



## Coaching and Ethics

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*“Coaching is a distinct and different paradigm for working with people and accomplishing results. It is a way of relating and communicating in which the coach is committed to the commitments of the coachee or team and is competent to provide an opening for new possibilities and unprecedented actions to occur.”*



### **Is This Article For You?**

This article is written for three important audiences. First and foremost, the article speaks to professional leaders and coaches, whether you work within organizations or as practitioners providing coaching services on a temporary or contractual basis.

Second, it is for those who are new coaches, those on a development track to refine their capabilities and ideas about coaching, or those who have been introduced to coaching through courses such as “Coaching for Breakthroughs and Commitment” offered by the Canadian Centre for Management Development. Finally, anyone who is interested in coaching as a discipline or considering working with a coach could find useful ideas here. Even if you are unfamiliar with coaching as a discipline for achieving unprecedented results, this article will introduce you to concepts and ethical issues of concern to anyone contemplating using a coach.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, coaching has become fashionable in many organizations and has captured the hearts and minds of those who see coaching as a revolutionary approach to management and leadership. At its best, coaching is not simply a new buzzword for describing a more ‘people-centered’ style of management. Rather, coaching is a distinct and different paradigm for working with people and accomplishing results. It is a way of relating and communicating in which the coach is committed to the commitments of the coachee or team and is competent to provide an opening for new possibilities and unprecedented actions to occur.



The historical culture of management is rooted in a commitment to predict or forecast the future and then control human behavior and processes to achieve that culture's aims. By contrast, a coaching culture is grounded in a commitment to create or invent the future and then empower the authentic commitment and actions of those being coached. In effect, this is a shift in the locus of power and responsibility from the manager to those they manage. In most organizations, coaching is not a formal role, but a body of competencies and a 'way of being' in the world that can empower people in many roles, including the role of manager. When looking at the nature of the action produced, in our experience, coaching is virtually synonymous with leadership.

***We believe people representing themselves as executive or organizational coaches must adhere to the highest standards of professional responsibility and accountability.***

Our first concern is to protect the interests of those being coached. A defined ethical standard offers a mechanism for clarifying what people can expect and lays the foundation for exploring ethical performance. In this article, we are proposing a 'code of ethics' for coaches as a starting point for distinguishing standards within the coaching community and also as guidelines for consumers to consider when electing to work with a professional coach. Any code of ethics, however, is only as valuable as its endorsement by a community of individuals and the degree to which it impacts our day-to-day choices.

### ***Coaching is NOT a Passing Fad***

This discussion of ethics is grounded in the view that coaching is emerging as an important and distinct discipline in organizations. We need to be sensitive, however, to the phenomenon of how a new idea can emerge only to be appropriated by the historical culture, thus reinforcing the prevailing paradigm. In many organizations, the notion of 'flavor-of-the-month' (when speaking of new approaches to management and work) is a cynical expression of this phenomenon. It suggests that the 'new' is essentially trivial, is more of the same, and thus can be disregarded. The challenge is to not throw out or undermine what is valuable, powerful and new while attempting to avoid shallow interpretations or seduction by practitioners using a popular new concept to sell 'old' approaches.

Over the past decade, coaching has attracted much attention and offered opportunities for people to take advantage of increased interest and demand. Throughout this period, thousands of individuals have been trained or declared themselves as coaches, programs for teaching and/or certifying coaches have proliferated, many books have been published on the subject, and conferences on coaching are now mainstream. Several large corporations have even replaced the word 'manager' with the word 'coach' in all of their publications, on organizational charts and on business cards. Clearly, changing a label doesn't change behavior or the underlying issues of organizational life and culture. Some estimates suggest that there are as many as 10,000 self-declared coaches working as practitioners in the United States and Canada today. While many of these practitioners are undoubtedly very competent and are making a positive difference with their client companies and in the individual



lives of those they coach, others are simply calling themselves coaches and applying traditional techniques, giving advice, and functioning in the old ‘command and control’ paradigm.

