

*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.



## ICF CODE OF ETHICS

The ICF Code of Ethics is composed of five Main Parts:

1. INTRODUCTION
2. KEY DEFINITIONS
3. ICF CORE VALUES AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES
4. ETHICAL STANDARDS
5. PLEDGE

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The ICF Code of Ethics describes the core values of the International Coach Federation (ICF Core Values), and ethical principles and ethical standards of behavior for all ICF Professionals (see definitions). Meeting these ICF ethical standards of behavior is the first of the ICF core coaching competencies (ICF Core Competencies). That is “*Demonstrates ethical practice: understands and consistently applies coaching ethics and standards.*”

The ICF Code of Ethics serves to uphold the integrity of ICF and the global coaching profession by:

- Setting standards of conduct consistent with ICF core values and ethical principles.
- Guiding ethical reflection, education, and decision-making
- Adjudicating and preserving ICF coach standards through the ICF Ethical Conduct Review (ECR) process
- Providing the basis for ICF ethics training in ICF-accredited programs

The ICF Code of Ethics applies when ICF Professionals represent themselves as such, in any kind of coaching-related interaction. This is regardless of whether a coaching Relationship (see definitions) has been established. (1) *This Code articulates the ethical obligations of ICF Professionals who are acting in their different roles as coach, coach supervisor, mentor coach, trainer or student coach-in-training, or serving in an ICF Leadership role, as well as Support Personnel* (see definitions).

Although the Ethical Conduct Review (ECR) process is only applicable to ICF Professionals, as is the Pledge, the ICF Staff are also committed to ethical conduct and the Core Values and Ethical Principles that underpin this ICF code of ethics.

The challenge of working ethically means that members will inevitably encounter situations that require responses to unexpected issues, resolution of dilemmas and solutions to problems. This Code of Ethics is intended to assist those persons subject to the Code by

directing them to the variety of ethical factors that may need to be taken into consideration and helping to identify alternative ways of approaching ethical behavior.

ICF Professionals who accept the Code of Ethics strive to be ethical, even when doing so involves making difficult decisions or acting courageously.

## 2. KEY DEFINITIONS

- “Client”—the individual or team/group being coached, the coach being mentored or supervised, or the coach or the student coach being trained.
- “Coaching”—partnering with Clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.
- “Coaching Relationship”—a relationship that is established by the ICF Professional and the Client(s)/Sponsor(s) under an agreement or a contract that defines the responsibilities and expectations of each party.
- “Code”—ICF Code of Ethics
- “Confidentiality”—protection of any information obtained around the coaching engagement unless consent to release is given.
- “Conflict of Interest”—a situation in which an ICF Professional is involved in multiple interests where serving one interest could work against or be in conflict with another. This could be financial, personal or otherwise.
- “Equality”—a situation in which all people experience inclusion, access to resources and opportunity, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, color, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, immigration status, mental or physical disability, and other areas of human difference.
- “ICF Professional”—individuals who represent themselves as an ICF Member or ICF Credential-holder, in roles including but not limited to Coach, Coach Supervisor, Mentor Coach, Coach Trainer, and Student of Coaching
- “ICF Staff”—the ICF support personnel who are contracted by the managing company that provides professional management and administrative services on behalf of ICF.
- “Internal Coach”—an individual who is employed within an organization and coaches either part-time or full-time the employees of that organization.
- “Sponsor”—the entity (including its representatives) paying for and/or arranging or defining the coaching services to be provided.
- “Support Personnel”—the people who work for ICF Professionals in support of their Clients.
- “Systemic equality”—gender equality, race equality and other forms of equality that are institutionalized in the ethics, core values, policies, structures, and cultures of communities, organizations, nations and society.

### **3. ICF CORE VALUES AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES**

The ICF Code of Ethics is based on the ICF Core Values ([link](#)) and the actions that flow from them. All values are equally important and support one another. These values are aspirational and should be used as a way to understand and interpret the standards. All ICF Professionals are expected to showcase and propagate these Values in all their interactions.

### **4. ETHICAL STANDARDS**

The following ethical standards are applied to the professional activities of ICF Professionals:

#### **Section I - Responsibility to clients**

As an ICF Professional, I:

