

What Would You Do...?

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This paper poses questions about what you would do in a number of situations where ethical or contractual considerations can occur in a coaching relationship. If you are a coach, think about your stance if you ever had to face one of these challenging situations. If you hire coaches, you might want to use these scenarios to see how clear your prospective coaches are about their own code of ethical conduct or boundary management.

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It is easy to sign up to an existing code of ethics, like those of the main professional coaching organisations. But most of us don't know what we would actually do in practice until faced with a real situation that raises ethical or contractual questions. The following are all actual situations faced by myself or colleagues in recent years. There are no absolute right or wrong answers and you may hear yourself arguing "well, it depends..." However, simply having to think about your responses to these situations will help you clarify your own personal ethical stance, and may help you draw up clearer contracts in the future.

Your coachee inadvertently reveals that he has awarded a big contract (financially) to a friend of his. When questioned, he shrugs this off as 'not a big deal'.

The issues: At best this may break an organisational code of ethics, which may be a serious offence (depending on the nature of the business and the size of the contract), at worst it is potentially fraud. How 'big' does a misdemeanour have to be for you to feel obliged to take action? If you coach senior leaders, what responsibility do think you have to your

coachees in ensuring appropriate corporate governance of their businesses? Once you know about it you can't not know, so if it is serious, professionally you have an obligation to act. You could shrug it off with a quip 'I'll pretend you didn't say that'... but then your coaching relationship no longer holds real integrity.

One option would be to explain that you can't continue as though you hadn't heard what he'd said, and that you need to understand the implications. Explore what the coachee's motivation was for doing this and what his options now are. If he is regretful / sorry and believes he acted foolishly, explore how he can 'come clean' in the organisation. If the coachee becomes defensive / aggressive you need to decide if this is someone you want to continue to work with and under what circumstances (e.g. if the coachee is prepared to examine their behaviour as part of the coaching agenda). Finally, if you think that the misdemeanour is serious, seek your own legal advice before acting in the organisation, and make sure that your coaching notes clearly document the facts.

Your coachee tells you that she is planning to leave the organisation and is biding her time for the most advantageous time to go.

The issues: who do you see as your 'client'—the person in front of you and / or the organisational sponsor? To whom do you personally feel most loyal? What do you see as your obligation to the organisation? What is your contract of confidentiality? What impact would her leaving in this way have on the business—e.g. what if she were a pivotal person in a major project / leading a major M&A? At what point would you feel obliged to disclose behaviour that could potentially damage the organisation? What is your view on whether this is a good move for

her? What's your personal view of her behaviour—inauthentic, unethical or fair enough in today's business world?

One option would be to talk about your dilemma with her (i.e. your desire to support her and your obligation to take the organisation into account) and discuss the concerns it raises for you.

A further option would be to disclose your own view of her action. You may believe that your personal judgement is not relevant to your coaching work, but your opinion will inevitably 'leak' into your coaching work, and it would certainly be more authentic as a coach to own up to your own bias. Re-contract to help her leave in the most helpful way to both herself and the organisation.

You hear via a third party in the organisation that your married coachee is having an affair with another senior manager in the business, and 'people are beginning to talk'.

The issues: what 'buttons' does this press for you (your moral stance on extra marital relationships / your stance on third party gossip)? What do you see as your responsibility in respect to your coachee? What if the gossip were beginning to have an impact on your coachee's reputation and potentially his / her career?

You may simply decide to stay out of this 'third party' stuff. However, if your coachee's reputation is beginning to suffer, this would certainly be an abdication of your responsibility as a coach.

Another option would be to choose to be open with your coachee about information you'd heard on the grapevine, disclose your concerns for your coachee's well being at work and contract to work on the implications of this for your coachee and how s/he might handle it.

If you were open with your coachee and s/he retorted “it’s none of your business as a coach”—you have the option of challenging this, as his/her career and performance at work are very much your business.

Finally, depending on your boundary with this coachee on work *vs.* personal issues, you may have the option (if the coachee wishes to do so) of working on what purpose this affair is serving in his/her life at the moment and what choices they have.

HR have asked you to work with a particular individual. You’ve had an initial meeting with your coachee who talks about coaching as supporting his hoped for transition into the Partnership. At the meeting with his boss you are told that your coachee is on ‘a yellow card’ (i.e. heading towards a disciplinary) but the boss hasn’t told your coachee this.

The issues: who do you see as your ‘client’—your coachee and/or the sponsor? What ‘buttons’ does this press for you (e.g. feelings of being used/manipulated by the boss or HR)? What do you see as the boundaries between coaching and line management?

One option would be to be clear with the boss that this is a line management issue i.e. it’s their job to exit people, not yours. Explore with the boss their reasons for not being ‘up-front’ with your coachee.

A further option would be to offer to support a three-way meeting to explore this between the manager and the coachee, then support the coachee in either exiting with dignity or doing what is required of them to stay.

However, if the boss refuses to be up-front

with your coachee, and you can’t disclose the situation to your coachee, you may consider withdrawing from the contract. You may also want to find out how much of this HR knew when putting you in front of the client in the first place.

