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Is it Ethical to Coach A Company Without Coaching the CEO? And Other Ethical Explorations In Organizational Coaching with Commentary

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Is it Ethical to Coach A Company Without Coaching the CEO? And Other Ethical Explorations In Organizational Coaching

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Coaching in the organizational context is a magnified and multi-faceted version of one-to-one coaching, with additional twists due to the varied individual and group relationships that may form during the coaching work done inside a company. Careful consideration of ethical principles applicable to professional coaching provides an important framework for success of the coaching work. This article explores some of the foundational ethical issues for the coach to consider both before accepting the work and throughout the engagement.

When a coach is hired to work with the people in an organization, a significant factor in the outcome of that work will be the coaching mindset of the CEO.

THE QUESTION

Is it ethical to coach a company without coaching the CEO? The initial answer to that question, like any ethical question, is “Maybe. It depends.” And that answer begs more questions, like “On what does it depend?” and “How can I make sure I’ve paid attention to the important issues?” While such ethical questions for a professional coach may seem not unlike the existential question about a tree falling in the woods with no one to hear, fortunately there are ethical coaching models to help address them. The International Coach Federation (“ICF”) Code of Ethics¹ will be used primarily to illuminate critical ethical issues and questions.

Defining “A Company”

In this article, we will use the example of an external coach hired to work with a “close corporation”² or private company (which may be legally organized as something other than a corporation³, such as a loose association of individuals doing work together). The ethical issues addressed, however, may also apply to a department, division or other work group with a designated manager or director, in a larger private or publicly traded organization.

As a working definition, we will consider the example of a company in which the CEO also holds a controlling interest in the company, such as being sole or majority shareholder or owner, and/or chair of the board of directors, managing partner, or similar deciding role, and who is also involved in some oversight of day to day operations.⁴ For reference ease, we will call this person the “CEO.”

Coaching a company, or a distinct business unit of an organization, often involves working with company officers, department heads and managers and may also extend to the teams they oversee within a department or inter-departmentally, individually or in groups. We will refer to the others in the company being coached – vice presidents, division directors, department managers, supervisors and/or work staff – as “others” in the company so as to distinguish them from the “CEO.”

A CRITICAL STARTING POINT

How the CEO Views Coaching and the Coach

When a coach is hired to work with the people in an organization, a significant factor in the outcome of that work will be the coaching mindset of the CEO. If the CEO is also being coached, or has had a constructive experience of coaching, the likelihood of others in the organization taking the work seriously is enhanced. Thus, the first important consideration in approaching this question is to determine the level of involvement the CEO will have, if any, in the process of the coaching work to be done with others in the company. If the CEO has had individual coaching, or understands and endorses the process and is willing to be involved with the coaching work being done with others through briefings, updates, conferences and the like, then the coach's engagement has a reasonable possibility of realizing effective change for the company.

This is especially true in our company example where the CEO often has considerable involvement in day-to-day operations and business outcomes.

If the CEO sees the role of the Coach working with others as a process of “fixing them” to correct problems, then the coaching engagement portends a possibility for disaster.

Frequently, in business or corporate coaching engagements a coach is brought in to work with individuals, groups, or both, and with various people in a company, like a work team, a collection of division managers, a full department – including management and staff, a group of professional partners, or even all the people in a small company. The CEO is particularly visible and active in such settings. Consequently, if the CEO sees the role of the Coach working with others as a process of “fixing *them*” to correct problems, then the coaching engagement portends a possibility for disaster.

Has the CEO Contributed to the “Organization’s” Problem?

Sometimes, one of the unnamed “problems” of the organization to be solved includes *the CEO or other company leader*. Without that leader's willingness to look at how he/she is involved in creating or maintaining a problem, or is interfering in work flow because of a lack of effective communications, delegation, structuring, context-development or decision-making, the ultimate outcome of the coaching work may be negatively impacted from the outset. Without a CEO's genuine willingness to participate in the coaching process and address his/her degree of problem contribution and involvement, the efforts toward business change attempted by others in the company may fail to develop. Managers and workers may feel threatened and reluctant to challenge (or even speak honestly to) such a leader, who often asserts an authoritarian management style. This is especially true in situations where business downturns have already led to lay offs or employment terminations.

What Is Being Sought? True Coaching or Company Scapegoat?

If a non-participating CEO seeks to “repair” others in order to produce results when he/she is “part of the problem,” it may not only not be ethical to engage in the assignment – taking it on may subject both the coach and others to significant frustration, conflict and dissension. The coach may discover a need to use his/her professional liability insurance policy when production falls off, people resign, progress fails to be made, or worse and the coach gets blamed. After all, the coach was brought in to help make improvements. People in the company may see “coaching” as a last effort to make things better, and upon realizing change is not really possible because the CEO won't participate, they may choose to leave the company. As any good employment lawyer can attest, a particularly frustrated or disgruntled employee may even try to make trouble for the company

on their way out. Thus, although such a corporate coaching engagement may seem promising and lucrative for the coach, it is important to undertake a well-rounded inquiry of the business situation and people involved, particularly the attitude and involvement level of the CEO. A thorough ethical review of a coaching engagement will identify the potential issues and costs involved and will prove illuminating for the coach.

