

Ethics Traps – for Coaches Are You Crossing an Ethical Line without Knowing?

By Carly Anderson, MCC



One of the things we coaches need to become masterful at is the ability to have conversations with potential clients, as well as at any time with a current client, about the boundaries coaching.

I feel honored to have listened to a few thousand coaching sessions (yes that many!) in my role as a Mentor Coach and an active ICF Assessor for MCC, PCC and ACC credential applications, since 2005, and continue to learn a lot about the boundaries of coaching.

The International Coaching Federation provides a Code of Ethics and Resources.

View ICF Code of Ethics <https://coachingfederation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>

Sometimes without realizing, a coach will cross an ethical line or miss an ethical issue to discuss with their client or potential client. It's critical for the wellbeing of the client, and the integrity of the coaching profession that coaches are aware of when they might no longer be having a coaching conversation and instead have crossed a line or boundary into another profession or expertise.

Ethical boundaries can include therapeutic, business advice, financial advice, legal advice, intellectual property advice, or any other type of mentoring or advice a “coach” could be giving to a coaching client, which may have ramifications to the client in their personal or professional contexts.

Instead, coach remains vigilant to remaining in coaching mindset, where coach is fully aware of how to use coaching skills to support their client to become aware of their self-knowledge, and support the client to make their own choices and decisions. If client doesn't have the knowledge, then coach can coach their client to clarity, and/or support their client to find the best resources for them to find their answers.

Opening a Conversation

Once recognized as a possible ethics conflict, a coach needs to be competent and confident in their ability to have an open conversation with their client, to curiously inquire to understand more about the client and their context. The outcome of such conversation being to collaboratively determine what is the coaching aspect, and what may be outside the scope or ability of the coach to provide, and better served by another professional.

Coaching may or may not continue at the same time as other professional support being engaged by the client; it will depend on each situation as to what is right and best for the client, and in ethical and personal integrity of the coach.

Understanding Boundaries of Coaching (Therapeutic)

As a Professional Coach, how do you define the boundaries of coaching and know when you might be on a slippery slope outside your scope to work with a client on? Sometimes the ethical issue is initiated by the client, and sometimes it's driven by the coach.

A conflict of interest may arise when a client wants or needs more or different than the coach can ethically, morally, legally or knowledgably provide in their role as a Professional Coach.

For example, to determine if a client would benefit from additional or different support from a therapeutic modality outside a coach's scope to provide, the coach listens for if the client wants to understand why they are unable to move forward on or resolve circumstances in their life that have a recent or long history for them. The client may also be recycling over same or similar themes in the coaching which may include:

- Unhealthy family relationships and dynamics with parents, siblings, or influential family members
- Long term struggle to lose weight
- Desiring to permanently stop smoking or cease using any addictive substance
- Desiring a love relationship for a long time, wondering why they aren't lovable enough or can't find 'the right' person
- Any mention of abuse in a personal or professional setting
- Any mention of discrimination that impacts the person's ability to function effectively

- Those in early stages of the Grief Process. Grief is normal in life; yet when the client is in denial, anger, or depression (normal aspects of Grief), coaching alone may not be most beneficial.

Some coaches are also qualified Therapists, Counselors, or other professionals who have the training, skills and Presence to work with different emotional and behavioral issues. However, when in a coaching process, ensure your client knows the distinction between coaching, and any other expertise you might engage with. Educate your client continually on the distinctions between Coaching, Mentoring, Consulting, Psychotherapy, Teaching, Training. This will support the client to understand what a coach can provide and what they do not.

For example, an adult client may refer to what a parent did or didn't do, or specific events which happened to them in childhood. You're listening for when the client speaks of their childhood, or earlier history, as if the events are still real today and are in some way 're-living' the experience in this moment. **If the client is able to take the learning from a processed 'traumatic' event** and now use that as knowledge for today and toward their future, coaching can most likely occur.

Sometimes, the client can gain enough "closure" about a past event by speaking about it with their coach in a coaching conversation. However, coach needs to remain sensitive to if it appears there is more to be resolved than the coaching conversation can accomplish.