For consumers of coaching services, this can be very confusing. Certainly some people expect and want their ‘coach’ to tell them what to do. “Swing the club this way” or “Make your resume look like this.” Others who have experienced Total Quality Management (TQM) or organizational delayering initiatives may have been introduced to coaches or facilitators as a replacement for supervisors—complete with new skills to empower and support others. Such ‘coaches’ can be very productive contributors to both organizations and individuals, yet they are quite distinct from those coaches who are professionally trained and capable of working with people to achieve breakthroughs—unprecedented results based on new ways of being.

### **Coaching Happens in a Context of Trust**

As Warren Bennis and others have suggested, **coaching by its nature is very personal and is based on a unique and profound level of trust between the coach and those being coached.** While coaching is not therapy, the quality of the relationship is similar and the consequences, whether positive or negative, can be just as profound. This is because the coaching relationship is based on two key elements. The first is that **the coach is a competent observer and is responsible for generating a possibility with the coachee that is larger than what is available in the coachee’s historical reality.** This necessitates a level of faith on the part of the coachee that the coach is acting solely in the coachee’s interests. Second, **the objective of the**

**coaching relationship is to empower the coachee to take unprecedented action that, more often than not, is contrary and counterintuitive to the experience and historical competence of the person being coached.** Consequently, the coachee is required to take significant personal risk to realize the benefits of the coaching relationship. If successful, the benefits are obvious and validate the coaching process. If unsuccessful, the coachee must be prepared to deal with and be responsible for potentially negative consequences.

When a group of seminar participants was asked to distinguish between morals, ethics and values, this was their most useful interpretation: ***morals are the rules of God, ethics are the rules of a community and values are our individual rules.*** Ideally, these rules are aligned and coherent and become our framework for living. In most cases, however, we are faced with choices where the rules are not always clear or may seemingly be in conflict. Moreover, in many cases, our actions are not so much a product of deliberate choices as natural or automatic responses to situations and circumstances in which the prevailing ethic is governed by conventional wisdom, expediency, habit or trial and error.

In the federal public service, most leaders are familiar with the Report of the Study Team on Public Service Values and Ethics, prepared with the guidance of the late John Tait. That report proposed four lenses for thinking about values:

- Democratic values
- Professional values
- Ethical values, and
- Personal values.



This offers another way to look at the standards and expectations we hold of coaches and their professional conduct. In reading the remainder of this article, it may be useful to consider the connections to these categories and the implications for those coaching within a public sector context.

***We believe that for coaching to become a widely respected discipline or profession, there must be an agreed upon set of rules to govern our practice.***

In the absence of such rules, coaching may indeed become a passing fad and the potential of coaching as a new and empowering paradigm for organizations and management may be lost. We invite coaching colleagues and clients to engage this proposal as a starting point. This article offers a foundation that can be enriched or expanded based on whatever experience and commitment can be brought to bear. Here then are the ‘rules’—the code of ethics—we propose:

### **A coach is clear about the limits of his/her competency.**

Competency is defined as the ability to make and keep promises. One of the paradoxes of coaching is that the coach does not need to know as much as the coachee in a particular field to be an effective coach, nor does she need to be able to perform at the level of the coachee. This is obvious if we look at coaches of professional athletes or performing artists. Yet the coach does need to be able to promise a result that is beyond the capability of the coachee to accomplish by herself. For example, a person can be competent to coach people in such areas as their relationships with other people, their communication, how they observe themselves and their circumstances, and their relationship to their

own commitments. Breakthroughs in these domains can be powerful for almost anyone in any field of work. That same coach may not be competent, however, to write computer programs or undertake market research or prepare a balance sheet. The ethical issue is this. **A coach needs to know enough about the areas being coached to listen effectively.** At the same time, the coach’s interventions should be focused on the coachee’s commitments and coaching requests.

A coach is always working with the phenomenon of ‘cognitive blindness’, the boundary between ‘*what we know*’ and ‘*what we don’t know that we don’t know*’. This is the area where coaching is powerful and valuable, since none of us can observe ourselves in action, nor can we observe our own worldview. If a coach isn’t vigilant and aware of her own blindness, the distinction between expertise and opinion can be lost. When this occurs, the coaching can be reduced to giving advice and there is a danger of the coachee acting on the view of someone less competent than himself.