Assessing “Coachability”

Performing a thorough initial assessment of the proposed engagement may begin with a determination of “coachability”⁵ for the CEO or business leader, as for any potential coaching client. That is important whether that person is the one who has actively sought out an individual coach privately or is someone for whom

the business is providing (and paying for) the coaching. Determining coachability is especially important when someone other than the person being coached is paying for the service, since payment is an important representation of an individual’s investment in the coaching work.⁶ The concept of coachability includes things like: whether the coaching client is willing to participate; can be relied upon to show up on time and do the work that is the subject

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of coaching; keeps their word; works to eliminate struggle or self-sabotaging behaviors; tries on new concepts; tells the truth; asks for what they need; and can share credit with others. Often considered “softer skills,”⁷ less emphasized in some business settings, the likelihood of people in an organization being willing to openly share with one another and co-create a culture in which there is greater recognition and use of inter- and intra-personal skills may depend largely on whether that is being demonstrated by the “powers that be.”

Coachability and CEO Involvement

Coachability does not require that the CEO, or other applicable business leader, actually be coached individually during the organizational coaching engagement. That is preferred since a number of new issues, concerns or ideas may arise for the CEO to consider from the coaching of others in the company. Individual coaching gives the CEO a place, time and mechanism for considering this new information and including it in an overall plan to further develop the company direction, purposes, strategies and markets. In the organizational context, the CEO is a pivotal part of the coach-client relationship.⁸ It is critical that the CEO be involved, supportive, open and willing to make changes that may involve looking

at his/her own choices, behaviors or personal leadership style, or the organizational culture and his/her part in shaping it.

Who actually is the client? That question is more complex than whether the CEO will participate in the coaching process as a “client.”

Short of regular individual work with the organizational coach, involvement of the CEO may also be accomplished through his/her inclusion in coach-facilitated group meetings, or independent meetings between the coach and CEO. This allows the CEO to participate on an as-needed basis or in an oversight, direction or decision-making role that is more inclusive of the input of others in the company who are being coached. Coaching of the CEO can certainly occur during such sessions and can incorporate, for example, the ICF Code of Ethics philosophical and definitional aspects of coaching (see Sidebar) to frame the meeting parameters and dialogues. A request from the CEO that a paper progress report be submitted by the coach does not allow for the same level of exploration, discovery and outcome design for the CEO or for others in the organization with whom the coach is working.

Thus, such a “reporting only format” may be a red flag of the CEO’s unwillingness to participate in a meaningful way.

When the CEO is not a One-on-One Coaching Client

Implementing the process of coaching in an organization with a non-participating CEO may conflict with the Definition of Coaching in the ICF Code of Ethics where it states: “Coaching concentrates on where clients are now and what they are willing to do to get where they want to be in the future.” In this situation, the CEO, as a crucial part of the “organizational client”, would appear to be unwilling to “do” anything, but will require others to do the work. Since ICF member coaches pledge further to “recognize that results are a matter of the client’s intentions, choices and actions, supported by the coach’s efforts and application of the coaching process,” it seems clear that an arrangement for coaching in such an organization without participation of the CEO could easily fail to produce positive results. That is especially true if the CEO’s intention is for *others* to take actions, without contributing any of his/her own efforts to support the realization of those results. A “non-coached” or particularly “non-participating” CEO could sabotage any real progress toward desired outcomes identified by others, especially when their desires include changes the CEO may need to make.

Who is the Client? Company vs. CEO or Others as Clients

Another pivotal ethical question in the organizational coaching context is: who actually is the client? That question is more complex than whether the CEO will participate in the coaching process as a “client.” Clearly, all of the people in the organization who participate in the coaching qualify to be called “clients,” as does the CEO who has approved the engagement. Assuming the coach encounters a fully engaged and participating CEO, it remains critical to consider that the organization itself may also qualify as the “client.”⁹ The interest of the organization itself as a separate whole may supercede that of others, who stand in a position to potentially undermine its effective operations. Without the organization, the engagement of a coach to help improve its ongoing operations would not be needed. And if, for example, the underlying issues the coach was engaged to address led toward a division or dissolution of the organization, then that could be counterproductive to the business as a going concern.¹⁰ Recognizing this in order to avoid significant business losses may become crucial to an ultimately successful organizational coaching engagement.

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Thus, the “company” itself may also be considered the client, and as such, all of the people working there instrumental in that “client’s” viability or success, since one of the fundamental premises for incorporating organizational coaching is to derive some benefit to the business operation. Coaching’s return on investment is becoming increasingly more important to measure or demonstrate in the business setting.¹¹ It may be advisable to consider and continually reassess the implications of the “organization as a whole” as part of the organizational coach-client relationship.

This client consideration is not unlike one a lawyer must undertake when working with an organization or business entity. Most professional conduct codes governing lawyers clearly state that the organization is the client.¹² Interests of individuals may conflict with the interest of the organization as a whole. Discovering and being clear about what the interests and goals of the organization are, and according to whose authority and direction, can become confusing, particularly in the smaller,

less organized companies which lack an agreed upon written business plan or even mission statement. Unfortunately, this is all too true of many small businesses and private companies.

