

When Ethics Could Collide: Nine Practices

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When a client has different cultural influencers at play in their life compared to the coach, how does the coach support the client while holding the cultural influencers they value as a citizen of a specific country, their professional code of practice AND those of the client? For example, if a coach who lives in a country where women are not considered equal is working with a female client who lives in a country where women are considered equal and their professional code of practice recognizes gender equality, how can they ensure they support the client in a way that allows them to be whole, feel equal and able to explore all possibilities that could be available to them? Alternatively, the coach believes in and supports gender equality while the client lives in a country where gender equality is not recognized. How does the coach deal with these fundamental differences in cultural and ethical practice?

Recently I was in conversation with a group of coaches from different countries. Someone in the US had just completed a talk at a conference that she was paid to speak at. She shared that she had decided at the last minute to take her book to sell at the end of it. During the talk she decided she had an opportunity to sell her book, and possibly connect with a few people who would like to be her clients so she decided to also offer free coaching sessions to people who would like to participate. I asked her if she had discussed this with the conference organizer and she said no, that was not necessary. Marketing was expected of speakers at conferences. I said that as far as I knew, in Canada, this would be considered a conflict of interest and ethically not appropriate. The person from India agreed with me while the one from Turkey did not see anything wrong with this. Here we were, four people all speaking the same language and yet we had 2 different interpretations of one act. We all adhere to the same professional Code of Ethics and yet based on cultural influencers we embrace from our countries, the interpretation of ethical practices can be different.

This experience led me to think about the future of coaching. Coaching has become a global profession where many coaches work in countries they have never traveled to, countries they can point to on a map, countries with customs, culture and ethical practices unknown to them. How does this lack of knowledge and understanding influence the coaching relationship? How does a coach from a different country understand from a cultural and thus ethical perspective how they ensure they are supportive of their client(s) at all times?

The Business Dictionary defines ethics as 'the basic concepts and fundamental principles of decent human conduct. It includes the study of universal values such as essential equality of all men and women, human or natural rights, obedience of the law of the land, concern for health and safety and increasingly also for the

natural environment.’ Looking at this definition one can see some of the principles included vary from country to country, for example, ‘obedience of the law of the land’ where what is considered lawful in one country is not in another and ‘essential equality of all men and women’ where many countries do not practice this principle.

Ethics are typically defined in the context of a community be it a country, a state, a religious group, a professional group. They define the rules of the culture of that community. “Culture describes a collective way of life, or way of doing things. It is the sum of attitudes, values, goals and practices shared by individuals in a group, organization or society. Cultures vary over time, between countries and geographic regions, and among groups and organizations. Culture reflects the moral and ethical beliefs and standards that speak to how people should behave and interact with others.” (2)

When a coach is working with a client in a country other than their own country, they are faced with the probability of a different culture and thus ethics of the two regions may be dissimilar. Layer on top of this the professional code of practice respected by the coach, assuming they belong to one of several professional coaching groups that have developed professional standards.

The opportunity for differences of cultural practices within the relationship between the coach and client is always present and when the coach adds their professional code of conduct into the mix and the client adds their code of practice from their organization, the ability for the coach to understand the principles at play can become challenging. For example, in the United States, one cultural influencer is the focus on the individual while in Asia the focus is on the collective, what is best for the organization. These represent two different perspectives and do not reflect what is right or wrong, rather what a specific cultural belief of that community represents. These influencers affect the ethical norms of each individual

Returning to my discussion described above, as we continued to explore our perspectives, the possibility to see one’s ethical perspective as ‘right,’ means others are then seen as ‘wrong’. ‘Rules’ such as those of a professional code when layered over national cultures can take us to a place of positional absolutes, which can create an additional layer of complexity in the coaching relationship.

Here are nine practices for a coach to consider:

1. Understand the Cultural Principles and Ethical Standards of Your Community:

Sometimes when someone from a different culture says or does something, we disagree because it feels wrong to us. Become aware of this feeling. Seek to understand the cultural beliefs of your community and how these impact you. What happens when you find your ethical practice in conflict with that of a client? Read and become familiar with your professional code of

standards so you know what is expected of you, the 'rules' to which you are expected to adhere by being part of that community. Once you fully understand these 'rules' they can provide a 'GPS' for you when navigating a conversation with someone with different cultural ethics.

2. **Understand Your Cultural Ethics:** They are not globally 'right' or 'wrong': In your culture there are certain behaviors that are considered the norm or 'right' and others that are considered 'wrong' or not acceptable. For example, let's refer back to principles around gender. If your cultural ethics beliefs are that genders should not be treated equally, then when in a conversation with someone who does believe this, based on their cultural ethics, you may consider their perspective to be 'wrong'.

