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Coaching ethics: Making ethical decisions – Novices and experts

Abstract

This short article reviews the principles which underpin professional ethics. It considers the parallel domains of sports and counselling psychology and explores the ethical issues which face coaching psychologists. It moves on to consider ethical decision making frameworks and how coaches may use such frameworks to make more informed ethical decisions in their coaching practice. It suggests that while codes of practice are a useful for experienced coaches, novice coaches need to develop a heuristic to help them resolve ethical dilemmas which can occur in their practice.

Key words

Professional ethics coaching psychology, coaching ethics, ethical decision-making, confidential in coaching, coaching supervision, decision-making frameworks.

Introduction

How do most coaches resolve ethical dilemmas? Most say they use their intuition to make a decision or use the code of ethics provided by the BPS (or other membership body). For new coaches this is more of a difficult decision. They have less experience to fall back on and thus less background experience to guide the 'intuitive' process of making a good decision. They are also likely to be less familiar with the meaning behind the codes of ethics published by the professional bodies and how broad principles are to be interpreted in practice. This places both coaching and also novice coaches at a disadvantage.

How would you for example manage the issue of confidentiality in the following situations?

Scenario A: You are undertaking life coaching and your coachee tells you that they are very unhappy in their relationship and are planning to leave their partner, but are frightened to make the step.

Scenario B: You are an executive coach employed by the organisation to help managers improve their performance. Your coachee tells you that they are planning to leave the organisation after being head hunted by the company's main competitor.

In both cases, and subject to the contract with the organisation, most coaches would respect the confidential nature of this information and not disclose this to partners or employers. They would let events unfold; the partner to leave their spouse and the employee to leave their company.

However, how might you react if in Scenario A the person says that the main reason for leaving is that the partner violent to them and has both hit them and threatened them with a knife. They have not left yet as they are too frightened to do so.

Or in the case of Scenario B, the coachee tells you that they have been working on a new piece of technical design which would give either company a significant competitive advantage. They are planning to take this commercially sensitive data with them to their new company on a disc.

As coaching psychologists we need to help coaches think about the dilemmas we and other coaches face and help them develop strategies for resolving difficult ethical dilemmas.

Ethics in coaching

To date little has been written about ethics within coaching. A small number of articles have touched on the topic (for example in TCP, Law, 2005; Law, 2006). Law has drawn attention to the emergence of Human Rights legislation on its impact on ethical codes and has raised ethical issues such as whether it is legitimate for coaches to invite their coachee to a conference to give a joint paper.

In North America (Tomlinson & Strachan; 1996; Williams & Anderson, 2006) the focus has been more towards the legal implications of poor ethical decisions on coaching practitioners. Williams and Anderson's reviewed how coaches can avoid potential claims, through effective note taking and careful referrals. The limited number of claims in the UK means that few if any professional indemnity companies increase their premiums for psychologists as a result of the individual taking on coaching. Coaching with its facilitative approach is seen as a low risk activity compared with other consulting activities.

In Australia the debate has been centred on the issue of Duty of Care (Spence, Cavanagh, Grant, 2006). This study focused on the growth in life coaching as a proxy for counselling services. Spence highlighted the lack of understanding and training of coaches in mental health issues, and potential danger posed by an unregulated market where coaches were often working with clients with more challenging needs than the coach was equipped to manage.

The UK professional coaching bodies (for example; AC, APECS, BPS EMCC and ICF) all have Codes of Ethics which they ask their members to agree to as a condition of membership. The implication is that a failure to comply with the Code could result in removal from the membership register. However, the evidence suggests that to date in the UK this has not been an issue. The BPS for example receives an average of 120 complaints a year from the public each year across all of its Divisions; from clinical to counselling and forensic. Around a dozen of these complaints are of a sufficient serious nature to warrant a BPS Hearing. Of these approximately 2 to 3 psychologists are removed from the register each year. What is interesting is that to date none of the complaints have related to ethical issues of practice with coaching clients. In fact there has only been one complaint about coaching. This related to a graduate member's claims of proficiency in the area of coaching which were unsubstantiated by their training, and their member grade. This lack of serious complaints may be due to the fact that all UK coaches are working at a high level of ethical conduct, and no issues have emerged over the past six or seven years that these bodies have been in existence or that coaching has been a high profile activity. However, it is more likely that few organisational clients or coachees know about such codes and if they are aware of them, they are less willing to make a formal complaint and simply terminate the coaching contract. While such contractual terminations resolve the issue for the individual client they may fail to protect the wider public from misconduct and the coaching profession from reputational damage. The evidence from the domain of counselling suggests that clients are unwilling to make formal complaints due to a combination of ignorance about procedures and rights and difficulties in pursuing such complaints (Jehu, 1994). Only a small percentage of cases ever make it to the professional body compared with the number of incidents. While the nature of clients and the issues are likely to differ in workplace coaching, when compared with therapy, the evidence suggests this is less of the case in life coaching, where clients may possess complex personal and present issues which are related to these (Spence, Cavanagh, Grant, 2006). A different comparator which may have more links to business is sports coaching. Both share a concern for performance and goal attainment. Sports coaching has developed a *Code of Ethics and Conduct for Sports Coaches* which sets out in a more practical way than many of the current codes of coaching ethics mentioned above. This model offers a clear set of principles to sports coaches in how they work with athletes from a focus on humanity to ensure honesty in their dealings. While not a perfect solution for the novice sports coach, it provides a clearer statement of what is right and wrong than current guides, although its clarity presents a further problem in that it could be seen as over prescriptive.