When Individual Interest is Contrary to Company Interest

While it may be easier to recognize potential conflicts of interest between the various people involved in a company (owner to owner, CEO to Board of Directors, shareholders to Board, Executives to CEO, Managers to Executives, Staff to Managers, etc.), it may not be so clear how differing views and conflicting

interests can have an impact on the company as an operating whole. Making sure legal counsel is involved to advise the company's leadership (and perhaps help direct the coach on the course of the work being undertaken) or to represent the organization's separate legal interests may even be imperative in some circumstances. The Definition of Coaching in the ICF Code of Ethics states, "Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that

From the outset, it will be important to explain and document in the coaching agreement the important purposes for confidentiality, and how it will be maintained with the individuals being coached.

helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations."¹³ While that definition contemplates businesses and organizations as a setting in which coaching may be delivered, it focuses primarily on clients as individual people. In those settings, it is recommended that the coach recognize the interests of "company as client," and clearly states in a written coaching agreement what the coach will do if faced with a situation in which an individual in the company has an interest adverse to the company.¹⁴ Language similar to the following may be helpful:

You understand that I will be working individually or in groups with a number of individuals within the company as my coaching clients, and that I also consider the company itself to be my client. Where there may be disagreement or conflicts among the interests of any of you, or if I have reason to believe there are concerns that may negatively impact the company as a whole, I will do my best to help promote discussion among you to find agreement or create mutually workable resolutions. In no event will our work together include assisting you or any individual in the company to undertake anything that is harmful to the company. Should any such subject arise, you will be encouraged to work through it directly with company management or ownership, or to separate from the company in a mutually agreeable way; otherwise, our coaching relationship will be terminated.¹⁵

Maintaining the Confidentiality of Individuals in a Company Setting

Another twist in the ethical issues facing the organizational coach is he/she may be engaged to work with individuals within a company including the CEO and other executives, managers and staff; and that work may be done one-on-one, in groups, or both. Confidentiality becomes more complex to maintain under such circumstances, especially when some of the confidential communications expose conflicting viewpoints, or disagreement with company direction or plans that need to be more openly and constructively discussed. Additionally, the CEO or other company leader who has engaged the coach will likely want to "know what's going on" with others, especially if he/she is not able to directly discern that by participating in the coaching work.

The Standards of Ethical Conduct in the ICF Code address confidentiality in the coaching relationship this way: "I will respect the confidentiality of my client's

information, except as otherwise authorized by my client, or as required by law” (Standard 11) and “I will obtain agreement with the person being coached before releasing information to another person compensating me” (Standard 13).¹⁶ Both of these ethical standards apply in the organizational context, and may have implications different from an individual coaching engagement. From the outset, it will be important to explain and document in the coaching agreement the important purposes for confidentiality, and how it will be maintained with the individuals being coached.

At its heart, the coaching relationship is focused on personal development. Coaching is a highly evolved form of relating to other human beings, and of assisting them to more meaningfully, constructively and creatively interact with the people, events, challenges and opportunities around them. It is vital to establish rapport and trust with a client if they are to meaningfully share what is really going on, what is really stopping them and what they really want in any given situation; whether their primary coaching focus is personal life, career goals or company direction. As stated in the ICF Code of Ethics Definition of Coaching: “Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.”¹⁷ In a company, that process and client improvements are ultimately intended to also benefit company operations. The revelations needed to move such results forward may proceed more slowly in an organization where there is fear that improperly revealed personal confidences may have economic or other negative repercussions.

In coaching, the boundary of the private discussion promotes needed trust development and sharing with the coach. When a coach works with different people individually within the same organization, however, this will require the coach to carefully maintain confidentiality and demonstrate that revelations made in the private discussion will not be repeated to others in the organization. Additionally, the coach must effectively assist the individual client to learn to more effectively and directly communicate concerns to the CEO, other leader or others in the company.

In a company, the coach may also facilitate group coaching. Coaching groups may be comprised of people who are also individually coached (like executives and managers), as well as people who participate *only* in group coaching (such as support staff.) Open dialogue may be more difficult or slower to develop in the group meeting. The coach may have information from individual clients that would help move the group or company forward, however the coach will need to maintain confidential communications revealed in those individual coach-client discussions.

The coach must resist revealing such confidences while assisting members of a group to supportively speak up, even when “telling hard truths,” so that challenging communications may be more easily shared by them and constructively managed. The coach should take ethical care during group meetings not to suggest, even indirectly, that a client reveal information that was privately shared with the coach. While the coach may feel that the information is important or even timely for the group to hear, the client may not be ready to speak up, and “pushing” or “fishing for” the revelation might undermine the individual coaching relationship with that person. The coach may use other techniques or tools, such as role play, group dialogue, situational exercises or assessment instruments to encourage and

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support members of the group to share their own communications directly with others.

Testing the Coach's Ability to Maintain Client Confidentiality

When coaching several different people within a company, the coach may encounter a client who directly asks or attempts to manipulate the coach into delivering difficult communications, so that client may avoid having to confront a challenging subject with another person. Doing so is known as triangulated communication. It is not only a breach of confidentiality for the coach to carry such messages to others in the organization (or in a report to a company leader

who is not participating in the coaching directly); it is also counter-productive to the learning and performance improvement of the individual.