When it comes to ethical practices, there is no global 'right' or 'wrong' because all communities are passionate about and believe their practices are 'right'. Our ethical practices are 'right' for our community be it an organization, professional group, country etc. This however does not mean other groups that have different cultural ethics are 'wrong'. Rather we should consider them as different such that we seek to be open and non-judging so we can better understand them. This does not mean we need to agree with them, just better understand them.

3. **Re-examine Your Coaching Relationship:** If you find your cultural ethical practice is different from that of a client, such that it is interfering with the coaching process, perhaps there is a need to re-evaluate the coaching relationship and determine if you are the best coach for this person. In this way you demonstrate respect for both you and your client.
4. **Connect Ethics and Goals:** Once we accept that a client has different ethical practices than we do, we need to better understand those practices. If we can accept our ethical practices as different, we then need to be open and curious and seek to understand their beliefs. Once we gain clarity, we can then connect their ethical practices to how they live their lives, what they believe in and value and how this may impact the goals they have developed for themselves. If your client is female and lives in a society that believes in gender inequality and her goal involves success in achieving a certain position, greater financial gain, leadership etc, your exploration with her may be different than it would be if gender equality is the norm.
5. **Test Assumptions:** I believe making assumptions can be an enormous obstacle that gets in the way of the coach in relationships where the client is a citizen of a community, which is different from that of the coach. Both parties may have the same 'mother tongue' and yet have different ethical standards and cultural practices. Just because both parties speak the same language, for example, does not mean their cultural beliefs and ethical practices are the same. Becoming curious as a coach, thereby asking the

client what is meant by certain comments or statements of beliefs, can open up the conversation and lead to greater understanding upon which to build a non-judging and open coaching relationship where the coach is intentionally able to support the client achieve their goals.

6. **Respect Self and Client:** To be effective as a coach, at all times during the coaching relationship you need to be able to hold both you and your client in high regard. Become aware of your emotional buttons being pushed by the client's comments and how it makes you feel. How is this feeling impacting your ability to be effective as a coach? Reflect on any possible impact the client's beliefs may have on you and your abilities will ensure you are respectful of both the client and yourself. To be otherwise could compromise the effectiveness of the coaching relationship. We need to be able to respect both parties if we are to be our best and support the client in being their best. If you find yourself unable to continue to be respectful of both parties, it may be time to refer the client to another coach.
7. **Create a Judgment Free Space:** Sometimes a client will offer a perspective that differs from our cultural or moral beliefs. Instead of judging them, create a space that allows you to be open to the cultural beliefs of the client, the ethical practices they adhere to. To be open in such situations, we need to suspend any judgments we may have around the differences between our practices and those of the client. To be effective as a coach, there is a need to be aware of how our cultural norms, our ethical standards may conflict with those of the client, ensuring we don't judge them for differences that arise from their cultural norms.
8. **Accept Such Differences:** This can be challenging and yet within the context of the coaching relationship, if we cannot suspend judgment and accept such differences, we risk our capacity to support the client in realizing their potential.
9. **Recognize and Manage Blind Spots Created by the Differences:** A coach with feminist beliefs may not realize how their beliefs influence their approach to a client who does not acknowledge gender equality personally or within their culture. The 'yes, but...' of a conversation may interfere with creating a judgment free space needed for the client to move forward in a way that aligns with their beliefs.

Initially when I decided to write this piece, I wanted to explore how ethical practices differ around the world. This led me to consider how differences in cultures and hence ethical practices can impact the coaching relationship. Coaching is a collaborative relationship where the coach holds the space for the client to create their own solutions, one that help them achieve their defined success. Holding a

space for clients seems somewhat simple to accomplish, something most coaches are successful at in all coaching relationships. And yet, what I have learned is when the coaching relationship brings together different cultural and thus ethical standards, holding this space can be difficult, creating challenges for the coach and probably the client as well.

With our shift to more of a global economy where working across countries and even continents becomes a standard practice, coaches looking forward, face many challenges in creating that space for clients of differing cultures so they can be successful on their terms, terms that take into consideration their unique cultural community and ethical standards.

The challenges that present themselves, now that coaching has a global market, need to be acknowledged and understood to ensure coaches are ethical at all times in their professional lives. As coaches, we need to respect our clients, their unique ethical and cultural practices if we are to be successful in supporting them to become the best version of themselves moving forward. If we cannot respect our clients fully because of cultural or ethical differences then we also need to acknowledge this to ourselves and decide how best to support this client so we do not construct barriers based on our ethical practices that stifle them in their continued growth and development.

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