

Staying Out of Ethical Hot Water with Solid Coaching Agreements

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ICF Arizona & New Mexico Chapter's Virtual Event Handout

Approximately 40% of ICF Ethics complaints would not be filed if coaches had a solid coaching agreement, held their clients accountable to their coaching agreement and coaches adhered to their own agreement.

This ethics session will provide a high-level review of the important components of a coaching services agreement and how a solid coaching agreement can support you to stay out of the ethical conduct review process.

We will examine together a coaching dilemma specific to how a coach can get into "ethical hot water" due to their handling and adherence to his own coaching agreement.

Tina Elliot will be sharing some of the reasons coaches end up with ethical complaints that have to do with their coaching agreements.

The ICF's Code of Ethics is provided below for reference as we work through a coaching dilemma for this training session.



Code of Ethics

Adopted by the ICF Global Board of Directors June 2015.

Note: yellow highlights are updates to ICF's Code of Ethics as of June 2015

Green highlights are references to Coaching Agreements

Preamble

ICF is committed to maintaining and promoting excellence in coaching. Therefore, ICF expects all members and credentialed coaches (coaches, coach mentors, coaching supervisors, coach trainers or students), to adhere to the elements and principles of ethical conduct: to be competent and integrate ICF Core Competencies effectively in their work.

In line with the ICF core values and ICF definition of coaching, the Code of Ethics is designed to provide appropriate guidelines, accountability and enforceable standards of conduct for all ICF Members and ICF Credential-holders, who commit to abiding by the following ICF Code of Ethics:

Part One: Definitions

- **Coaching:** Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.
- **ICF Coach:** An ICF coach agrees to practice the ICF Core Competencies and pledges accountability to the ICF Code of Ethics.
- **Professional Coaching Relationship:** A professional coaching relationship exists when coaching includes an agreement (including contracts) that defines the responsibilities of each party.
- **Roles in the Coaching Relationship:** In order to clarify roles in the coaching relationship it is often necessary to distinguish between the client and the sponsor. In most cases, the client and sponsor are the same person and are therefore jointly referred to as the client. For purposes of identification, however, the ICF defines these roles as follows:
 - **Client:** The "Client/Coachee" is the person(s) being coached.
 - **Sponsor:** The "sponsor" is the entity (including its representatives) paying for and/or arranging for coaching services to be provided. In all cases, coaching engagement agreements should clearly establish the rights, roles and responsibilities for both the client and sponsor if the client and sponsor are different people.
- **Student:** The "student" is someone enrolled in a coach training program or working with a coaching supervisor or coach mentor in order to learn the coaching process or enhance and develop their coaching skills.

- **Conflict of Interest:** A situation in which a coach has a private or personal interest sufficient to appear to influence the objective of his or her official duties as a coach and a professional.

Part Two: The ICF Standards of Ethical Conduct

Section 1: Professional Conduct at Large

As a coach, I:

- 1) Conduct myself in accordance with the ICF Code of Ethics in all interactions, including coach training, coach mentoring and coach supervisory activities.
- 2) Commit to take the appropriate action with the coach, trainer, or coach mentor and/or will contact ICF to address any ethics violation or possible breach as soon as I become aware, whether it involves me or others.
- 3) Communicate and create awareness in others, including organizations, employees, sponsors, coaches and others, who might need to be informed of the responsibilities established by this Code.
- 4) Refrain from unlawful discrimination in occupational activities, including age, race, gender orientation, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, national origin or disability.
- 5) Make verbal and written statements that are true and accurate about what I offer as a coach, the coaching profession or ICF.
- 6) Accurately identify my coaching qualifications, expertise, experience, training, certifications and ICF Credentials.
- 7) Recognize and honor the efforts and contributions of others and only claim ownership of my own material. I understand that violating this standard may leave me subject to legal remedy by a third party.
- 8) Strive at all times to recognize my personal issues that may impair, conflict with or interfere with my coaching performance or my professional coaching relationships. I will promptly seek the relevant professional assistance and determine the action to be taken, including whether it is appropriate to suspend or terminate my coaching relationship(s) whenever the facts and circumstances necessitate.
- 9) Recognize that the Code of Ethics applies to my relationship with coaching clients, coachees, students, mentees and supervisees.
- 10) Conduct and report research with competence, honesty and within recognized scientific standards and applicable subject guidelines. My research will be carried out with the necessary consent and approval of those involved, and with an approach that will protect participants from any potential harm. All research efforts will be performed in a manner that complies with all the applicable laws of the country in which the research is conducted.

11) Maintain, store and dispose of any records, including electronic files and communications, created during my coaching engagements in a manner that promotes confidentiality, security and privacy and complies with any applicable laws and agreements.

12) Use ICF Member contact information (email addresses, telephone numbers, and so on) only in the manner and to the extent authorized by the ICF.

Section 2: Conflicts of Interest

As a coach, I:

13) Seek to be conscious of any conflict or potential conflict of interest, openly disclose any such conflict and offer to remove myself when a conflict arises.

14) Clarify roles for internal coaches, set boundaries and review with stakeholders conflicts of interest that may emerge between coaching and other role functions.

15) Disclose to my client and the sponsor(s) all anticipated compensation from third parties that I may receive for referrals of clients or pay to receive clients.

16) Honor an equitable coach/client relationship, regardless of the form of compensation.

Section 3: Professional Conduct with Clients

As a coach, I:

17) Ethically speak what I know to be true to clients, prospective clients or sponsors about the potential value of the coaching process or of me as a coach.

18) Carefully explain and strive to ensure that, prior to or at the initial meeting, my coaching client and sponsor(s) understand the nature of coaching, the nature and limits of confidentiality, financial arrangements, and any other terms of the coaching agreement.

