

Values and Ethics in Coaching

social sciences and the law. The core focus of professional ethics is the application of a set of values that dictate ethical professional conduct and constitute 'an integral part of professional identity' (Bond, 2015: 47). The most elaborately developed type of professional ethics are *medical ethics*. This is due to the long history and ethos of the discipline of medicine, which necessitated the combination of ethical and technical issues in the training and practice of physicians.

Contributions from philosophy: Thomas Percival

The first modern code of medical ethics was crafted by the English physician Thomas Percival (1740–1804). His *Medical Ethics, or a Code of Institutes and Precepts, Adapted to the Professional Conduct of Physicians and Surgeons* was initially produced as a pamphlet in 1794, and expanded in 1803 (Waddington, 1975).

Professional codes like Percival's medical code of ethics have had an immense influence on the development of ethical standards of practice in other relevant 'helping' professions like counselling and psychotherapy (Bond, 2015). These are grounded in deeper societal values that pertain to issues of trust and confidence, power and status, even conflict of interests. As Brennan and Wildflower (2014: 432) aptly claimed, these codes have gradually created a consensus of morally acceptable behaviour that transcends professional activities and encompasses all aspects of human interactions. 'It is', they argued, 'in the nature of being a professional that one functions with a particular level of consciousness of the effect of one's behaviour' (ibid.).

Ethics in coaching

Over the last two decades, the use of coaching as a developmental tool has increased exponentially, primarily in North America, Europe and Australia, and more recently in Asia and Africa. A recent study initiated by the International Coach Federation found that coaching is a \$2 billion-per-year industry employing 47,500 professionals globally, and that the number of coaching programmes and professionals entering the field is constantly on the rise (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), 2012). This rapid success brings with it a certain degree of notoriety (Brennan and Wildflower, 2014). Unlike relevant 'helping' professions like medicine, nursing, social work or counselling and psychotherapy – all services that are subjected to the regulatory scrutiny of professional associations or

the government – coaching continues to remain largely unregulated. As a result, ethical standards of professional practice are primarily self-imposed and no coach is obliged to comply with any specific codes of ethics, if he or she does not wish to do so.

So, how do coaches make decisions when it comes to ethical issues or dilemmas? In most cases intuition, as dictated by one's value system, seems to be the coach's first port of call. Passmore (2009: 8) put it very appositely when he claimed that:

Most coaches are in most cases ethical pluralists, who hold to a few solid principles, but for most of what they do they consider the circumstances of the situation and consider the motives and situations of the characters involved to help them reach a decision about the course of action to follow.

But are 'a few solid principles' adequate to safeguard ethical practice? Despite this unregulated landscape of coaching, or (better put) because of this landscape, the existence of a code of ethics for practice has been deemed essential (Brennan and Wildflower, 2014). This is because a code of ethics can provide a set of guidelines against which coaches and clients can measure a coach's performance and evaluate their practice for continuous development and improvement. Additionally, as coaching is still not recognised as a legitimate, stand-alone profession, a code of ethics will allow it to move away from what Grant and Cavanagh termed 'pseudo-credentialising mills' (2004: 2). Indeed, in 2008, the Global Convention on Coaching (subsequently named the Global Coaching Community – GCC), a symposium of coaching scholars and practitioners from around 40 countries, prioritised the issue of ethics as of paramount significance to the legitimisation and preservation of the coaching profession (GCC, 2008). This is not to say that coaching has been in existence with no standards of ethical practice whatsoever. Several professional coaching bodies have produced their own codes of ethical practice which coaches can adopt, should they choose to. Let's look at them.

Professional coaching associations and their codes of ethics

A code of ethics is a list of guidelines that signposts what is to be expected from a practitioner of a particular profession (Gert, 1988). In essence, it is a set of standards of conduct that dictate what is considered morally acceptable behaviour within a particular field of practice and/or organisation (Brennan and Wildflower, 2014: 431). But, before we proceed further with our discussion, we wish to be clear about terminology. In particular, we think that it is important to distinguish between the terms 'code of conduct' and 'code of ethics'. The *Collins English Dictionary*

defines a code of conduct as 'an agreement on rules of behaviour for a group or organization'; and a code of ethics as 'an agreement on ethical standards for a profession or business'. We adopt these definitions in this book and we refer to conduct as the actual behaviour; and ethics as the general guides that influence that behaviour.