It is continually the responsibility of the coach to prepare for and be able to, at any time in a coaching session, have a broader conversation about what the coach can and cannot coach them on. And to be prepared to give distinctions about normal emotions, past/present/future focus, and inquire about other practitioner/specialists they might want to seek out.

Once you inquire, you might learn the client has already sought out a specialized professional and you didn't know, but now you do. You can adjust the boundaries of your coaching, and agree that if something comes up outside the coach expertise, the coach will ask if the client can discuss that with their specialized expert.

With such conversation, you may still be able to form a coaching focus for the engagement. The level of trust most often goes to a deeper place because of such transparent conversation. I know my client relationships have benefited from deeper trust when I've had such conversations. The key is the coach supports the client to understand the boundaries of

coaching, so the client and coach can be most effective working together, in support of the client.

Know the range of normal human emotions

Whenever you hear the client in an emotional pattern in the present, or wanting to resolve something that has a history for them, the coach needs to recognize this moment. Notice if the client is continually referencing some event that was traumatic for them, whether that's in the distant or near past. Understand the stages of Grief, so you are informed on how to work with the client, or not.

It's important for a Professional Coach to be aware of (and preferably trained in) the range of normal emotions, as emotions drive our behavior and the quality of experience of every aspect of our life. Emotional Intelligence is a well-researched and accessible field on emotions and well-integrated into the field of coaching.

There is a range of normal emotions that coaches can work with for a client to have the lasting change or shift they may be seeking. **Normal emotions include** (and are not limited to) feeling happy, satisfied, pleased, optimistic, sad, dejected, grieving and even 'situationally' depressed, excited, scared, tense, nervous, anxious, frightened, angry, irritated, resentful, upset, frustrated, embarrassed, guilt, uncertain, patient, impatient, peaceful, loving, and warm-hearted.

Example of how to approach your coaching client about a possible ethical conflict

Once you've heard what the client has shared and you are not sure if you can coach them, next is to inquire if you can ask some clarifying questions in order to better understand what they have shared. This is where the coach becomes really curious and non-judgmental, with the intent to "listen and learn" about your client.

Let's say the client says they were speaking to someone "the other day" about their "ADHD." You realize this is unique biology of this person and want to understand more. Whether you

know a lot about ADHD or not, next is to find out if it's okay to ask some clarifying questions to understand their experience of ADHD and how it informs working together.

Example questions might be:

- How long have you known about your ADHD?
- What support have you already sought out for understanding and working best with your unique biology?
- What do you know about yourself that would be useful to being coached effectively?
- What is the best way to use your ADHD as a strength and asset?
- What might be areas of challenge to be aware of?
- What is the best way for me to coach you, given what you know about yourself?

Perhaps the coach determines through curious clarifying questions how to coach the client in the best way for this client. The client agrees to reveal to the coach self-knowledge about their unique biology, and they continue to be curious together to best utilize the client knowledge as a strength/asset for the client. It might be the coach does some research between sessions to understand ADHD as well.

It can be that a coach trained in excellent coaching skills, can be a very effective coach for an ADHD client. Yet for another coach it may feel “unethical” for them to coach a client they don’t know as much about.

To summarize: While coaching a person diagnosed with ADHD is not an ethics issue, perhaps after further inquiry, the coach and client agree the client may instead benefit from another professional, or a coach specializing in ADHD biology. The important part is the coach has become very curious, asking clarifying questions, engaged from a collaborative, partnering mindset that is supportive of the client. There can be even more trust developed between client and coach as a result of having this type of conversation, because the client feels seen, cared for and treated respectfully.

From past to present to future

If the client is through the trauma of a past event, there can be learning to be gleaned. We all have past events, and there can be rich learning to bring into the present. You could inquire into their learning from a past event and how that is impacting them today, with the perspective they now have. Then there might be an opportunity to inquire how they want to use that knowledge to move forward.