You are coaching several members of the same team and two of them tell you that the third is bullying a member of her staff. You have not picked up a hint of this from the coachee in question.

The issues: What is your contract of confidentiality with individuals and with the team (if it is a team coaching contract)? What is their motive in telling you and what do they hope you will do? What stops them from confronting their colleague? Who do you feel most loyal to? What do you see as your responsibility if someone is genuinely being bullied? What do you see the role of their line manager as being in this?

An obvious option would be to coach the two on how to have a conversation with their colleague and/or their manager about this matter.

A slightly indirect option might be to explore with the ‘alleged bully’ in more depth the relationship that she has with her reports. This might include a contract to hold upward feedback interviews with her direct reports and get anonymous feedback from them—as a way of getting data that you can work with together. If her reports don’t raise the issue, you may have an interesting discussion to hold with the ‘accusers’.

A more direct option would be to disclose that you have heard something that has surprised you without breaking confidentiality, and raise the issue directly with the coachee.

When you meet your coachee in the afternoons he more often that not smells of alcohol, and your perception is that his behaviour is getting increasingly 'unpredictable'.

The issues: What do you see as your role as coach in this? What impact is it having on you/your work with this coachee? What impact is it having on his work performance? How able are you to raise this directly with your coachee? What responsibility do you feel to the organisation (i.e. somebody who seems to be drunk at work is probably breaking an organisational code of conduct and could be a liability to himself, to others and to the business). One option would be to put it down to 'business lunches' and move your sessions to the morning. This might be fine to a point, but when you have a coachee who is clearly inebriated on a regular basis, this option only really serves as an excuse to avoid a difficult issue.

A more honest (and, ultimately, compassionate) option would be to raise it directly and be open about your concerns (e.g. his personal well-being, his performance at work, his career, the impact on his coaching). Explore what the situation is, and if appropriate, refer him to an appropriate source of support (e.g. dependency counselling).

It would certainly be an option to experiment with holding your sessions in the morning, not as an abdication of your responsibility, but as a way of seeing if he is drinking in the morning too (a clearer indicator of alcohol dependency).

If you become convinced that there is an alcohol dependency issue, a somewhat challenging option (for most coaches) would be to re-contract by telling your coachee that you will only work with him if he comes to your sessions without having had a drink. Tell him that if he attends a session obviously having been drinking, that you will end the session.

If you are convinced that it is serious e.g. your coachee is deteriorating, you may choose to disclose to your coachee that you feel obliged to have a conversation with HR and try to get your coachee's agreement to a three-way meeting. Show that you want to help your coachee to get support from his organisation.

A final option, if your coachee refuses to agree, would be to withdraw from coaching. This raises further issues. Would you do so without telling his boss and/or HR? It may raise a values issue for you, i.e. could you withdraw from a vulnerable coachee (even if it's counselling they need and not coaching—some support being better than none)?

As time goes by you realise that you really don't like this particular coachee, and you think it is effecting the quality of your work. But you are aware that she is very senior in the business and could easily jeopardise your work in that organisation.

The issue: this might be about your coachee, about you or something about the two of you (after all the coaching relationship is a 'co-creation'). This is just the kind of complex issue that coaching supervision can help with. So option one is clearly to take it to supervision.

If, then, you believe that it is primarily 'something about your coachee', to what extent is this useful data about the impact your coachee has on people, that could inform your coaching work (i.e. is what she evokes in you likely to play out in her other work relationships)? You will need to pin down exactly what she does that has this impact on you. Disclose this to her sensitively, explore the possibility that others might also perceive her in a similar way, and the impact this might be having on her effectiveness.

In supervision look carefully at the part you

play in this, e.g. any possible counter-transference (who does this client remind you of) and what you can learn about yourself in this process. If your reaction continues, recommend a different coach.

It does raise the issue of where you would personally draw the line in working with clients who press serious buttons for you (e.g. could you work with a racist / sexist / other challenging characteristic)? It is important to know at what point your own reactions prevent you from doing your best work.

You agreed to work with a particular coachee on helping to restore his falling motivation. Several sessions in he tells you that he is feeling seriously depressed and 'really can't see much point in anything anymore'.

The issue: what have you contracted to work on with this coachee and where do you personally draw the line between coaching and counselling? What understanding do you have about depression? You owe it to your coachee as part of your duty of care to explore what the coachee means by this, how serious he is, what action he might be contemplating (is he potentially talking about quitting work or quitting life?).

Whether or not you are familiar with the typical symptoms of depression, one option is to encourage your coachee to see his GP as many mood disorders have organic origins. An additional option would be to recommend a counsellor / therapist. You might then re-contract to work with him to explore how he can get appropriate support at work and how he can be as functional as possible in the workplace.

This kind of situation raises another dilemma, a you could spend many sessions simply 'being with him' or trying to raise his spirits, without seeing any real shift. What is your stance on this? There is no doubt that this kind of sup-

port serves a purpose, but is it your role as a coach? How do you feel about his organisation paying you to do this? How would they feel? An option here would be to set a clear deadline to review whether the coaching is having any positive impact in terms of his productivity at work, or you might agree to resume coaching when his counselling starts to have a positive effect.