When you join a professional coaching body, you agree to enter a community of practice with mutual obligations towards its members and the overall profession (Khurana and Nohria, 2008). It also means that you agree to comply with its professional and ethical standards. By extension, your membership implies that you accept to be held accountable for ethical conduct and, as a result, to be subjected to the organisation's complaints procedure, in case of breach of its code of ethics. Pursuing accreditation from such an institution, in addition to mere membership, can be an onerous process, but of course it has several benefits. This includes the opportunity to claim publicly that you operate under the aegis of one such association. It also enhances your status and credibility as a practitioner of this relatively young, emerging profession (Carlo and Prior, 2003; de Jong, 2010).

In the field of coaching, the most well-known professional associations are the:

Africa Board for Coaching, Consulting and Coaching Psychology (ABCCCP)

Association for Coaching (AC)

Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS)

European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC)

International Association of Coaching (IAC)

International Coach Federation (ICF)

Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC)

Recognising the relevance of coaching in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy, several psychological professional associations have established special interest groups in coaching psychology. Some of these are the:

American Psychological Association (APA)

Australian Psychological Society (APS)

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

British Psychological Society (BPS)

Joining a professional coaching body and agreeing to comply with its professional and ethical standards is a matter of ethics. Considering the pros and the cons, what are your thoughts on the merits of joining a coaching body?

Activity



Write a list of the professional values that underpin your coaching practice. Then, go online and find the professional coaching body that you are a member of or that operates in your country. Within its website, locate their ethical code of conduct, which is usually freely available to download. Have a read through it (it's usually no more than one page long). Can you find similarities with your own professional values?

While the different professional coaching bodies operate independently from each other, if you carefully go through their 'codes of ethics' or 'codes of conduct', you will most certainly trace several similarities. These, of course, will be dictated by the societal values in the community within which you operate.

Brennan and Wildflower (2014: 431–2) conducted an expansive survey of several professional bodies' codes of ethics across various related professions. They found that there is a degree of consistency in the ethical principles that underpin professional practice, the most common of which are:

1. Do no harm: Do not cause needless injury or harm to others.
2. Duty of care: Act in ways that promote the welfare of other people.
3. Know your limits: Practise within your scope of competence.
4. Respect the interests of the client.
5. Respect the law.

If one looks at the 'code of ethics' documents of professional coaching associations like the ICF, EMCC, AC, IAC, APECS, WABC and ABCCCP, at first glance they appear quite similar. A brisk analysis of the first three, the ICF, EMCC and AC, for instance, shows that they all place great significance on a coach's qualifications and expertise, continuing professional development and supervision, respectful practice that promotes the profession, adhering to codes of ethics, confidentiality and boundary management, as well as contracting and conflicts of interest.

A more nuanced examination, however, reveals critical differences in the priorities they place on what constitutes ethical conduct. While the ICF makes it perfectly clear that sexual relationships with clients

or sponsors are frowned upon, the AC does not seem to refer to this issue. The EMCC places strong emphasis on maintaining professional responsibility, especially towards confidentiality and provision of follow-up coaching, after the termination of the coaching relationship. It is also the only body that seems to place emphasis on respecting the variety of different approaches to coaching. The ICF makes particular reference to ethical issues of further compensation for the coach through third parties that could be perceived as personal, professional or monetary benefits. It also mentions the significance of conducting and disseminating research in an ethical manner. Finally, the AC specifies the need for indemnity insurance and places particular emphasis on issues of diversity and equality that are only implicit in the other two bodies' codes of ethics.

All of the differences in both wording and emphasis between these associations are bound to cause confusion (Brennan and Wildflower, 2014). Moreover, if coaches opt for membership in more than one of these organisations, ethical dilemmas may arise as to which guidelines should take precedence (Passmore and Mortimer, 2011). To mitigate the potential risks of such inconsistencies, in 2011 the ICF and EMCC joined forces with the European Union (EU) in an attempt to produce a shared code of conduct as a benchmark for ethical practice in coaching and mentoring. This pursuit lays the groundwork for the development of self-regulation in both coaching and mentoring and, in this respect, it is registered on the dedicated EU database for self-regulated initiatives in Europe (Brennan and Wildflower, 2014: 433). A few years earlier, a group of these bodies (the ICF, AC, APECS and EMCC) commenced a process of agreeing on the First UK Statement of Shared Professional Values (Association for Coaching, 2008).