If the client starts to recycle or engages in circular thinking/feeling into their history or unresolved feeling/circumstance, then it is the responsibility of the coach to pause the coaching again, and have a conversation that re-establishes the boundary of their coaching expertise, in support of the wellbeing of the client.

When you have this type of honest conversation with your client, you are doing them and yourself the best service. In many countries, if you are being paid as a Professional Coach, and are then instead working to resolve client earlier life issues, addictions, or trauma, you can put yourself and your client at risk, not only ethically but also legally.

Common ethical issues initiated by a client

Scenario One: A client speaks about the significant lack of support from a parent (or other significant person) in their earlier life.

This may sound like the client saying, “I remember when my father dropped me off to swim lessons and told me to catch the bus home. I was only ten years old, and scared of being on the bus with kids who wanted to hurt me physically. I was punched on many occasions. My father never listened to me when I said I didn’t want to catch the bus, and just told me to grow up. My mother just said, ‘listen to your father’ so I received no support from her either.”

As coach, you can begin by being empathetic toward your client, for example, “That does sound as if it was traumatic for you and unfair. I’m sorry that happened to you.” After giving client some space to respond, coach might further say something like, “This seems like it’s significant for you as you referenced it when you were talking about taking a more prominent leadership role. How might it be impacting you today, as you consider this next leadership role?”

You can further inquire if the client has sought out a professional to bring some resolution about this childhood event. If the client says no, then you can ask them to consider that path, in support of their wellbeing. And then define what you can work on in a coaching relationship

such as, “I can work with you from the present to the future. I’m not qualified to work with you to resolve past or childhood issues. However, if you do reference early events, I can ask you if you feel it’s a therapeutic issue and needs a different professional. If you say no, then I might ask you what you learned from that incident that you can use today. How does that sound to you?”

Note: There are many ways for a client to gain clarity and come to resolution about their history. There are different therapeutic modalities beyond a therapist or counselor, including practitioners in somatic, body work, emotional and trauma work, which might be complimentary or preferable therapeutic modalities for a client to consider.

Scenario Two: A client has a goal of losing weight and has had long-term weight challenges.

Our society has normalized weight loss through programs such as Weight Watchers and some rapid weight loss television programs where it appears that personal fitness trainers are acting in the role of psychotherapist. This leads everyday people to believe that anyone can work with such issues. That isn’t true, because long-term emotional reasons behind eating usually require a therapeutic modality of some kind to get to the bottom of the deeper issues.

Inquire further to understand the nature of their weight issue. How long have they had this weight challenge? If the client says it’s about getting older, or after having a child, or something else that gives context that this isn’t a longer-term health issue, then coaching can be a good approach.

Here’s what a conversation might sound like with a client who says they have had their weight issue for a long period of time. Firstly ‘listen and learn.’ Then perhaps: *“I understand you want to work with reducing your weight, however as a coach, I need to inform you that I’m not qualified to deal with this issue, as long-term weight issues often have an underlying emotional component from the past. Have you considered working with a therapeutic professional who is trained to work with these types of issues?”*

Let the client respond and listen to what they say; remain empathetic. Sometimes the client may say they have a therapist or counsellor and they will work with them on the emotional aspect of eating. Then you may find you and your client redefining the coaching agreement to what you can work on around their vision of being healthier. So it may still be possible to work with them but from a different perspective.

Other active addictions such as drug and alcohol abuse are deeper issues that also go beyond what a coach can work with.

When you have open conversation with your coaching client, you can re-set the coaching agreement for the coaching session and agree with the client that if you feel the topic is outside of your coaching boundaries and expertise, then the coach will pause the coaching again, make the observation, talk about how else they might get support with their circumstances, and re-contract with the client around how to stay in a coaching mindset and framework.

Scenario Three: A client has a goal to stop smoking

Another addictive behavior with potentially underlying emotional issues is smoking. Let's say you interview to coach a CEO who has outcomes around their role as CEO, yet also want to stop smoking. They tell you smoking is a lifelong addiction and are motivated at this time in their life to finally work through their addiction, to stop smoking permanently.