One indicator of a coach’s awareness and management of her own blindness is that she maintains a relationship with a coach herself. It is good to be suspicious of anyone purporting to be a coach who is not also a great coachee. We recommend that anyone hiring a coach ask explicitly in what areas is the person not competent. This does not restrict the coach from ever giving advice, but when aware of her limits of competency she is able to clearly announce that “this is not coaching”, and in doing so manage the potential for confusion or unintended outcomes.



### **A coach is professional and clarifies the nature of the coaching process.**

A mark of professionals in any field is that they are very clear with their clients about what they do and do not offer. These promises may be recorded in writing and become a basis for later evaluation of results and value added. In a coaching relationship, there should also be a clear articulation of what is required of the coachee. **Establishing expectations is important not only because it is a good professional practice, but also because the nature of the coaching relationship is inherently dynamic.** Neither the coach nor the coachee can predict, nor should they proscribe, what the process will be. It will change and evolve over time and, in most cases, involve creativity on the part of the coach. Consequently, clarifying the ground rules establishes a frame of reference in which the individuals can work. At the same time, the coaching client may well make new requests as he discovers the possibility of achieving results in areas other than those initially considered. Finally, the coach will be responsible for clarifying the nature of the coaching relationship, particularly with respect to the power of choice exercised by the coachee. In summary, the coach should be explicit about the coaching process, content and relationship.

One reason that it is important to get the ‘agreement’ clear at the beginning of a coaching relationship is that coaching can be extremely uncomfortable for the person being coached. Historical inertia and patterns of behavior are often difficult to break and require exceptional clarity and commitment to do so. Coaching requires ‘unreasonable’ actions on the part of the coachee, which can generate considerable resistance and rationalization that can either undermine the value of the coaching or produce classical

‘power and control’ games between the coach and coachee. Part of any agreement should include a mutual understanding of where boundaries exist, what are the protocols and practices for dealing with expected resistance, and any other pitfalls that can be anticipated. Coaching works only when power and choice are vested in the coachee. A failure to understand and clarify this at the beginning of the relationship can result in the coach either assuming or being given a traditional authority-control role in the relationship. This will negate or obscure the value of the coaching and even if results are produced, the coachee may become co-dependent upon the coach for sustaining the results.

### **Coaches recognize the value of their work and maintain professional integrity in their relationships consistent with agreed upon compensation.**

We believe that coaching is a privilege. When we coach others, they grant us permission to observe and intervene in their lives and in how they are ‘being’ in their work and in their world. The special trust required of them for the coach to make a contribution is exceptional and can only be regarded as a gift. The relationship is analogous to that typically found with doctors, priests, therapists or very close friends. When someone relates to another this way, it is always possible to abuse or take advantage of the trust. This abuse can be sexual, political, economic or personal domination. All such forms of abuse are inappropriate.

**One way to acknowledge and maintain this special relationship is to clarify exactly what the basis of compensation will be (if any) and rigorously reject any temptations to benefit beyond the pre-established terms.** In an organizational context, this may



be implicit in the managerial relationship; however, it is incumbent on the coach to make it explicit, just as he would if operating as an independent practitioner. We believe that coaching is a valuable service and we set daily or hourly fees based on what we and the client consider to be appropriate. Once established and agreed upon, practices should be developed that keep the relationship on a professional level. When the coachee accomplishes breakthroughs, they can experience extraordinary emotion and gratitude. In some cases, these breakthroughs can be 'priceless' or worth many times the cost of any fees. It is important to always acknowledge that the result belongs to the coachee and that the coach has already been compensated, whether formally or simply from the satisfaction of empowering others.

In addition to establishing set fees to prevent inappropriate remuneration, there are other ethical issues that must be considered. One common abuse of coaching by professional consultants is to use coaching as a way to gain entry and preferred access to larger consulting contracts within the client's organization. While many coaches are also qualified as trainers or management consultants, the relationship with the client is compromised if the coach uses it for such business development purposes. Another common example of abuse of the coaching relationship is the covert use of the coachee as a vehicle for promoting or marketing coaching to others. And since coaching involves a level of trust and openness, there is the possibility of sexual attraction. From an ethical perspective, encouraging or acting on such attraction would be another clear form of abuse.

