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Is it Ethical to Coach a Friend?

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The ICF Ethics and Standards Committee recently posed the question "Is it ethical to coach a friend?" for discussion. While it is not a violation of the ICF Code of Ethics to coach a friend there are opinions both pro and con as to whether or not it is good practice to do so. It was generally agreed that it could be a sticky situation, mostly due to the potential conflict in roles between being someone's friend and being his or her coach.

Part Two of the ICF Code of Ethics defines professional coaching as "an ongoing **professional relationship** that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, business or organizations." Friendships, by their pure nature, imply a personal relationship. The role expectations can differ greatly. For example, friends do not take a pledge of conduct, coaches do. Friendships involve reciprocity of conversation and agenda. It is "a little bit about me and a little bit about you." Whereas in a coaching relationship, the client chooses the focus of the conversation, and it's the client's agenda, not the coach's that rules. There are no contracts, no agreements and no set appointments in a friendship. In professional coaching relationships, these are common elements. It is evident; there are obvious distinctions between being a coach and being a friend.

Many coaches do not mix roles, preferring to keep friendships separate. If, however, one does decide to enter into a professional coaching relationship with a friend, here are some of the Standards of Conduct in the Code to consider, as well as potential pitfalls.

Standard Number **17** *I will not knowingly exploit any aspect of the coach-client relationship for my personal, professional or monetary advantage or benefit.*

A potential exploitation could be to use coaching as a means for your fellowship rather than as a vehicle for your friend's optimal development. Within the context of a coaching relationship it may be necessary to act in ways you do not within a friendship. For example, there may be occasions where direct, candid feedback is called for, that may never be asked for or sought out within your friendship. If your motive is to enhance your fellowship, you may be reluctant to be so candid for fear of losing the friendship. Your friend might lose the benefit of the full coaching experience, and ultimately end up with a compromised outcome.

Standard Number **20** *If I believe the client ^{or sponsor} would be better served by another coach, or by another resource, I will encourage the client to make a change.*

A potential conflict could be an unwillingness to encourage your friend to switch to another coach because you want to be the facilitator of his or her optimal development. This could hinder admitting to yourself or to your friend that there is another coach who might better serve your friend's needs.

Standard Number **25** *I will seek to avoid conflicts between my interests and the interests of my clients.*

Since both of you have a common interest in preserving your friendship, a potential conflict could occur if your friend does not speak up or self-reveal when it would be in his or her best interest. Consider how your dual role may inhibit candid feedback about your coaching. If your friend does not give you this kind of information out of fear of harming your friendship, the coaching may be compromised.

Or, your friend may become aware of issues important for personal growth and development, which he or she might be reluctant to share with a friend. From your professional vantage point, realize your friend may be more willing and comfortable revealing things to a coach who is not a friend. If your friend is unwilling to bring up critical issues he or she may lose out on the full benefits of coaching.

As coaches, we have skills that may enhance relationships and it is natural to bring those into our casual conversations with friends. However, when considering entering into a professional coaching relationship with a friend, realize it can be tricky. Seriously consider the potential inherent conflict in the roles. Clearly defining roles, boundaries and expectations can help, but may not eliminate all the potential issues involved.

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