According to the agreement statement, the shared professional values are the following:

- Every coach, whether charging fees for coaching provided to individuals or organisations or both, is best served by being a member of a professional body suiting his/her needs.
- Every coach needs to abide by a code of governing ethics and apply acknowledged standards to the performance of their coaching work.
- Every coach needs to invest in their ongoing continuing professional development to ensure the quality of their service and their level of skill is enhanced.
- Every coach has a duty of care to ensure the good reputation of our emerging profession.

The same statement contains the following guiding principles that underpin the First UK Statement of Shared Professional Values:

Principle One: Reputation

Every coach will act positively and in a manner that increases the public's understanding and acceptance of coaching.

Principle Two: Continuous Competence Enhancement

Every coach accepts the need to enhance their experience, knowledge, capability and competence on a continuous basis.

Principle Three: Client-Centred

Every client is creative, resourceful and whole and the coach's role is to keep the development of that client central to his/her work, ensuring all services provided are appropriate to the client's needs.

Principle Four: Confidentiality and Standards

Every coach has a professional responsibility (beyond the terms of the contract with the client) to apply high standards in their service provision and behaviour. He/she needs to be open and frank about methods and techniques used in the coaching process, maintain only appropriate records and to respect the confidentiality a) of the work with their clients and b) or their representative body's members' information.

Principle Five: Law and Diversity

Every coach will act within the laws of the jurisdictions within which they practise and will also acknowledge and promote diversity at all times.

Principle Six: Boundary Management

Every coach will recognise their own limitations of competence and the need to exercise boundary management. The client's right to terminate the coaching process will be respected at all times, as will the need to acknowledge different approaches to coaching which may be more effective for the client than their own. Every endeavour will be taken to ensure the avoidance of conflicts of interest.

Principle Seven: Personal Pledge

Every coach will undertake to abide by the above principles that will complement the principles, codes of ethics and conduct set out by their own representative body to which they adhere and by the breach of which they would be required to undergo due process.

Source: Association for Coaching (www.associationforcoaching.com).

Let us clarify here that codes of ethics cannot guarantee a solution to every ethical problem a coach is faced with in practice. Their role is to provide the catalyst for moral thinking and to function as a quality assurance mechanism (Bailey and Schwartzberg, 1995). In other words, while codes can provide the 'scaffolding' that underpins the profession (Duffy and Passmore, 2010), they cannot control it (Bond, 2015). Importantly, no unified code of ethics can alleviate the challenges of making ethical decisions. For this reason, scholars and practitioners have proposed the development of ethical decision-making frameworks as a potential avenue for making ethical decisions (see, for instance, Duffy and Passmore, 2010; Passmore and Mortimer, 2011). The word 'framework', however, can imply intellectual and practical complication, and may not be appealing to every practitioner. The nuanced idiosyncrasies of distinct communities and societies also preclude any attempt to customise and generalise ethical conduct. Echoing our colleagues' concerns regarding possible negligence when coaches do not consciously set out their ethical guidelines to clients (Passmore and Mortimer, 2011; Spence et al., 2006), we emphasise the significance of consciously exploring and reflecting on individual values and ethics and their impact on one's coaching practice.

Conclusion

Our ethical behaviour as coaches is our own responsibility. Ethical dilemmas – what van Nieuwerburgh (2014: 172) calls 'ethical moments of choice' – will inevitably arise in all aspects of our personal and professional lives. If treated appropriately, ethical dilemmas can enhance our personal and professional development. This is because they alert us to what is morally right or wrong. As a practitioner, if you catch yourself worrying over specific decisions you have to make in your practice, this is generally wonderful news. A right level of worry is indicative of your commitment to your clients and your will to provide them with a service that is right and appropriate for them. Moreover, a healthy dose of worry enables you to be humble and involved in your coaching practice and facilitates the development of your professional maturity. So don't be reluctant to open up yourself to conflict and confusion. Doing the right thing may not always feel right, and this feeling of 'wrong-ness' – what Passmore and Mortimer (2011: 212) call *cognitive dissonance*, echoing Festinger's (1957) seminal theory – can spawn further reflection, learning and development. The key to success is to maintain a conscious and recurrent ethical thinking, and to continuously reflect on your values and how they can influence the decisions that you make in your coaching practice. This will be the focus of the following chapter.