### **A coach has clear and observable criteria for assessing results and outcomes.**

A common question is, "How can we measure the results of a coaching relationship?" This is difficult to answer because breakthroughs are inherently unpredictable. If a result can be predicted, it isn't a breakthrough.

Measurement is also difficult because the result of coaching occurs first and foremost in the coachee's '*way of being*', which becomes the context for the coachee's actions and the coachee's results. It is holistic in nature. Our answer to the above question is always that **the only place to look for the results of coaching is in the actions and the results of the coachee**. The only criteria possible are the declared commitments of the coachee that, in his view, he could not have accomplished by himself.

An important aspect of most coaching relationships is that, while the commitments agreed upon at the beginning are a base line for assessing results, they are not necessarily the only results that will be produced. Because of the holistic nature of the process, coachees frequently report results in other domains. For example, although most of our coaching is in the context of work, results often occur in people's relationships with family or with themselves. We recommend a practice in which the coach and coachee frequently and rigorously assess outcomes in a variety of areas and document these over time. Such documentation is valuable because as breakthroughs occur there is a natural tendency to forget where one began, which increases the likelihood that the coaching relationship will not be correlated with the results.



It is possible that the results from a coaching relationship may be acceptable or satisfactory and not be a breakthrough. These results should obviously be appreciated and acknowledged, but in our view they are also the kinds of results that can and should be available from other types of developmental relationships such as skills training, counseling, mentoring, normal supervision and even self-study. **What distinguishes coaching as a discipline is its focus on achieving more than incremental improvement.** The objectives of coaching are unprecedented actions and results on the part of those they coach.

### **A professional coach is a member of a community and empowers the profession and community.**

One way to distinguish a profession from other kinds of work is that a profession is a community of practitioners that draw their identity and practices and, to some degree, their power from the community. They are not merely members of a club or association, but they relate to their colleagues as contributors to the field and as sources of new thinking and inspiration. While competition always exists within a profession, competition is not the primary factor governing strategy and action. There is a larger commitment to the clients and to the profession as a whole, including general adherence to its traditions and practices. For example, a surgeon will not normally perform a procedure on a close relative, not because he or she isn't capable, but because the profession has declared that the risk of losing objectivity is inappropriate. This kind of solidarity is two-way in the sense that the individual derives power, knowledge and value from the community and the community exists by virtue of each individual

practitioner's responsibility and commitment to the community.

At the present time, there is no recognized group or organization that represents those who are practicing coaching either professionally or as part of another profession or organizational role. Several associations exist and many coaches work with others in informal arrangements. At this point, there are no widely recognized licensing authorities or agreed standards for what constitutes the discipline of coaching. The International Coach Federation is contributing to the development of such standards and has an accreditation process for Coach Training Programs. This sort of formalization of the profession is emerging, but is not yet clearly endorsed by coaching practitioners. For this reason, it is important that anyone offering coaching be clear with those they coach about their qualifications, experience, references and the underlying basis for their practice. Similarly, those people about to begin a coaching relationship will want to be clear about how prospective coaches' qualifications fit with their needs.

### **A coach represents the possibility of the coachee accomplishing breakthroughs. When a coach can no longer be responsible for this possibility, he will withdraw from the coaching relationship.**

Another paradox of coaching is that breakthroughs are always occurring at the boundary between what is realistic and reasonable and what is unrealistic and unreasonable. Before Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile, there was no evidence that it was possible. Possibilities do not exist in reality: they only exist in the vision and commitment of human beings. If they existed in reality, they would be examples. One of the



primary values of a coach is the ability to clarify and own the possibility of a coachee accomplishing the unprecedented in the face of a history in which there is no evidence that such a breakthrough could happen.

**When we coach, we always deal with two people: first, the person with whatever history, talents and knowledge she might possess, and second, the person as a possibility.** A coach is always relating to the latter. If we stop relating to the person as a possibility, then we inevitably will fall into attempting to fix the person rather than empowering her to accomplish the results herself.