An individual client may directly authorize the delivery of a message by the coach to others in the company, which may be considered ethical under ICF Code of Ethics Standard 11. When that authorization is a client's

In organizational coaching, the coach may anticipate that company management will want to know what's going on in the coaching work being done in order to somehow track its cost-effectiveness.

attempt to avoid doing it on his or her own, the coach may best serve such a client by declining the authorization. Otherwise, the coach may prevent "client self-discovery," discourage the "development of client-generated solutions and strategies" and fail to "hold the client responsible and accountable," which are foundations of the coach's responsibility as stated in the ICF Code of Ethics Philosophy of Coaching.¹⁸

It is, therefore, important for the coach to be clear from the outset that his/her individual communications with people in the company will not be *specifically* shared with management, ownership or others. It is also important for the coach to detail how any substantive information obtained will be disseminated, since it is often difficult to communicate information without including some identification of the source, even if not by name. In organizational coaching, the coach may anticipate that company management will want to know what's going on in the coaching work being done in order to somehow track its cost-effectiveness. While information can be formally obtained and distributed via initial and periodic anonymous surveys of participants and similar mechanisms, it is more likely to occur on an ongoing basis informally through dialogue, email and similar reporting. An authorization for release should clearly and specifically define what information may be shared by the coach and the manner by which it that will occur. Release of information should be spelled out in advance and in writing to all involved parties.

Addressing Confidentiality in the Coaching Agreement

In the organizational context, a clearly worded written coaching agreement provided to each person being coached is advisable, as it is in any individual coaching engagement. ICF Code of Ethics Standard 2 guides the coach to "construct clear agreements with my clients that may include confidentiality, progress reports, and other particulars." This is echoed by Standard 7, which provides that the coach should ensure that the client "understands the nature of coaching and the terms of the coaching agreement between us."¹⁹ The language in a coaching agreement provided to each individual being coached within a company might include the following sort of statement:

The company is paying my fee for this work. As such, our work will focus on assisting you to become more effective and productive

to benefit the company, as well as, yourself. Though the company is paying my fee, you are my client and the information you share with me will be maintained confidentially and not shared with others at the company, or with company ownership. We may work on how you can best share that information directly with the person or persons who need to hear it. The substance of concerns that may affect overall or company-wide operations, however, may be communicated outside our discussions in a summarized and de-identified fashion in written reports, group surveys, emails or other discussions. This means not only will I omit your name, I will also do my best to omit any detail that might identify you as the source of the information.²⁰

Teams of Coaches

In organizational coaching, more than one coach may be required to properly focus and track the coaching being done with a large number of people. The potential for conflict, confusion and breach of confidentiality may be magnified as different coaches are assigned to certain individuals or groups, and the team of coaches must coordinate information to effectively assist the people being coached (and the company) to make productive progress. Loyalties will develop between coaches and their clients, and information may be shared that each coach feels is important for the other coaches on the team to know.

Very clear agreements between the coaches will be crucial, and it will likewise be essential that the people being coached know how information will be shared among the team of coaches. The structure of the group of coaches should be carefully delineated and coordinated, and information disseminated by a coach team leader who may also best serve as the coach working directly with the CEO.

Coaching in the organizational context is a magnified version of the one-to-one private coaching engagement.

CONCLUSION

Coaching in the organizational context is a magnified version of the one-to-one private coaching engagement. The interrelationship of multiple people being coached within a company is a crucial consideration, which may be illuminated by considering how to apply existing ethical coaching guidelines to all individuals with whom the coach may work, and the organization itself as a “client.” Foundational in this context is the coach’s relationship with the main representative of the organization who engages the coach to work with others in the company, and the coaching example that leader sets for the others being coached. The coach will have a number of opportunities prior to taking on the engagement to be sure that there is a demonstration of support and a high level of willing participation from that CEO or other leader.

When the skilled professional coach is able to identify the various clients being served in any given organizational situation and clearly distinguish their needs and interests, conflicts of interest are less likely to occur. Because the critical foundation of a professional coaching relationship is built on a high level and degree of trust, all efforts should be made to carefully and specifically construct the parameters of client confidentiality by means of a comprehensive written coaching agreement between client and coach. From that ethical foundation, constructive progress and organizational return on the coaching investment is more likely to grow.

SIDEBAR: THE ICF CODE OF ETHICS

Part One: The ICF Philosophy of Coaching

The International Coach Federation adheres to a form of coaching that honors the client as the expert in his/her life and work, believes that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:

- Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve
- Encourage client self-discovery
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
- Hold the client responsible and accountable

Part Two: The ICF Definition of Coaching

Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.

In each meeting, the client chooses the focus of conversation, while the coach listens and contributes observations and questions. This interaction creates clarity and moves the client into action. Coaching accelerates the client's progress by providing greater focus and awareness of choice. Coaching concentrates on where clients are now and what they are willing to do to get where they want to be in the future. ICF member coaches recognize that results are a matter of the client's intentions, choices and actions, supported by the coach's efforts and application of the coaching process.

Part Three: The ICF Standards of Ethical Conduct 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.

