Do the Right Thing: Ethics for Coaches

Class #2. Sticky Situations

This is an introduction to the Ethical Principles, Code and the Member Pledge that all IAC members must take when they join the organization. From time to time, you’ll experience professional situations that challenge your ethics and confuse your choices. Here are a few scenarios and choices you may face, with potential options and guidance from the IAC’s Code of Ethics.

Sticky Situations focuses on client scenarios as examples of situations that you may one day encounter in your own business. We’ll discuss these scenarios in class and look at options for resolving them as ethically as possible.

Be sure to review the IAC Code of Ethics before class and if possible, have it open to refer to in class (or have a printed-out copy). We’ll be looking at the more detailed version of the Ethics, which is located here: http://www.certifiedcoach.org/ethics/ethics.html. See if you can find satisfying answers to the questions, below.

This module is limited to ethical behavior, as defined by the coaching profession in general, and specifically the IAC Code of Ethics. It doesn’t pretend to offer legal advice, especially since our students live in countries around the world. It’s advisable to consult with an attorney on some of these issues, especially if you have doubts. You may also want an attorney to help you create coach/client agreements to clarify what you do and do not offer. This also may help limit your liability.

You may also want to cover yourself and your business with liability insurance. There are many carriers. IAC members in the US can apply for liability insurance through the IAC website.

We’re going to focus on ethical challenges that can be grouped into four categories:

- Confidentiality
- Mental Health
- Liability
- Appropriate Behaviors

Confidentiality is a common issue for coaches, because unlike most professions, coaching businesses are usually entrepreneurial, so self promotion is considered legal and ethical. It’s tempting to use client scenarios and case studies as evidence of the validity of coaching. You may also want to refer to clients’ situations when you’re talking to friends or to other coaches. When is this okay? Here are a few examples:
• You get a call from a major newspaper that’s profiling a prominent client of yours. They want some details about your client and the exposure could be wonderful for your business. How should you handle it?
• You and a coaching friend of yours have both coached the same client. When would it be okay for you to discuss the client with each other?
• You coach members of the same family separately. How much can you share about them to each other?

Mental Health is another issue that comes up a lot for coaches, because so many people don’t understand the difference between coaching and therapy. Sometimes people who really need a therapist seek out coaching instead, perhaps because there are fewer stigmas associated with coaching. However coaching is not effective for people who have serious psychological disorders, like major depression, obsessive/compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, etc. If you’re not a trained psychotherapist, how do you know where to draw the line?

• A prospective client does a complimentary session with you and reveals that he/she is a perfectionist, a procrastinator and occasionally feels depressed. Do you take the client on and under what conditions?
• During a coaching session, you notice an unhealthy family relationship between your client and their immediate family. Do you try to coach them around it?
• You have a client who doesn’t “believe” in therapy, but clearly has some issues. What do you do?
• Your client is distraught over losing his job. He casually mentions that he never understood why his father committed suicide, but he’s beginning to get it. What’s appropriate?

Fortunately, liability has so far not been a big issue for most coaches. However, because the field of coaching is growing rapidly and even some well-meaning coaches are unaware of professional ethics, this may change. You do want to be aware of a few types of situations that you could be held liable for.

• You have more clients than you can coach, so you hire your best friend to coach the extra clients. This works out great until you receive an irate call from one of these clients. Your friend just posted something about the client in their blog and although they changed the details, they didn’t get permission from the client. Who’s responsible and what needs to be done?
• You’re a corporate coach who is coaching a mid-level manager who mentions to you that they’ve been surreptitiously doing something illegal while on the job. You’re being paid by the company. Should you tell the company? Should you continue coaching the client?
• You’re a business coach who occasionally gives advice to your clients. One of your clients makes a mistake that costs him his business and blames you for it. He sues you, saying he is an alcoholic and you should have known not to coach him. Do you think he has a case?

What’s considered appropriate behavior is sometimes simply a matter of preference. Other times it’s a matter of ethics.
• Your client wants to meet you in person and you agree to have a drink together at a local bar. It turns out your client is really good looking and a bit of a flirt. When you leave, you give each other a big hug and a peck on the lips. Is this ethical?
• You and your client have agreed that the client needs to take a time out to work on something with a therapist. The client wants to remain friends and see you socially. Is this okay?
• Your client is starting an exciting new business which you’ve been coaching them on. The client invites you to become a partner and you really want to jump into this opportunity. Should you do it?

There is no one answer for some of these situations, but see if the Code of Ethics helps you make a decision. Come to class ready to talk about these scenarios and bring your own sticky situations.

Here’s one sticky situation that a member of the SCM Board of Advisors shared with me (and gave permission to print). It’s from Mattison Grey, whose integrity is at least as high as any coach I know. She felt the temptation, but her personal integrity and knowledge of ethics guided her:

“A reporter from the NY Times called and asked about a former client of mine. She wanted to know if I would talk to her about him. I have no idea if this was for a good story or a “bad” story. If for a good one, it could have been a great opportunity for exposure. Either way, I had to tell her that in the coaching profession we have a code of ethics and I felt like everything I knew about him was as a result of our coaching relationship and that I was going to honor that and could not say anything about him (good or bad). She was clearly disappointed, but said, ‘I understand’.”

You’ll make countless in-the-moment choices like this in your business. Cultivate very high personal ethics and you’ll handle most situations well. When in doubt, try to make the most ethical choice.

Resources:

http://www.certifiedcoach.org/ethics/principles.html
http://www.certifiedcoach.org/ethics/ethics.html