19) Have a clear coaching service agreement with my clients and sponsor(s) before beginning the coaching relationship and honor this agreement. The agreement shall include the roles, responsibilities and rights of all parties involved.

20) Hold responsibility for being aware of and setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern interactions, physical or otherwise, I may have with my clients or sponsor(s).

21) Avoid any sexual or romantic relationship with current clients or sponsor(s) or students, mentees or supervisees. Further, I will be alert to the possibility of any potential sexual intimacy among the parties including my support staff and/or assistants and will take the appropriate action to address the issue or cancel the engagement in order to provide a safe environment overall.

22) Respect the client's right to terminate the coaching relationship at any point during the process, subject to the provisions of the agreement. I shall remain alert to indications that there is a shift in the value received from the coaching relationship.

23) Encourage the client or sponsor to make a change if I believe the client or sponsor would be better served by another coach or by another resource and suggest my client seek the services of other professionals when deemed necessary or appropriate.

Section 4: Confidentiality/Privacy

As a coach, I:

24) Maintain the strictest levels of confidentiality with all client and sponsor information unless release is required by law.

25) Have a **clear agreement** about how coaching information will be exchanged among coach, client and sponsor.

26) Have a **clear agreement** when acting as a coach, coach mentor, coaching supervisor or trainer, with both client and sponsor, **student, mentee, or supervisee about the conditions under which confidentiality may not be maintained (e.g., illegal activity, pursuant to valid court order or subpoena; imminent or likely risk of danger to self or to others; etc.) and make sure both client and sponsor, student, mentee, or supervisee voluntarily and knowingly agree in writing to that limit of confidentiality. Where I reasonably believe that because one of the above circumstances is applicable, I may need to inform appropriate authorities.**

27) Require all those who work with me in support of my clients to adhere to the ICF Code of Ethics, Number 26, Section 4, Confidentiality and Privacy Standards, and any other sections of the Code of Ethics that might be applicable.

Section 5: Continuing Development

As a coach, I:

28) Commit to the need for continued and ongoing development of my professional skills.

Part Three: The ICF Pledge of Ethics

As an ICF coach, I acknowledge and agree to honor my ethical and legal obligations to my coaching clients and sponsors, colleagues, and to the public at large. I pledge to comply with the ICF Code of Ethics and to practice these standards with those whom I coach, teach, mentor or supervise.

If I breach this Pledge of Ethics or any part of the ICF Code of Ethics, I agree that the ICF in its sole discretion may hold me accountable for so doing. I further agree that my accountability to the ICF for any breach may include sanctions, such as loss of my ICF Membership and/or my ICF Credentials.

For more information on the Ethical Conduct Review Process including links to file a complaint, please click [here](#).

Helpful Links:

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

ICF Ethical Interpretive Statements: <https://coachingfederation.org/interpretive-statements>

COACHING DILEMMA

RELATIONSHIP COACHING OUT ON A LIMB Ethical Hot Water or Not?

Ethical Dilemma provided by Tina Elliot, MBA, PCC, BCC – www.synergycoaching.org

Coach Mike had been working with his life coaching Client Tom for about 10 months. Client Tom asks Coach Mike if he would be willing to do couples coaching due the challenges he's having in his relationship.

Coach Mike thinks this would be a great opportunity to expand his coaching skills into the relationship arena. He agrees to work with both Tom and his girlfriend Yvonne and will continue to use the same agreement he had with Tom but sends the following condition via email to both clients:

“Once the client and his partner engage in couples coaching, the coach will not be able to work with the original client individually unless it is about a topic unrelated to his relationship, i.e. general life, career or other.

Client Tom agrees to this as does new Client Yvonne via a yes response to this email.

The couples coaching moves forward over the next 3 months, however the same problems still continue in the couple's relationship. Client Tom calls Coach Mike and says I know I am not supposed to speak with you individually however I really need to talk with you.

Coach Mike agrees to hear the client out but realizes this crosses the line as it has to do with Tom's relationship. Coach Mike suggests he speak with a fellow coaching colleague of his and refers him out.

Client Tom connects with the other coach but comes back to Coach Mike again and request to speak with him because of their long-term coaching history together. Coach Mike says he will speak with him but only if he lets Yvonne know that he's going to speak with him. Tom states he has shared this with Yvonne and she is ok with him speaking to Coach Mike individually.

A call is set-up and Client Tom speaks with Coach Mike and it is mostly about his own thoughts and feelings about his relationship with Yvonne. A few follow-up emails and text messages are shared between Coach Mike and Client Tom about next steps with his relationship.

Yvonne had access to Tom's email and text messages (unbeknown to him) and she reads about Tom's meeting with Coach Mike and some of his planned next steps regarding closure of his relationship with her. She is furious and calls Coach Mike and demands to know what is going on, she states this is a breach of their agreement and wants her money back for her part of the couples coaching.

Coach Mike attempts to talk with Yvonne, he states he will not give her money back as the couples coaching was delivered in good faith. He is willing to continue to work through this with both clients focusing on next steps in their relationship in support of what they both decide is right for each of them.

Client Yvonne begins calling Coach Mike leaving threatening messages about filing an ethics complaint, lawsuit, etc. Coach Mike blocks Client Yvonne's phone calls.

Could being in this situation possibly be an ethical breach of ICF's Code of Ethics?

Directions:

- 1. What statements above make your ethical intuition speak?*
- 2. Which ICF Ethical standard/s may be relevant as potentially breached?*
- 3. What is your course of action as a coach?*

Have questions or comments about this ethics session or the upcoming ***Staying Out of Ethical Hot Water Workshop***? Contact Tina Elliot at email: tina@synergycoaching.org or 928-772-4630.
Workshop Information: <https://synergycoaching.org/ethics-in-professional-coaching-workshop/>