1. (18) Explain and ensure that, prior to or at the initial meeting, my coaching Client(s) and Sponsor(s) understand the nature and potential value of coaching, the nature and limits of confidentiality, financial arrangements, and any other terms of the coaching agreement.
2. (19) Create an agreement/contract regarding the roles, responsibilities and rights of all parties involved with my Client(s) and Sponsor(s) prior to the commencement of services.
3. (24) Maintain the strictest levels of confidentiality with all parties as agreed upon. I am aware of and agree to comply with all applicable laws that pertain to personal data and communications.
4. (25) Have a clear understanding about how information is exchanged among all parties involved during all coaching interactions.
5. (26) Have a clear understanding with both Clients and Sponsors or interested parties about the conditions under which information will not be kept confidential (e.g., illegal activity, if required by law, pursuant to valid court order or subpoena; imminent or likely risk of danger to self or to others; etc.). Where I reasonably believe one of the above circumstances is applicable, I may need to inform appropriate authorities.
6. (14) When working as an Internal Coach, manage conflicts of interest or potential conflicts of interest with my coaching Clients and Sponsor(s) through coaching agreement(s) and ongoing dialogue. This should include addressing organizational roles, responsibilities, relationships, records, confidentiality and other reporting requirements.
7. (11) Maintain, store and dispose of any records, including electronic files and communications, created during my professional interactions in a manner that promotes confidentiality, security and privacy and complies with any applicable laws and agreements. Furthermore, I seek to make proper use of emerging and growing technological developments that are being used in coaching services (technology-assisted coaching services) and be aware how various ethical standards apply to them.
8. (23) Remain alert to indications that there might be a shift in the value received from the coaching relationship. If so, make a change in the relationship or encourage the

Client(s)/Sponsor(s) to seek another coach, seek another professional or use a different resource.

9. (22) Respect all parties' right to terminate the coaching relationship at any point for any reason during the coaching process subject to the provisions of the agreement.
10. (13) Am sensitive to the implications of having multiple contracts and relationships with the same Client(s) and Sponsor(s) at the same time in order to avoid conflict of interest situations.
11. **Am aware of and actively manage any power or status difference between the Client and me that may be caused by cultural, relational, psychological or contextual issues.**
12. (15) Disclose to my Clients the potential receipt of compensation, and other benefits I may receive for referring my Clients to third parties.
13. (16) Assure consistent quality of coaching regardless of the amount or form of agreed compensation in any relationship.

## **Section II - Responsibility to practice and performance**

As an ICF Professional, I:

14. (2) Adhere to the ICF Code of Ethics in all my interactions. When I become aware of a possible breach of the Code by myself or I recognize unethical behavior in another ICF Professional, I respectfully raise the matter with those involved. If this does not resolve the matter, I refer it to a formal authority (e.g., ICF Global) for resolution.
15. (27) Require adherence to the ICF Code of Ethics by all Support Personnel.
16. (28) Commit to excellence through continued personal, professional and ethical development.
17. (8) Recognize my personal limitations or circumstances that may impair, conflict with or interfere with my coaching performance or my professional coaching relationships. I will reach out for support to determine the action to be taken and, if necessary, promptly seek relevant professional guidance. This may include suspending or terminating my coaching relationship(s).
18. (13) Resolve any conflict of interest or potential conflict of interest by working through the issue with relevant parties, seeking professional assistance, or suspending temporarily or ending the professional relationship.
19. (12) Maintain the privacy of ICF Members and use the ICF Member contact information (email addresses, telephone numbers, and so on) only as authorized by ICF or the ICF Member.

## **Section III – Responsibility to professionalism**

As an ICF Professional, I:

20. (6) Identify accurately my coaching qualifications, my level of coaching competency, expertise, experience, training, certifications and ICF Credentials.

21. (5 & 17) Make verbal and written statements that are true and accurate about what I offer as an ICF Professional, what is offered by ICF, the coaching profession, and the potential value of coaching.
22. (3) Communicate and create awareness with those who need to be informed of the ethical responsibilities established by this Code.
23. (20) Hold responsibility for being aware of and setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern interactions, physical or otherwise.
24. (21) Do not participate in any sexual or romantic engagement with Client(s) or Sponsor(s). I will be ever mindful of the level of intimacy appropriate for the relationship. I take the appropriate action to address the issue or cancel the engagement.

#### **Section IV - Responsibility to society**

As an ICF Professional, I:

25. (4) Avoid discrimination by maintaining fairness and equality in all activities and operations, while respecting local rules and cultural practices. This includes, but is not limited to, discrimination on the basis of age, race, gender expression, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, disability or military status.
26. (7) Recognize and honor the contributions and intellectual property of others, only claiming ownership of my own material. I understand that a breach of this standard may subject me to legal remedy by a third party.
27. (10) Am honest and work within recognized scientific standards, applicable subject guidelines and boundaries of my competence when conducting and reporting research.
28. Am aware of my and my clients' impact on society. I adhere to the philosophy of "doing good," versus "avoiding bad."

#### **5. THE PLEDGE OF ETHICS OF THE ICF PROFESSIONAL:**

As an ICF Professional, in accordance with the Standards of the ICF Code of Ethics, I acknowledge and agree to fulfill my ethical and legal obligations to my coaching Client(s), Sponsor(s), colleagues and to the public at large.

If I breach 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 mandatory additional coach training or other education or loss of my ICF Membership and/or my ICF Credentials.

For more information on the Ethical Conduct Review Process including the links to file a complaint, please click the button below.

*Adopted by the ICF Global Board of Directors September 2019*

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## Helpful Links:

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

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

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## 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?***