The coach lets the client know they don't have the expertise to support them with that goal, yet can support them in their wellbeing as a CEO. As a result of having an open, truthful conversation, the client tells you they have already hired a therapeutic practitioner to work with the deeper emotional reasons for smoking and to support them with the withdrawal process. They let you know they'd like to additionally use the coaching to support accountability for actions that keep them moving toward their vision of how they want to be; as a fit and healthy person, which is bigger than just their role as CEO, yet they know will support them be a "healthy CEO."

As a result of such a conversation and contracting, both coach and client are clear on the boundaries of expertise, what the client needs, and how multiple professionals can be complimentary. The client can use coaching to support them to be accountable and stay motivated to move toward their vision of a "fit and healthy person, and healthy CEO."

As a coach, you need to be willing to have these difficult conversations and set the boundaries with your client of what topics you can coach around, and what you ethically or expertise-wise cannot. Then your coaching can be very effective, and you can avoid crossing an ethical line.

Ethical Boundaries Driven by the Coach (Consulting, Mentoring)

Sometimes unwittingly, the coach crosses an ethical boundary which can cause Role Confusion.

Some examples of role confusion are:

A client speaks about a situation they are facing and the coach immediately begins giving advice in the form of models, books, websites, or articles to read. The coach brings an energy and attitude of “I have the expertise to help you solve your problem.” There is little inquiry about what the client has tried, what they know, or what has worked for them in the past – to draw on their self-knowledge first.

A coach brings the energy of teacher, educator or mentor to their coaching, where there is often a ‘right’ answer the coach is expecting from the client, and a right way the coach believes the client should approach something.

A coach is significantly inserting their own point of view, interpretations, beliefs, philosophies and perspective, and gives their opinions as if they are truth. There is no checking with the client as to what they think. You could say this is a form of directing, leading and giving advice.

A coach has shifted themselves into the ‘spotlight’ about what they believe, or think. In coaching, we aim to be in partnership with our client; metaphorically we are the one holding the spotlight on the client, rather than being in the spotlight ourselves.

A coach has shifted to expert, consulting mindset. If a coach feels the need to share their expertise, that might mean the coach isn’t in the role of a coach, they may have a Need to be validated, liked, valued or seen as knowledgeable.

In Closing.....

Consider what learning and development will support you to become an even better coach, and more aware of ethical boundaries. Work your coach, or mentor coach, to practice the ability to easefully have conversations as outlined in this article.

Become trained in Emotional Intelligence or other knowledge about emotions. Learn about the Grief Process. Develop your empathy for the human condition as we are human, wanting something better for ourselves and those we impact.

It's our responsibility as a Professional Coach to continually recognize when we might be on a slippery slope, and possibly crossing an ethical boundary, such as outlined by the International Coaching Federation Code of Ethics.

As a Professional Coach, we need to be clear in communicating, and further clarifying at any time what the coaching process is, and to define the boundaries of a coaching conversation.



Carly Anderson, MCC has led mentor coaching group / individual programs since 2013 to support the professionalism of coaches preparing for their ICF MCC, PCC or ACC credential. As well as continue to develop competency and capabilities as a Professional Coach. The Mentor Coaching Program is approved for 10 hours of ICF mentor coaching, or counts for 30 hours of core competency CCE's, or 30 hours toward coach-specific training.

<https://carlyanderson.com/thementorcoachinggroup>

Carly offers coaching products including **The Upgraded Target Approach: Clarifying the ICF Core Competency Model**, and **Ten Characteristics of MCC Skill Level**.

<https://carlyanderson.com/store>

The **Butterfly on the Wall Coaching Series** is a rare opportunity to have an insider's peek into a real relationship between coach and client, as Carly coaches one of her clients for 15 consecutive sessions, staying in coaching mindset throughout the sessions.

<https://carlyanderson.com/store/butterfly-on-the-wall-coaching-series>

To sign up for the (very brief) monthly Coaching Brief eNewsletter and receive core competency and credentialing tips, go to the right column of <https://carlyanderson.com/blog>