

Ethics as critical practice

What do we do when the codes that we have relied on, that are embedded in coaching stance or coaching models, come into conflict with our professional wisdom and or our personal beliefs of what is right or wrong? And our sense of the limitations imposed on coaching by what organisations or clients expect?

In asking these questions I am moving us from the traditional way of thinking about ethics to what is described as ***ethics as a critical practice**. When we question the basis of the ethical or moral codes we follow or take for granted in the form of accepted **practices** rather than as overt codes of conduct.

For example, the coaching stance of neutrally, holding a non-judgemental, non-directive space for our clients – we all understand the power or this, but when and where do we feel the limitations?

Hetty Einzig in ‘The future of coaching: vision leadership and responsibility in a transforming world’, published in 2017 asks:

“Is it tenable to persist in the traditional coaching stance of moral neutrality – the Switzerland of the helping professionals? We know in truth, there is no such thing -we all relate to the world through the prism of our own unconscious beliefs.

While clearly the coach’s principle offering is to listen, to reflect, to provide a thinking space, to what degree should a coach be able to form and articulate a coherent philosophy, are we alive to the voice of our own conscience, and what does it say to us? And to what degree should the coach be transparent or even overt about their values base, in the way they might outline their theoretical training to clients, and if not, what right does the coach have to call foul -based on what? These are the kinds of questions I believe coaching is facing today.”

What role should coaching have in the big ethical debates of our time in relation to gender, race, equality, disability rights, climate emergency etc?

Critical reflection through co-coaching practice

I put this question to the 9 coaches who attended AC CCF event I facilitated. The discussion amongst the 10 coaches present generated other questions:

- What do we risk losing if we go too far down this road?
- What are the limits of working explicitly with your values as a coach?
- When we talk about values are, we referring to the personal values of the coach or the practical wisdom and values inherent in the coaching approach and tools used by the coach in service of their clients and the basis upon which we promote our services and contract with clients and sponsors of coaching in organisations?
- When challenging the values of a client how much weight does our system of values carry against theirs?
- As Hetty Einzig puts it, on what basis do we call foul?

Our exploration of coach neutrality within the context of one-to-one client work took up the next phase of the session.

In our co-coaching practice groups, we formed triads with the observer focusing on how the coach's values informed the coaching approach and what impact this had on the coachee. Both coach and coachee shared their observations too.

I played the role of coachee in my practice group and the discussion was fascinating. Our aim was to uncover the moral compass, values and practical coaching wisdom unpinning the coaching process being observed.

Neutrality may be the wrong word

When my coach fed back her self-observations, she described the techniques she used, when we probed further she talked about the underpinning philosophy drawn from the work of psychologist Hans Eysenck and made explicit that what she was valuing was my essential wholeness and my sense of agency. Her reading of the term 'neutrality' was the importance for her of standing back from my issue, to avoid being drawn into it. My reading of this well-established core principle of person-centred coaching is that it is not a moral or values free space. This neutrality is itself an expression of consciously held values that intuitively informs the work of this coach. Perhaps, neutrality is not the right word to describe what is happening here. In the coach's stance we have an embodiment of her ethical, relational values.

My experience of this as her coachee was one of feeling validated, safely held in this space and empowered to look at a situation that was overwhelming me, with some objectivity myself, using methods evoked by the coach. I did experience a feeling of liberation. I did not feel a conflict between her person-centred approach and my more systemic lens. The problem I shared was rooted in my lived experience as a black woman, my coach was a person racialised as white. She did not need to have experienced what I was experiencing to help me shine a light on it. Her ability to listen without judging created space for me. I was able first to acknowledge the presence of shame in my issue and then by giving it a shape, weight and colour in response to her question- locate it as belonging not to me, but to the way in which I

had/was internalising a racialised view of myself – a classic example of how internalised oppression shows up in individual psychological states.

That of course does not complete the exploration of neutrality. Because while a coach is free in her face-to-face work to ‘control’ the space, to create the conditions for holding this space for her client, to operate freely in line with her values and moral compass, what about coaching in organisations where there may be multiple stakeholder interests to manage or when we are coaching clients whose views and attitudes are not aligned with ours.

Two examples from recent conversations with coaches:

1. A client in the closing stages of a session makes an overtly anti-Irish racist remark. As an anti-racist how does he respond?
2. A coach is unsure how to contract with a sponsoring organisation for her work with three male coachees who are being groomed for succession to partnership in a company dominated at the top by males. They have tried in the past to recruit females but failed to retain women on the leadership track. As a coach commissioned to work with these future leaders individually can she do what she feels would be more useful and seek to work more systemically with them as a group in the interests of a more sustainable future for the company that embraces diversity?

If in either of these cases the coach remains silent and does not offer some challenge or resistance, then we have collusion. Ethics as critical practice would move the coach to open up the unspoken.

“Ethics as critical practice is disruptive.” Derrida

Looking at our practice from the perspectives of the values embedded in them was disruptive, making the unconscious, conscious.

Contracting

I will end this reflection with my current thoughts about the questions raised:

Does a coach give up all agency in the practice of holding a safe space for the client? Surely this space cannot be held if the coach does not also feel safe, present and validated in the process. Coaching is a co-creative process, there needs to be equality for the relations of power to be free to flow in both directions. Coaches manage the power dynamics between them and their client through the process we

call contracting, both psychological contracting and procedural contracting. Both forms are ongoing and continuous in any healthy coaching relationship.

This also means being proactive before we begin work about the values and moral compass that guides our work. For example, we contract as coaches committed to anti-racism, quality, equity, inclusion, and diversity. We establish our responsibility to share, without compromising confidentiality, any intelligence we glean through our work about organisational culture with those who commission us into the organisation. We share the same with individual clients we contract with, this gives us permission, while not removing the discomfort, to challenge our client when the need arises.

Assuming we are successful in securing the work on that basis, we need to be brave enough to hold that ground with clients who may be resistant, or avoidant or unaware, or hostile and being willing to walk away from work that does not help us to hold our integrity. This is where neutrality in the classical sense, is tantamount to complicity with oppressive and unsustainable practices. To blindly focus our work, in the spirit of performativity, on the bottom line (our own as well and the companies we work with) without due consideration of wider social and ecological impacts or consequences. It is my view that it will prove worth our while to put a stake in the ground for what is right over what may seem expedient. There is a thirst for integrity in the world.

On the other side of this it would seem equally damaging to hold coaching hostage to our personal campaigning zeal. I have experience from my own personal history of political activism of how necessary to be vigilant because 'purpose' can so easily ossify into orthodoxy, thus becoming a new form of blindness or despotism.

As coaching evolves into becoming a more openly values driven space there is a fine line to tread. Remaining critically aware, open, and connected to the real work (not just the theoretical) in service of healthy social relationship and use of power is crucial to retaining balance.

However, this is premised on reflections of work carried out by credentialed coaches, who belong to professional bodies and undergo supervision. There is a whole coaching industry that remains unregulated, much practice that is shallow, uncritical, promiscuous, mercenary or simply naïve. All of which risks doing harm.

I would love to hear your take on these questions.

Links & References

*Ethics as Critical Practice: The "Pentagon Papers", Deciding Responsibility, Truth Telling, and the unsettling of Organizational Morality, by Weiskopt & Willmott, 2013.

<http://oss.sagepub.com/content/34/4/469>

The future of coaching: vision leadership and responsibility in a transforming world, Einzig, 2017.

[The Future of Coaching Podcast with Hetty Einzig & Naomi Ward.](#)

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