

Ethics Issues in Professional Coaching

DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Situation

A mentor coach has been working with a new client for three months and the coaching relationship is proceeding positively with a solid level of trust and connection building between client and coach. The client is getting value by learning a lot about herself and the development of her coaching business. In month four, the mentor coach is contracted by a private coaching company to deliver sales presentations and corporate coach training to organizations in and outside of the local metropolitan area. The mentor coach learns that his client has been contracted as well (the coach and client live in the same city) and the two are to be partnered to work together as co-facilitators in delivering coach training locally and nationally, and will also be expected to develop future business with the promise of sharing in sales commissions on any newly generated clients. Would it be ethical for the mentor coach to either continue or terminate the coaching relationship with his client? Would it be advisable for the mentor coach to decline this new assignment for ethical reasons?

Ethical Considerations

Unlike the field of psychotherapy whose professional writings and ethics codes are clearer about the guidelines and rules governing dual relationships, the coaching profession is less so, mostly owing to its relatively early emergence and evolution as it strives to become recognized as a legitimate profession in the eyes of the public. Dual relationships in coaching can be defined as any situation or circumstance that places the coach in the position of assuming another role, outside of the role of professional coach, with one's client.

In the coaching field, it is not uncommon for coaches to be confronted with delicate decisions regarding dual relationships with their clients, or in some cases, even multiple relationships. Examples of such dual relationships with clients might include participating in designated social activities, serving on Boards of professional associations, delivering coach training programs, or sharing client workload in an executive coaching engagement where groups of coaches are contracted by a sponsoring organization.

Smart coaches will be alert to such circumstances that can potentially interfere with the coach's duty to rightly serve their client and operate from the highest standards of professional conduct. An audit of ethical considerations can positively contribute to the coach's awareness and responsibility for more effective decision making and provide the coach with a better navigation system to address the complex dimensions involved in dual relationships. Some ethical points include:

1. Remain cognizant of the functioning level of your client: A coaching relationship is based on establishing trust, professional intimacy and a solid interpersonal relationship between coach and coachee. Although coaches aim to work with the purely functional aspect of the client, there frequently exists the potential for a client to unconsciously manifest behaviors that are either dysfunctional or inappropriate to the professional coaching relationship. Pay attention to issues such as but not limited to transference, blurred boundaries in the social relationship and how the client relates and responds to you as an authority figure.

2. Be sensitive to the nature of the individual coaching relationship: Mentor coaching relationships create a dynamic where the client is looking to the mentor coach for specialized guidance, counsel, training and expertise which are all linked to the mentor coach's knowledge and experience level in the field. This has the potentiality to spawn unevenness in the relationship by implying a hierarchy between coach and client. In such a case, a coach's thoughts, words and behavior need to be carefully reflected and practiced so as not to misuse coach influence or jeopardize the client's own sense of expertise, direction and self-responsibility.

3. Become an expert at wearing and naming your different hats: Should you choose to engage with your client in situations outside of the professional coaching relationship, you'll be invited to call out your metaphoric hats in advance of wearing them. Examples of coach to client dialog might sound something like this: "I will be strictly wearing my Board hat whenever you (client) and I conduct Board business." (a qualification to this line of dialog assumes there is no conflict of interest and/or you and your client have mutually disclosed the nature of your pre-existing coaching relationship to the Board, as deemed appropriate); or, "I'm wearing my coach colleague hat at this event.", etc. Naming the hat you are wearing contributes to normalizing the situation for you and your client and allows each of you to show up with greater ease and comfort as you function in your 'other' roles.

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