

Don't Cross

the Line

How coaches can
master ethical dilemmas
in their work.

By Nancy G. Schreiber

Coaching is an inconsistent and unregulated business led by practitioners from a wide variety of professional backgrounds. As a result, the guidelines for defining the coaching relationship often are ambiguous.

Even more unfortunate, this lack of standardization gives rise to a myriad of ethical dilemmas that can tarnish the coaching's effectiveness as well as lead to potential legal exposure for both the coach and the organization.

It is, however, possible to bridge the ethical gaps between organizations and coaching providers by establishing clear roles and responsibilities up front and discussing ethical issues when they arise.

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Coaching as an intervention

The best reason to use coaching is for mutually agreed-upon development. When the employee, organization, and coach believe that coaching is the appropriate intervention, it is easier to obtain positive outcomes. Sadly, however, coaching may be sought as a way to save an employee who may be permanently lost to the organization.

Knowing when to engage a coach requires an understanding of coaching as an appropriate and ethical intervention. An unethical use of coaching is to validate an organization that's merely looking to terminate an employee—the coach becomes a puppet in the process. If a coach knowingly takes on such a case, she has crossed an ethical boundary. To avoid making that mistake, coaches should ask the following questions before taking on a client:

- How long has the organization been aware of the problem?

- What other types of interventions have been tried?
- Has the employee ever performed or behaved well?
- How do you think coaching can contribute to change in the employee?

Answers to such questions, to some degree, can be a diagnostic indicator of the organization's intentions for hiring a coach. In addition, they also can help to predict coaching success. If the answers suggest a poor prognosis, ethics warrant sharing that information with the organization.

After disclosing concerns to the organization, the coach may still be requested. In this situation, she should feel that ethical due diligence has been exercised and she may pursue the client.

A few years ago, I received a call regarding a senior vice president in a Fortune 500 firm who was abrasive, insulting, and a nondiscriminating bully. (He verbally attacked both men and women.) Because his behavior was both severe and pervasive, turnover among his staff was high.

As I probed deeper, I learned that the organization had been aware of his behavior for years, but had never followed through on its threats to discipline or terminate him. Consequently, he never changed his behavior and now the organization thought coaching could help him become a "kinder and more pleasant" manager.

From that information, I determined that he was not a good candidate for coaching and stated my concerns to the president. The president acknowledged my concerns but still wanted me to meet with the employee for at least one session. I agreed because I felt that I had done my part to be ethical and fair.

The session only validated my concerns that the employee was a bad candidate for coaching. Following the meeting, I told him and the president that coaching would not be an appropriate intervention. Three months later, the president called me and

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asked if I had been providing coaching services to the employee. Despite having had no further contact with the employee, I was shocked to learn that he told the president that he was meeting with me on a regular basis. The president terminated the employee that week.

This case demonstrates how easy—and yet unethical—it is to use coaching as a panacea for whatever ails the organization. It also shows how an organization's poor selection practices cannot be ameliorated by coaching.

Competence

Assuming it would be ethical to pursue a coaching relationship, ask yourself the next question: Am I the right coach to meet the specific needs of the client? You need to decide if you are operating within the boundaries of your professional competence. Acting ethically as a coach requires that you stay within those identified areas.

Usually, coaches have areas of expertise that have been honed through years of training and experience. Some people in the field are licensed psychologists, while others have had no formal education or training in behavioral change. Coaching certification programs and university-related programs have become a bridge for those who do not seek more traditional, graduate-level programs.

Although these educational programs have helped to establish more consistent standards and practices, anyone can claim to be a coach even without any formal training. Therefore, it is imperative that coaches know their areas of competence and expertise—and it's even more important that they know what areas of coaching to avoid.

Organizations seeking to hire coaches cannot rely on coaches to set or know their limitations. Ethical behavior on the part of the hiring organization dictates a thorough examination of a coach's formal training. Officials should interview a coach and verify credentials

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as if he is a potential employee. Another good practice is to request a client list and see if it is possible to speak with past customers.

Relationship boundaries

Let's assume that you have determined that coaching is an appropriate intervention. What other ethical issues must be considered? Two of the toughest ethical questions to answer are Who is the client? and What are the boundaries of the relationship?

When an individual requests services directly and the corporation has no financial stake, that individual is the client. More often, however, a corporate representative (a manager or HR employee) will request services for another employee. In that case, both the organization and the employee are the client.

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Sometimes corporate representatives want frequent progress reports. If so, it's best to always include the employee receiving the coaching in status reports or meetings with the corporate representative.

Nothing should be said or written that has not also been shared with the employee. When a corporate meeting is requested, ask that the coaching client attend. Coaches should not become communication conduits. This can lead to triangulated relationships that give rise to further ethical issues. Good ethical practice requires that the boundaries and roles of each party involved be discussed from the beginning.

Assessment data

Once you have the boundaries of the relationship established and the area of competency identified, you will need to discuss the process of coaching. In most coaching scenarios, the first phase focuses on assessment. Often, organizations use formal

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assessments, such as psychometric instruments, that need to be administered by people with specific credentials or training. Organizations must ensure that such instruments are used only by qualified coaches.

While it's understood that the coach will interpret the data and communicate it back to the client, it's also important to establish who else has access to the information. Sharing assessment results obviously is ethical—and an important part of the coaching process.

However, providing raw data (defined as uninterrupted data) is not. Releasing raw data to either the employee or organization can be construed as unethical because the client has no training to draw meaningful conclusions.

Best practices involve bundling coaching services with the release

of the survey data. When organizations implement 360-degree feedback without any coaching, the employee is left to interpret (or misinterpret) the findings. As a result, the employee often feels overwhelmed and unable to move forward with an action plan for change.

Informed consent

One of the best tools for establishing ethical coaching relationships is an informed consent document. These documents establish agreement between the relevant parties in the relationship. Boundaries of service, expectations of confidentiality, data access, and any other ethical issues may be outlined in the content. In short, informed consent can serve as an ethical compass that guides the coaching process toward ethical

practices and ultimately a much more effective coaching experience for all.

While these issues certainly are not an exhaustive list, they are common in the coaching profession. The key to mastering them and other ethical dilemmas is to address the issues early and directly. When expectations between both parties are explicit and aligned, ethical issues are less likely to impede the coaching process. **T+D**

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