Your coachee tells you that she has sought legal advice and is planning to take legal action against the company for unfair treatment. She hasn't discussed this yet with her bosses and wants your help in supporting her case.

The issues: she is telling you something that could be potentially damaging to the organisation. To what extent do you believe that you have a responsibility to the sponsoring organisation? Her action is also highly likely to be a kiss of death to her immediate and possible subsequent career prospects. What 'values' buttons does it press for you? What if you think her complaint is justified, e.g. you are aware that she is being bullied or discriminated against? If she takes this action, might there be a risk to your reputation as a coach in the organisation? What will you write in your coaching notes?

An obvious option would be to explore the full implications of this course of action with her, what options she has before taking such drastic action. You might encourage her to meet with her boss and HR, offer to facilitate or, even better, to find someone neutral to facilitate.

If she is serious about taking it forward, would you be prepared to testify in her favour and risk losing your contract with the organisation? You might, particularly if you had information that supported her case. Alternatively, a different option would be to explain that it wouldn't be appropriate for you

to testify in her favour because you have an obligation to the organisation too. However, you might be prepared to comment on the coaching work that you and she have done together.

Finally, if she still insists on taking legal action without prior discussion with HR/bosses, you need to decide whether you feel obliged to brief HR, and if you do, to be clear with your coachee about your intent. If it goes that far your coaching relationship is at an end in any case.

Your coachee tells you that he has some potential whistle-blowing information about financial mismanagement in the organisation.

The issue: once you know what the information is, potentially you walk into a very difficult situation that could end up in court, so one option is not to ask about the information. As the previous scenario he is telling you something that is potentially damaging to the organisation and to his own career.

Your coachee has disclosed this to you for a purpose, so the obvious option is to find out what he is wanting from you. Explore what the coachee's motivation is for doing this and his options for handling the situation as constructively as possible. Explore the implications for him if he did/didn't blow the whistle. Keep an accurate account of the facts.

You hear that a fellow coach in the same organisation is using psychometric instruments that you know he is not qualified to use, and from what you are told, it sounds as though he is using them inappropriately.

The issue is how much of an issue is this for you? You might be able to shrug it off and assume that

he 'probably knows what he's doing'. Or it might raise concerns for you about the integrity of the coaching profession and/or the potential harm an unqualified person might do in the organisation?

If you know the person one option is to have a conversation with him about your concerns and the ethical issues it raises. If you don't know him, is it possible to contact him in the spirit of wanting to support a professional colleague? If he tells you to 'mind your own business' a further option would be to have a conversation with HR in the interest of maintaining professional standards. Without naming names, explore how they ensure that coaches are qualified to use the metrics that they do use. In this way you don't undermine your colleague but you do uphold the ethics of professional coaching.

Your coachee calls you to say that he's been suspended for having been caught with 'highly inappropriate and unprincipled material' on his computer at work and he wants you to support him.

The issues: the material here is pornography. What buttons does this press for you? What is your own ethical stance on pornography *per se*, and on pornography at work? Would your reaction be different if it were images of his wife *vs.* images of, say, children? What kind of support would it seem appropriate for to you to give? Would you be prepared to get involved at all? Alternatively, would you withdraw at a time when he is most vulnerable? Is his organisation still going to pay for your time if he has been suspended?

If you decide to stay involved, one option would be to find out from him and from his organisation what the 'facts' are in the situation.

Find out what support he is seeking from you. You then need to decide what you are prepared to do. He may want someone to talk it all through with and get an understanding of how he managed to get himself into this mess. He may want you to speak up for him as a character witness. You'll need to decide on where your own boundary lies.

Summary

You will have noticed a number of recurring themes in these scenarios. On contracting and boundary management the main ones are: clarity (or lack of it) of expectations about the relationship between the coach and coachee and between the coach and the boss / sponsoring organisation. Clarity about how the boundaries between these relationships will be handled. Clarity about what confidentiality means *in practice*, and when and how confidentiality would actually be broken. These are the issues that should be discussed at a first meeting (obvious I know, but it is surprising how often I hear from coaching supervisees that they have omitted to do this clearly enough).

Then there are themes relating to the coach and his/her stance on certain issues, e.g. the circumstances under which s/he would withdraw from the coaching relationship, what certain issues trigger for the coach, and linked to confidentiality, the circumstances under which the coach feels obliged to involve HR. These are the issues that need to be raised, a) in coaching

supervision, then b) with the coachee as appropriate.

There is also the issue of keeping client notes. A couple of scenarios include the possibility of having to testify in court, and, if this were to happen, it is highly likely that you would be asked to produce your client notes. It is important that you have a clear note taking policy and are aware that under certain circumstances they may be read by others.

Fortunately for both coaches and sponsoring organisations the more challenging of these situations occur rarely. However, if you do find yourself in a situation like one of these, or any situation where you feel uncertain how to respond, seek support from a qualified coach supervisor and your peers, and remember that it is never too late to re-contract with your coachee and their organisation.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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