Version 05-2003.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See, ICF Code of Ethics, http://www.coachfederation.org/ethics/code_ethics.asp (last accessed April 28, 2004). The International Coach Federation is ICF is the largest non-profit professional association worldwide of personal and business coaches with more than 6000 members and over 145 chapters in 30 countries. A review of other existing ethical codes for coaches may also be helpful to the reader. Suggested are those of the European Mentoring & Coaching Council ("EMCC"), <http://www.emccouncil.org/frames/aboutframe.htm> (see "Downloads" on that page); the International Association of Coaches ("IAC"), <http://www.certifiedcoach.org/ethics.html>; and the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches ("WABC"), <http://www.wabccoaches.com/advantage/ethics.htm>.
- 2 A close corporation or "closely held corporation" is "a corporation whose shares, or at least voting shares, are held by a single shareholder or closely-knit group of shareholders." Black's Law Dictionary, Fifth Edition (West Publishing Co., 1979). An example is a company in which all the stock is held by family members or professional colleagues; as distinguished from a publicly traded company, in which shares of stock are owned by members of the general public and trading of shares is government regulated rather than defined by the internal working documents of the company. Many of the former tend to be smaller and less formal in management or

operation, and to be less likely to employ internal corporate coaches. Thus, they may be the sort of “corporate or business coaching” or “organizational coaching” situations in which a majority of coaches working as independent contractors are engaged.

- 3 This includes legal entities such as a limited partnership, family corporation, limited liability partnership or limited liability corporation; or people doing business together without forming a formal legal entity like in the case of a joint venture between private individuals, or a general partnership.
- 4 A department director or division manager in a larger organization may be similarly situated in terms of involvement, oversight or other control of work production, development of job descriptions or delegation of responsibilities, hiring and firing decisions, and other people-related aspects of doing business in which coaching may be utilized.
- 5 “Coachability” is a term that likely originated with Thomas Leonard, sometimes referred to as the father of coaching. Developed originally with a group of coaches at the Coach U, Inc. (www.CoachU.com) coach training program, the “Client Coachability Index” is a 10-item assessment used by many coaches who have trained in that program; or who are affiliated with Coachville, an online community of coaches with over 40,000 registered members (www.CoachVille.com), also founded by Leonard. Free Coachville membership provides access to many coaching resources and tools, including a Coaching Forms ebook that contains this assessment. See also, www.CoachingForms.com.
- 6 The source of payment may also raise ethical issues for the coach since it can influence, even unwittingly, the coach’s loyalties, creating a potential for conflict of interest. The ICF Code of Ethics provides guidance on these issues where it states “[w]henver 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” (Standard 15); and “I will disclose to my client all anticipated compensation from third parties that I may receive for referrals or advice concerning that client.” (Standard 16). These considerations require a careful consideration of “who” is the client. See also text accompanying notes 9-12.
- 7 While gaining greater recognition and popularity, the whole notion of “EQ” or Emotional Quotient, the intra-personal and interpersonal relational abilities detailed by Daniel Goleman in his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam Books), and of Multiple Intelligences introduced by his predecessor Howard Gardner in the 1983 book *Frames of Mind* (Basic Books), much of mainstream business has yet to grasp and incorporate such notions into their day to day operations. (See <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/PIs/HG.htm> and <http://www.eiconsortium.org/members/goleman.htm> for more information about Gardner and Goleman, respectively, last accessed April 28, 2004).
- 8 Since the CEO is an integral part of the organization, this consideration is especially important in applying the ICF Code of Ethics coaching philosophy that makes it the Coach’s responsibility to both “elicit client-generated solutions and strategies” and “hold the client responsible and accountable.” ICF Code of Ethics, see note 1.
- 9 Current coaching ethical codes do not address the definition of “client” in a fully encompassing manner, especially when considering the more complex coach-client relationships that may exist in an organizational context. The EMCC Ethical Code does note in its defining terminology the following concepts which may be informative here: “The term “client” denotes anyone using the services of a coach/mentor [and] ... the term “client” is interchangeable with any other term that the parties to the coach/mentoring relationship might be more comfortable with, such as “colleague”, “learner”, “partner”, “coachee” or “mentee”. It is recognised that there are circumstances where the coach/mentor may have two “clients”, the individual being coached and the organisation who may have commissioned the coach/mentoring. In this Code we have used the term “sponsor” to differentiate the latter.” *Ibid.* See, EMCC Code of Ethics.
- 10 It may be an appropriate role for a coach with the proper background and experience to assist a company with a succession plan that may include the winding up and termination of the business, selling a part of the business or dividing the business into parts. However, where this happens as a result of an engagement to assist the company to remain a going concern, it may be problematic. The ongoing business as a whole may be a considerable asset, and a possible loss in the value of that asset is an important factor.
- 11 In fact, one of the elements of professionalism in any human service endeavor is growth of the profession’s body of knowledge, including expertise and demonstration of results, through research. Coaching as a professional endeavor has formally entered this phase of its development.

In November 2003 the ICF sponsored its first-ever coaching research symposium, held as a one-day pre-conference event at its annual educational conference in Denver, Colorado. The event brought together close to 100 academics, researchers, and practicing coaches, and the program included presentations, panels, poster displays and group discussions. The published proceedings of the Symposium are available through ICF by calling its U.S. office at 1-888-423-3131, and see Coaching research information at <http://www.coachfederation.org/pressroom/news.asp> (last accessed April 28, 2004).

