

Ethics Codes & the Ethical Review Process

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Coaches know that without client trust the coaching relationship is hobbled if not ineffective. Client trust comes as a result of not just one coach but also an industry of coaches that follow ethical principles in their business practices and in their client interactions. We each believe we know what seems “right” in a coaching practice and relationship, but when every coach thoughtfully follows a set of broadly accepted ethical guidelines, it creates clarity for both individual and organizational clients about what to expect in the coaching relationship, thus ensuring an effective and healthy coaching marketplace.

With the emergence of coaching membership organizations in the 1990’s, the need for an ethics code became apparent. Today, as a member of a coach membership organization like the International Coach Federation (ICF), you agree to serve under the ICF Ethics Code in order to maintain a credential. ICF leadership and coach volunteers have spent uncounted hours developing the ICF Ethics Code and addressing breaches of the code through the code ICF Review Process. The ICF code and process review have set a standard for many other organizations that have followed, such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and the Association for Coaching (AC). Additionally, the ICF has actively engaged in defending the coaching profession from regulation when legislators have challenged its non-licensed status, threatening to create governmental licensing procedures. ICF has defended the coaching industry over the years by presenting their ICF Ethics Code and the Review Process to preserve coaching as a self-policing industry worldwide. To date, no state in the U.S. regulates the coaching industry, despite continual efforts to do so.

Over the years the ICF has continuously improved the ethics code and ICF Review Process in order to respond to changes in the understanding of ethics, increased global exposure of the coaching practice, and learning from experiences in applying the review process.

Understanding Ethics and the Ethics Code

An ethics code is defined by Michael Jensen, Emeritus Professor, Harvard Business School, as:

Agreed upon standards of what is desirable and undesirable; of right and wrong conduct; of what is considered by that group as good and bad behaviour of a person, group or entity that is a member of the group, and may include defined bases for discipline, including exclusion.(i)

While a list of acceptable behaviors to follow as coaches has been developed, the ICF and other organizations must also decide how they are deployed. Most importantly,

what is the purpose of these standards when we think about building an ethical community of coaches? Do we use them as a measuring stick to assess how “good” a coach is and thereby punishing the “bad”? Do we use them to create uniformity in perception of right and wrong? For the ICF, it was decided that the ethics code and the review process should reflect understanding and education. Most breaches of the ethics code are about a lack of understanding rather than an intention to harm. So, importantly, education—not punishment—is the goal of the ethics ICF Review Process. The revocation of a credential as punishment is used as a last resort. However, there are instances when the revocation of the coach credential or the accreditation of a coach training institution is deemed appropriate.

The Global Coaching Marketplace and Its Impact on Ethics

One of the challenges of building an ethical coaching marketplace is to recognize that it is a global marketplace with diverse cultures and therefore diverse definitions of “appropriate behavior.”. ICF is represented in 143 countries across the world. The ICF recognizes the responsibility that an international coaching organization has in understanding the diversity of its global membership and the need to create ethics that apply worldwide. In order to meet this challenge the ICF has deployed a globally diverse board of volunteer coaches to discuss the ICF Ethics Code monthly, walking through each section of the code and asking them to share what the words and concepts of the standards mean to them from their cultural perspective. In this way the code is reviewed and updated to include these insights.

Adopting the Ethics Code and the Review Process

Establishing and adopting an ethics code is the foundation of building an ethical coaching industry. Putting the code in to practice is essential in realizing an ethical marketplace. The code is put in to practice when coaches and coach training organizations adopt the ethical code, and there is a forum for complaints to be addressed by a review process using the ethics code.

When a coach becomes a member of or is certified by a coaching organization with an ethics code, they are asked to adopt that organization’s code of ethics. For the ICF the code contains 28 standards covering Professional Conduct, Conflicts of Interest, Professional Conduct with Clients, Confidentiality/Privacy and Continual Professional Development. The code dovetails with the Core Competencies required in its individual coach training that all ICF-accredited training institutions teach.

The ICF maintains a board of volunteer coaches from around the world who are charged with managing ethical complaints. This board is called the Independent Review Board (IRB). When a complaint comes to the ICF it is first vetted by staff to confirm that it involves an ICF member and therefore qualifies to be reviewed by the IRB. Once the complaint is vetted an investigative team of two IRB members conduct research on the complaint including interviews with the complainant and coach as well

as others involved in the event. Contracting documents are often reviewed as well as any other information relevant to the case. The investigation summary is then passed to the review team – a minimum of three IRB members - who determine if a breach has occurred. If a breach has been found then consequences are determined and communicated to the coach.

[Note: a power point presentation of the IRB process is available as an independent download accompanying this article.]

The Review Process Concerns

The IRB makes every effort to conduct a thorough investigation and to assess the situation holistically. If a breach of the code is determined, then the review panel recommends remedial actions that may include a course of continued education, mentor coaching, or research and authoring of a paper on the topic in breach or other activities that promote education. Revocation of credential is used as a last resort when repeated misbehaviors indicate a lack of learning on the part of the coach or the coach simply fails to comply with the recommended remediation. No process is perfect and the ICF IRB works hard to engage in regular conversations that allow for discussion and review of how cases are handled, looking for any possible recommendations for improvement of the existing process.

The ICF knows that having a complaint issued against you as a coach can be traumatic. Simply being charged with an alleged breach to the ICF code of ethics can create a threat to one's livelihood one's reputation. The emotional impact on the coach can be difficult. All members of the IRB and ICF administration sympathize with those being investigated. The primary hope is to maintain a process that educates coaches while maintaining a coaching industry that remains self-regulated, thereby allowing clients, the general public and local and federal governments to view the coaching industry as trustworthy and representative of integrity.

- i. (Jensen, Michael C., Integrity: Without it Nothing Works (November 29, 2009). Rotman Magazine: The Magazine of the Rotman School of Management, pp. 16-20, Fall 2009; Harvard Business School NOM Unit Working Paper No. 10-042; Barbados Group Working Paper No. 09-04. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1511274>)



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