People often ask, “When do you give up coaching someone?” There may be many reasons to terminate a coaching relationship. One reason might be that the coachee is unwilling or unable to trust the coach. Another reason might be that the coachee’s commitment to accomplishing a breakthrough result changes. Perhaps there is simply insufficient time, interest or resources to do the necessary work. A coach will also give up when he can no longer see and be responsible for the possibility for which they are working. This is important because the coach is often the only one who sees the possibility when the conventional wisdom or the coachee does not. When the possibility disappears, then so does the reason for coaching. In all cases, if the coaching relationship is not terminated, it can devolve into a process of mutual rationalization or co-dependence that is generally unhealthy and unproductive.

### **A coach is responsible.**

Like Harry Truman, a coach works in a context of “the buck stops here”, not as a function of authority, but of responsibility. Another paradox of coaching is that, while the coach is 100% responsible, she must relate to

the coachee or the team in a way that allows them to also be 100% responsible. When coaches deny their responsibility and blame winning or losing on the circumstances or on those they coach, they are undermining both themselves and the coachees and they will lose the context in which coaching is possible.

Responsibility is defined here as the “ability to respond”, as distinct from taking on an assumption of blame or credit either before or after the fact. Being responsible means accepting, even owning, what happens in our world. This notion of responsibility opens a different relationship with the circumstances in which we find ourselves, including everything that has occurred, is occurring or might occur. **As coaches, we promise breakthroughs. If they do not occur, then we are responsible for not keeping our promise.**

Successes and failures are relative to the observer and the time frame of the activity. Losing a game doesn’t constitute a failure in the context of an entire season. It is always possible to criticize a strategy or process after the fact. A coach, however, is focused on action, outcomes and the future, not on differing interpretations or stories of why something did or did not work out. The point is that the ethical behavior of a coach must be guided by her moment-to-moment judgments in the context of responsibility. This is a coach’s way of being because the results of a coach are accomplished without control or force. This requires being fully ‘present’ and clear with respect to what is occurring in the conversations with the coachee and also present to the intended outcomes. If the coach attempts to control the actions of the coachee, then the coach’s behavior is a reaction to what is occurring. This is a sign that the coach has been co-opted by the circumstances or the



coachee's story, thus negating any possibilities for breakthroughs.

Success or failure is declared at the end of whatever time frames are established for the coaching. There are no clear rules for what the consequences should be if the results are declared a failure. In sports, failure may mean loss of the opportunity to continue coaching; in business, it may be payment of a penalty or return of some portion of fees. Failure may also be handled by a simple apology and a commitment to redesign the coaching strategy. The point is that coaches must be responsible or they will lose the relationship and creative context with those they coach. Coaching then becomes just another part of the game and loses the power to empower others.

### **A coach makes a clear distinction between coaching and other kinds of helping relationships.**

In our interpretation of coaching, one of the central ideas is that coaching changes the way people observe themselves in relation to their situation. This doesn't happen as a function of new knowledge or information, nor does it occur because they are given a new model. This kind of change is ontological in nature, a shift in a person's ground of being or context. This is also a way of describing what occurs when a person has a new opening for action. Historically, the subject of 'being' has been addressed from many perspectives and generally regarded as psychological or spiritual in nature, which is why coaching is often regarded as an advisory role. From our point of view, coaching has nothing to do with those disciplines or approaches that seek change through self-understanding or insights based on new information. Coaching is grounded in different paradigms and traditions and, while it may or may not have

similar objectives to other disciplines, it is distinct. For example, counselors or therapists are often oriented toward fixing or revealing something related to a person's 'internal state'. Coaching is exclusively concerned with action and relegates issues like motive and internal state to the responsibility of the person being coached.

Given this view, it is dangerous when coaches attempt to resolve or promise to deal with human behavior or other phenomena from any perspective other than coaching. A coach is not normally a therapist, although some therapists are capable of offering coaching as a distinct aspect of their practices. One way to manage this potential confusion between disciplines is by rigorously avoiding "why" questions with the coachee. For example, when taking a risk, it is natural and common for a person to feel fear. Most people want to understand why they are afraid and have the coach help eliminate the fear. As a coach, it is important to have compassion and acknowledge the fear, but it is not the coach's job to make coachees feel unafraid. Rather, the coach's job is to empower the coachees to take action whether or not the coachees are afraid.