Ethical models

So where do these ethical standards in the Codes come from? They are often based on one of two positions; consequential or deontological. How we arrive at our decision is based on our position on a continuum between these two points. At one end of the continuum is the consequentialist view. This position is that 'right' is about bringing about the best consequences. So in this sense the position is about bringing about the best outcome for the greatest number of people. Under this view, killing, or more practically for coaching psychologists, telling a lie, is acceptable if this brings the greatest benefit to the client organisation and its people.

A second position is the 'deontological' position, which is based on duty. From this position certain types of behaviour are considered, by themselves to be 'right' or 'wrong'. For example, killing is always 'wrong'. Again a more practical example for a coaching psychologist, is that failing to honour a promise made to a client would always be 'wrong'. In reality most coaches sit somewhere between these two points, that neither an exclusive focus on consequences nor an adherence to rules is applied in all situations. Most coaches are in most cases ethical pluralists, who hold to a few solid principles, but for most of what they do they consider the circumstances of the situation and consider the motives and situations of the characters involved to help them reach a decision about the course of action to follow.

These two positions have informed the development of the ethical codes for each of the professional bodies, but few coaching practitioners reflect on the codes and how these fits with their own view of the world. Equally worrying is that limited attention is paid to coaching ethics in much of the coaching training that practitioners have. Yet novices need to develop short hand ways of considering and resolving ethical dilemmas. Given that the codes do not always offer the easy answers. This is because most of us are drawn to recognise the complexity in situations rather than follow the simple rules of a dutiful approach to ethical dilemmas.

Common themes in ethical codes

A review of the main coaching bodies' ethical codes reveals some common themes. Utility, Autonomy, Truth, Confidentiality Avoiding Harm, Justice, and Respecting the rights of others. These are all fine until we start to unpick some of the potential complexity within each and contradictions between areas that lead us to the horns of ethical dilemmas.

One common theme is Utility. This is often expressed as placing the interests or needs of clients first. In counselling where a clear dyad relationship exists between the counsellor and client, this should be relatively clear, although of course other parties are often involved either directly in the counselling (such as in Family Therapy) or have a stake in the outcomes. However, in coaching in the workplace, almost all relationships involve three or more stakeholders; the coachee, the organisational client (HR director) and often the coachee's manager. How does the coach seek to balance these interests?

The theme of autonomy is often represented through encouraging the self-determination of coachees; facilitating their choices about what meets their needs and allowing them to make what we as the coach might consider to be a mistake. In counselling the dilemmas can arise over whether the client has the mental capacity to make the right decision. In these cases the counsellor may step in to protect the client from harm, thus over riding one principle with another. In coaching the issue may be about bullying or racial harassment at work, rather than suicide. In what circumstances would it become acceptable to over ride the wishes of the coachee?

A third theme is confidentiality. Many coaches often say that sessions are 'confidential'. This implies that all information shared is confidential. Is that correct? Counsellors often refer to three exceptions to this; risk of harm to the client, risk of harm to others and serious illegality. These issues on the surface may appear simple and straight-forward, but in practice can be difficult. Michael Todd, the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester sadly died in Snowdonia after going for walk during a personal crisis. If you were a coach working with a client facing a similar situation and you were aware of their intention to go for a walk on the hills and to take their own life, what actions would you take? In what circumstances has the coach the right to break confidentiality? How much evidence does the coach need to believe harm may come to their coach or others? Similar dilemmas arise over illegality. In the case of drug taking by workers, what is serious? Is cannabis a substance that should be protected by confidentiality, while the use of Heroin should be disclosed to the employer?

Such decisions are likely to reflect the coach's views on drug taking and of different substances.

A fourth common principle is to avoid harm. This is often seen to over ride confidentiality, as in the example above. But harm can also result from the coach's actions. Is the coach working beyond their area of expertise? For example the coach may take on a coaching client thinking the issue is a simple performance issue, and behind this is the issue of anxiety or depression. These signs however require skills in the coach to spot them, yet few coaching courses discuss issue of mental health or are aware of the warning signs which would help them to identify these conditions (Szymanska, 2006; Szymanska, 2007).

Decision making framework

Given this challenge how can both coaching psychologists and in particular novice coaches improve the way they make ethical decisions. The process of supervision with a trained supervisor is of great assistance in the process.

The supervision process should offer not just the bi-monthly or quarterly meeting with a supervisor to review past incidents, but the opportunity to have 'emergency' contact to discuss a real live dilemma and work through this with the supervisor. My experience suggests coaches are ready to do this and a small number of dilemmas have presented themselves where the coach has felt the need to pick up the supervisor 'bat-phone' to call for guidance.

An equally, if not more useful route, is the development of coaching ethical competence among coaches, with the coach referring to a conscious framework to help them resolve a dilemma. Such frameworks are difficult to devise and are useless if done in the abstract. However, experienced coaches and in particular trained coaching supervisors use their own personal heuristic to help them work out what to do. Such models are likely to have much in common between one another, but as yet, for coaching, we don't know what this may look like. Further research could help us understand the thinking processes of experienced coaches and the decision making ethical frameworks they use to guide their practice. This in turn can help trainers of coaching share such models with novices and guide their development.

A third route which can help us develop our ethical thinking is the use of scenarios. By considering ourselves in a situation and discussing with others factors and possible options for action, with their consequences, coaches can enhance their sensitivity to ethical issues and their competence in making more informed decisions.

Conclusion

This paper suggest that coaches and novice coaches in particular need to develop a better understanding of ethical issues and ethical decision making. One way for doing this is to draw on the knowledge of experts who use short hand models to guide their own reflections on ethical dilemmas and resolve these through their decision-making processes.

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