and adherence to ICF Code of Ethics, in particular its confidentiality provisions.

Vendors and administrators who contract with coaches and have access to client names and records are to maintain the same confidentiality that we maintain as coaches. This provides continuity of confidentiality and assurance to clients that their coaching relationship is private.

Disclose conflicts of interest while maintaining confidentiality, and strongly consider declining engagements where it's not possible to fully serve the client as a coach.

Conflicts can arise where clients have a relationship with one another that could compromise the coaching should they both work with the same coach. In disclosing conflicts of interest, confidentiality still holds. This requires that we discuss conflicts of interest in general terms, e.g., asking a current client if they object to us coaching someone else in their company or asking a current organizational client if they have concerns about us coaching a competitor's employees.

In a personal context, examples of relationships that might give rise to conflicts include married couples, family members or business partners. The relationship itself doesn't negate the feasibility of the same coach taking them on as individual clients. The question is whether we can be effective and unbiased as a coach and whether the subject matter and nature of the relationship at hand will allow us to maintain an open and safe environment.

In an organizational context, conflicts can present themselves when we coach multiple employees, some of whom may be the subordinates or superiors of others we are coaching. We can maintain our effectiveness by asking questions to assure the aims of coaching can be supported and by being explicit about the confidentiality of coaching. In cases where working with multiple employees may not support the integrity of the coaching, we can be frank about that with the sponsor (individual or department in a company that has hired the coach) and consider bringing in other coaches to handle the potential conflict.

In an organizational context, use the sponsor to relay data on the coaching to other departments in the organization.

Organizational work can present special challenges, especially when departments in the organization seek details of the coaching engagement, such as number of sessions or which levels in the company are receiving coaching. To maintain confidentiality, we can ask the sponsor to respond to those requests.

Seek client's permission before using their name on websites and other materials.

Confidentiality of client information is paramount in coaching. It is what allows the work between a client and coach to flourish. If we are working with an individual or organization and they offer a testimonial or case study, we ask for permission in writing before putting it on our website or other materials.

Share with clients what is and isn't possible in coaching.

Where an organization has specific objectives for coaching, be honest about what is possible and what may not be achievable. For example, if a company wants to use coaching to increase sales by 10%, we can let the company know we can strive for that; however, we cannot guarantee that outcome. The same is true of other metrics that might indicate the success of the coaching.

Another example might be a client who wants coaching to achieve their goal to find a partner. We cannot guarantee that. We can however let the client know that coaching could support them in living to their fullest, both with and without a partner.

Spell out any degrees, qualifications, and experience to avoid misunderstanding.

To assure that clients know what they are getting when they hire us, we are clear and up front about our qualifications. For example, if we received a Masters degree, we don't hide the field of our degree (e.g., physics, theatre, counseling). Where appropriate, we relate its value to our coaching. If a client is seeking experience that we don't have, we are forthright about our background and focus instead on what we do offer as a coach. Should they want someone with different experience, we can refer them to a colleague.

Keep the role of coach separate from other professional roles, e.g., psychologist, therapist, accountant, attorney.

For example, if we practice both as a coach and as a psychologist or therapist, we do not practice both simultaneously with the same client. Should a client wish to engage us for both services, we close out the relationship for the first service before beginning the relationship for the second service. Also, we set up separate agreements for each engagement. Or, we can consider referring the client to another provider where the client would benefit from receiving both services at once.