This distinction is particularly important when working with people in areas that are also the concern of other professions. Coaching and other disciplines deal with matters such as trust, being authentic, distinguishing recurring patterns of inaction or ineffectiveness and impacting upon cultural values such as responsibility, accountability, risk-taking, courage, and being able to complete and put the past in the past. **Clarifying the distinction between coaching and other disciplines, including the theoretical foundations and practices upon which coaching is based, is important for preventing confusion.** Avoiding any



misrepresentation or confusion is the ethical responsibility of the coach.

### **A coach is committed to the commitments of the coachee.**

When we approach coaching, the power in a coaching relationship is always with the person or persons being coached. Thus, the senior context for coaching is to serve. A summary description of the coaching relationship is that the coach:

- 1) Listens for the commitments of the coachee,
- 2) Observes action, and
- 3) Interacts with the coachee until the actions and the commitments are in harmony.

This harmony represents optimum performance. Beyond it, the coach works to assist the coachee to invent bigger possibilities, formulate new commitments, ‘complete’ past successes and failures, and sustain new competencies and results.

From our perspective, this is the ultimate ethic: *to be committed to the commitment of the other*. Many times this means being *more* committed to the other person’s commitment than he is. It means being a support *for* the other person when they forget or are struggling with all the ways human beings have for giving up, or rationalizing away possibility, or avoiding being uncomfortable. It means giving the person absolute choice, while at the same time having compassion for the difficulty of reinventing oneself consistent with a new commitment. A coach never needs to use force if she is clear within herself and with the coachee that choice and commitment rest with those being coached. It is the coach’s authentic commitment to those she coaches that becomes the context for breakthroughs and unprecedented action.

No human being can observe himself or herself in action. This is why virtually all professional athletes and top performers always maintain relationships with a coach. In “Coaching and the Art of Management”, coaching is described as a dyad—it cannot occur except in relationship with another. It is in the relationship between the coach and the coachee that the results are created, even though the action that manifests the results of the coaching is the responsibility of the coachee. The coach is not a critic of the player: she observes what the player cannot observe for himself.

### **Implications for Coaches and Coachees**

In this article, we have described our approach to coaching as a means to accomplish unprecedented results and an associated code of ethics to guide both practicing coaches and their clients. What happens with this is up to you; however, we would like to leave you with some specific possibilities to ponder.

#### **For professional coaches:**

- Consider drafting your personal code of ethics, using this article as a starting point. Once you are satisfied with your own list, share it with those who can assist in testing the congruence between your words and action.
- Review your own ethical performance and solicit feedback from clients on how you stack up. Better still, ask a neutral party to review your adherence to the ethical standards you profess.
- Ask what your commitment is to the emerging profession of coaching. What will you do if you become aware of another ‘coach’ performing in ways that



are unethical? What would the remedy be if you slip up in your own performance?

- Do you have a coach? If not, how do you know if you are fit to coach others?

### For new or aspiring coaches:

- Explore with your colleagues and your coach the insights and questions that this article created for you.
- Use this article as a trigger to reflect on your readiness to pursue coaching as a serious commitment. Take time to write about coaching ethics in your journal over a period of several weeks and notice the recurring themes.
- Notice ethical behavior of other professionals. What does it look like? How might coaches learn and benefit from the experience of others?

### For coaches:

- What are the key messages you got from reading this article? What possibilities does it offer?
- If you are considering working with a coach, make your own list of questions and requests to cover as you begin the relationship. If you already have a coach, check to see if there are areas that need to be addressed.
- Who would you need to be to elicit the best ethical behavior on the part of your coach? Are there things you could do or not do that would influence the ethical behavior of others?

Thank you all for exploring coaching and ethics with us.

***“From our perspective, this is the ultimate ethic: to be committed to the commitment of the other. Many times this means being more committed to the other person’s commitment than he is. It means being a support for the other person when they forget or are struggling with all the ways human beings have for giving up, or rationalizing away possibility, or avoiding being uncomfortable. It means giving the person absolute choice, while at the same time having compassion for the difficulty of reinventing oneself consistent with a new commitment.”***