12 See, for example, the American Bar Association Model Rules of Professional Conduct at http://www.abanet.org/cpr/mrpc/mrpc_toc.html, (last accessed April 28, 2004) which have largely been utilized by most State Bar Associations in the United States to guide the ethical conduct of attorneys. Rule 1.13 of the Model Rules make clear that the organization is the lawyer's client, even though to exist and operate the organization can only act through its officers or other constituents, who are individual people. If any of those people do something to undermine the legal rights of the organization, it is the lawyer's duty to "proceed as is reasonably necessary in the best interest of the organization." The comments to the rule also make it clear that the rule applies to unincorporated or other business associations. Currently there is no ethical code for business or organizational coaches that addresses this issue; rather, they focus mostly on the relationship of coach to individual person. Some would argue that the issue pertains more to a person working in the role of organizational consultant, but coaches working in, with or for organizations providing coaching services (as opposed to expertise and advice which is more the province of consulting), must still define client relationships by who their clients are and their clients' interests, as opposed to what they may be doing for the client(s).

13 ICF Code of Ethics. See, note 1. Note that the reference considers the context of businesses and organizations, but focuses on clients as individuals. The Ethical Principles and Code of Ethics of the IAC (see note 1) considers this issue indirectly under section 1.18(a) referring to "third-party requests for services" where it states:

When a coach agrees to provide services to a person or entity at the request of a third party, the coach clarifies to the extent feasible, at the outset of the service, the nature of the relationship with each party. This clarification includes the role of the coach (such as organizational consultant), the probable uses of the services provided or the information obtained, and the fact that there may be limits to confidentiality. (Emphasis supplied.)

Any person engaging the coach to provide services for a company (a separate "entity") would be such a requesting third party. This ethical guideline might go unnoticed by a coach providing services in an organizational setting unless the coach considers his/her role to include organizational consulting. Thus from an ethical perspective, it may be best in the organizational coaching context for the coach to consider the organization or company as client when defining the coaching relationship between the various individual people with whom the coach may work directly.

14 The Ethical Principles and Code of Ethics of the IAC (see note 1) again indirectly addresses this issue in section 1.18(b) referring to "third-party requests for services" where it states:

If there is a foreseeable risk of the coach's being called upon to perform conflicting roles because of the involvement of a third party, the coach clarifies the nature and direction of his or her responsibilities, keeps all parties appropriately informed as matters develop, and resolves the situation in accordance with this Ethics Code. (Emphasis supplied.)

15 This language is included for illustrative or educational purposes only. While author, Ms. Garlo, is a lawyer by background and experience, this recommendation is not intended to be legal advice. Any coaching agreement or language utilized by a coach should be reviewed by his/her own professionally engaged legal counsel before it is utilized to be sure it is appropriate for the purpose employed.

16 ICF Code of Ethics. See, note 1.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 See note 15.

Commentary On Is it Ethical to Coach A Company without Coaching the CEO? And Other Ethical Explo- rations in Organizational Coaching

DOLLY M. GARLO, R.N., J.D., P.C.C. AND DAVID MATTHEW PRIOR, M.C.C., M.B.A.

Writing now, three years later, we can say from experience that the complexity of ethical issues in organizational coaching has become even more visible, though manageable through the use of ethical principles.

Our article, “Is it Ethical to Coach a Company without Coaching the CEO?” and other Ethical Explorations in Organizational Coaching” was first published in IJCO in August, 2004. Since that time, it has been inspiring to witness the continued professional growth of both coaching and coaches as they work in many new arenas. We are pleased to have contributed to that professional advancement, and appreciate the opportunity to provide an update on our observations.

The original context for our article was the realm of business, coaching in organizations in particular, because the business world is where coaching had become most visible and where its benefits were being quite readily realized. Although more specialty, ‘graduate-level’ or even university-based programs exist to prepare coaches for work in the business world, even today, standard coach training only scratches the surface of the complex world of for-profit and non-profit organizations. And while ethics, as a hallmark of professionalism, was growing in the dialogue among coaches, there was little in training programs or elsewhere that catalogued and described the practical situations in which ethical coaching issues may arise.

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We perceived then, and now, the need to raise the importance of coaching ethics in the organizational coaching engagement, to educate coaches and organizations in which they work about the business complexity involved with matters such as identifying the coaching client(s), the coaching agenda(s), client confidentiality, structuring a solid coaching engagement, reporting considerations, conflicts of interests and potential coach liability. Also, in the organizational context, we felt it was important to address having the senior leader (CEO) truly support the coaching initiative and why that is key to the success of a coaching initiative for all stakeholders. Coaching as a “remedial” activity to “fix” a poor-performing executive or manager was appearing in the workplace, indicating a suboptimization of the opportunity and suggesting a possible misunderstanding of the potentials coaching holds for both the individuals being coached and the workplace as a whole.

We believe our article was selected for publication in 2004 because it made some very clear and practical distinctions for working

organizational coaches, and gave examples and tools that coaches could put to use in their engagements. It sought to educate and instruct, and provided the ICF Code of Ethics as a guiding reference tool. While professional coaching in the organizational context generally has advanced and gained more prominence, the need for these tools and understanding of ethics in that context has become even more important. It is truly an honor to be included in this “Best of IJCO” issue to be able to reinforce and update these issues.

Writing now, three years later, we can say from experience that the complexity of ethical issues in organizational coaching has become even more visible, though manageable through the use of ethical principles. For example, a consulting company may be hired to work with all the members of an intact Senior Management Team with the task of “transforming” those individuals from a siloed, dysfunctional working group to a collaborative and trusting high performance team. When that work is delivered through one-on-one executive coaching of the team members by a group of coaches, the ethical issues compound and become multi-layered. Maintaining a consistent professional and ethical approach is crucial to the successful outcome of the engagement for all concerned. It is important that the confidentiality of the individual management team members is not breached. The outside coaches, however, must and do collaborate with each other as a private group and share information in a way that builds greater trust, collaboration and communication among the management team. Great principled care must be taken to preserve the confidential nature of the individual coaching relationships and yet bring about the required business results.

We have also observed and learned through dialogue with coaching colleagues that there is increased interest in ethical issues within the coaching community, within other disciplines, within the general public and within political and legislative communities. More and more coaches seem to understand that the ethics of coaching is the platform that allows them to use their coaching tools and skills, that keeps the profession self-regulated and garners growing understanding and respect in multiple other businesses, education, professional and political arenas. There has also been an increase in dialogues and inquiries about ethically appropriate behavior - before the fact. Coaches want to be proactive about preventing ethical quagmires and “doing the right thing.”

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Coaching ethics is but one of a host of identified core competencies that describe professional coaching and one that is now a solid part of professional standards defined by all professional coaching associations. Proficiency of those competencies, through individual coach credentialing, continues to advance, with distinctions being drawn between entry-level, mid-level and advanced level demonstration of that proficiency. The knowledge base of coaching has also evolved, and coach training is now being distinguished from coach education. The former focused on building coaching skills and developing sound business practices for the pursuit of professional coaching. Coaching education seeks to develop coaches who are “scientist-practitioners” – those who practice coaching from solid theoretical underpinnings and a research-based body of knowledge, which includes an emphasis on highly ethical approaches.

David has seen this in his teaching at New York University and The University of Texas at Dallas in executive and professional coach training programs. Coaching students there are often struck by the importance and complexity of confidentiality

considerations for clients with the realization that there can be multiple clients within one coaching engagement. Defining the agenda of the coaching has also been of particular interest in terms of reconciling individual goals with both the team and organization's needs. Students have also appreciated the practicality and significance of giving measured weight and time to structure and contractually document the organizational coaching engagement, before jumping in simply because it looked profitable for the coach. That seemingly profitable work ironically can become considerably expensive for the coach faced with the stressful reality of juggling multiple interests and possible conflicts that arise when the terms of the engagement are murky or misunderstood. In the academic environment, students are hungry for substantive information about organizational coaching ethics as well as for deeper examination and discussion of ethics through the case study approach.

In her ongoing work with ICF, Dolly continues to advance both organizational and ethical coaching issues as co-leader of the ICF Virtual Community (VC). This community provides personal and practice development programs by teleconference presented by guest speakers as an ICF member benefit in addition to its annual global and regional continuing coach education (CCE) focused

conferences. In response to member coach requests, the VC is committed to focusing 50% of its presentations on the ICF Core Competencies – minimum professional standards used within today's coaching profession as defined by the ICF – which include, as a foundational principle, understanding coaching ethics and standards and applying them appropriately in all coaching situations. The requested core competency CCE units are important for any coach seeking to attain or renew an ICF coaching credential as a commitment to professional

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coaching. Moving forward as a “knowledge-based organization,” this program benefit is now directed by the ICF Research & Education Committee, which is charged with advancing the portion of ICF's strategic plan that seeks to increase research on the coaching impact delivered by ICF credentialed coaches. Clearly embodied within that impact will be an ethical approach that honors the interests of both individual and organizational clients.

Even the ICF Code of Ethics, which provided the framework for our original article, has further advanced the principles of coaching ethics. Growing awareness of ethical coaching issues brought about the 2005 revisions to the ICF Code of Ethics (see addendum) adding 12 new standards of professional conduct that address:

- increasing the extent of coach self management;
- conducting and reporting research;
- setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries;
- practicing due diligence in ensuring that the client fully understands the terms of the coaching agreement; and
- respecting the client's right to terminate coaching.

Since the original writing of this article, the evolution of professional coaching ethics has continued with the consideration of complaints using the first Ethical Conduct Review (ECR) process in the profession, some even resulting in the imposition of sanctions. Recognizing the importance of this professional peer review process, ICF also created a separate Independent Review Board, taking seriously the responsibility of providing a fair and impartial forum in which to

carry out the ECR process when a viable breach of the Code of Ethics is alleged. In a continuous process of evolution, the ICF Code of Ethics is now undergoing revisions for a 2008 version that aims to further clarify the increasing complexities and professional conduct considerations of organizational coaching ethics.

We stand committed to see more ethics education in all educational programs for coaches, and especially as a mandatory requirement, particularly for entry-level training programs. While we both continue to work with ICF on that, we are pleased to provide IJCO readers with a copy of the updated Code of Ethics. We still believe that ICF has the most current set of ethical principles for coaches, and an organizational structure for updating it, as well as a sound process for professional peer review of ethical concerns.

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David Matthew Prior is president of Getacoach.com LLC. Based in the New York City metropolitan area, his work focuses on team, executive and organizational coaching, group facilitation, and coach consulting to organizations who are building coaching initiatives and programs. David serves on the coaching faculty at NYU (New York University; School of Continuing and Professional Studies Coaching Certificate Programs), and at the University of Texas-Dallas where he teaches the Ethics and Standards of Coaching for the Executive and Professional Coach Training Program. He currently serves on the global Board of Directors of the International Coach Federation (ICF) as a Vice President, following a 3-year term as Co-Chair of the ICF Ethics & Standards Committee (2003-2006).

Formerly a Trust and Financial Planning Officer with Chase Bank, he has an MBA from Thunderbird and is a graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, NY.

THE ICF CODE OF ETHICS

Part One: The ICF Philosophy of Coaching

The International Coach Federation adheres to a form of coaching that honors the client as the expert in his/her life and work and believes that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:

- Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve
- Encourage client self-discovery
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
- Hold the client responsible and accountable

Part Two: The ICF Definition of Coaching

Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.

In each meeting, the client chooses the focus of conversation, while the coach listens and contributes observations and questions. This interaction creates clarity and moves the client into action. Coaching accelerates the client's progress by providing greater focus and awareness of choice. Coaching concentrates on where clients are now and what they are willing to do to get where they want to be in the future. ICF member coaches and ICF credentialed coaches recognize that results are a matter of the client's intentions, choices and actions, supported by the coach's efforts and application of the coaching process.

Part Three: The ICF Standards of Ethical Conduct

Professional Conduct At Large

As a coach:

- 1) I will conduct myself in a manner that reflects positively upon the coaching profession and I will refrain from engaging in conduct or making statements that may negatively impact the public's understanding or acceptance of coaching as a profession.
- 2) I will not knowingly make any public statements that are untrue or misleading, or make false claims in any written documents relating to the coaching profession.
- 3) I will respect different approaches to coaching. I will honor the efforts and contributions of others and not misrepresent them as my own.
- 4) I will be aware of any issues that may potentially lead to the misuse of my influence by recognizing the nature of coaching and the way in which it may affect the lives of others.
- 5) I will at all times strive to recognize personal issues that may impair, conflict or interfere with my coaching performance or my professional relationships. Whenever the facts and circumstances necessitate, I will promptly seek professional assistance and determine the action to be taken, including

whether it is appropriate to suspend or terminate my coaching relationship(s).

- 6) As a trainer or supervisor of current and potential coaches, I will conduct myself in accordance with the ICF Code of Ethics in all training and supervisory situations.
- 7) I will conduct and report research with competence, honesty and within recognized scientific standards. My research will be carried out with the necessary approval or consent from those involved, and with an approach that will reasonably protect participants from any potential harm. All research efforts will be performed in a manner that complies with the laws of the country in which the research is conducted.
- 8) I will accurately create, maintain, store and dispose of any records of work done in relation to the practice of coaching in a way that promotes confidentiality and complies with any applicable laws.
- 9) 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

- 10) I will be responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern any physical contact that I may have with my clients.
- 11) I will not become sexually involved with any of my clients.
- 12) I will construct clear agreements with my clients, and will honor all agreements made in the context of professional coaching relationships.
- 13) I will ensure that, prior to or at the initial session, my coaching client understands the nature of coaching, the bounds of confidentiality, financial arrangements and other terms of the coaching agreement.
- 14) I will accurately identify my qualifications, expertise and experience as a coach.
- 15) 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.
- 16) I will not give my clients or prospective clients information or advice I know or believe to be misleading.
- 17) I will not knowingly exploit any aspect of the coach-client relationship for my personal, professional or monetary advantage or benefit.
- 18) I will respect the client's right to terminate coaching at any point during the process. I will be alert to indications that the client is no longer benefiting from our coaching relationship.
- 19) If I believe the client would be better served by another coach, or by another resource, I will encourage the client to make a change.
- 20) I will suggest that my clients seek the services of other professionals when deemed appropriate or necessary.
- 21) I will take all reasonable steps to notify the appropriate authorities in the event a client discloses an intention to endanger self or others.

Confidentiality/Privacy

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

Conflicts of Interest

- 25) I will seek to avoid conflicts between my interests and the interests of my clients.
- 26) 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.
- 27) I will disclose to my client all anticipated compensation from third parties that I may receive for referrals of that client.
- 28) I will only barter for services, goods or other non-monetary remuneration when it will not impair the coaching relationship.

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 the 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 and/or my ICF credentials.

v. 2005-01-22

Resource Center for Professional Coaching in Organizations

The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations (IJCO) is the signature publication of Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). In addition to this internationally acclaimed journal, PCPI publishes books on topics of interest to those in the coaching community, whether practitioner, decision maker, or end user. You can count on PCPI, Inc. to provide content that pushes the envelope — bringing theory, research and application together in ways that inform, engage and provoke. Visit the PCPI website, www.pcpionline.com, to view and purchase our growing line of products.

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