

Coaching Ethics¹

Ioanna Lordanou and Rachel Hawley

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Introduction

Coaching is a developmental intervention based on conversations that foster curiosity and courage, through mutual respect leading to new understandings and the opportunity to flourish. Done well, it offers individuals a safe space to think, reflect, and take responsibility for the actions that will help them develop and achieve their intended goals. In this developmental process, the coach's role is pivotal. Indeed, it is the coach's ability to listen attentively, to ask good, reflection-provoking questions, and facilitate a structured discussion that enables the client to fully consider their options, to find curiosity and courage, and take responsibility for their ensuing actions. An effective coach, however, is not only a skilled practitioner but an ethical practitioner; someone who consciously places their values and ethics to the forefront – rather than the background – of their professional practice, in their effort to constantly develop and maintain a consciously active ethical mind-set for the benefit of their practice, their clients, and the coaching profession, as a whole.

The Nature of Ethics in Coaching

During the course of their coaching practice, from novice to expert, every coach is required to make decisions, which hold ethical implications. Such decisions involve issues on what is morally right or wrong, ranging from the mundane to the gravely serious. Accepting a dinner invitation from a client with whom we have developed a cordial and trusting relationship, or breaking confidentiality when a client shows symptoms of self-harm, are just two examples of such ethical considerations that can test one's convictions of what actions are morally justifiable, or unjustifiable. Ethics, therefore, is an integral aspect of coaching, since it determines a coach's decisions and actions, as dictated by their values and beliefs. As De Jong (2010) aptly put it, ethics is the practice that determines what is good or bad, right or wrong. Accordingly, ethics dictate 'actual rules, codes, and principles of conduct' (Beckett, Maynard, and Jordan, 2017: 16).

Historically, the concept and practice of ethics can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates (c. 470-399 BC), Plato (c. 428-c. 348 BC), and Aristotle (384-322 BC). For Socrates, moderation was a key determinant of ethical behaviour, while Plato prioritised the denial of bodily pleasure, advocating that happiness (eudaimonia) could be achieved by living a life of virtue (arete). Aristotle also advocated pursuing a life of virtue but contrary to Plato, who considered knowing what is good (i.e. wisdom) to be sufficient to achieve happiness, he claimed that knowing what is good is inadequate without practising good (Crisp, 2013). These early scholastic views on what is morally right or wrong paved the way for the development of moral philosophy, with three prevailing branches: deontological ethics, stemming from the doctrines of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who situated reason at the core of morality, placing emphasis on one's sense of duty and obligation; utilitarian ethics,

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premised in the writings of David Hume (1711-1776), Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), and John Stuart Mill (1806-73), who emphasised the maximization of utility for the benefit of society; and virtue ethics, which dictate that the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of an action is determined by the virtues that enable an individual to grow and develop (see, for instance, Hursthouse, 1999).

An important aspect of moral philosophy is professional ethics. Professional ethics is a rapidly developing discipline informed by several strands of social sciences and the law. Ethical practice is manifest in a set of values that prioritise an ethical professional conduct, constituting 'an integral part of professional identity' (Bond, 2015: 47). The most elaborately developed type of professional ethics are medical ethics, primarily due to the long history and ethos of the discipline of medicine that necessitated the combination of ethical and technical issues in the training and practice of physicians (see Dunn, 2018). Medical ethics have significantly influenced the development of ethical standards in other relevant 'helping' professions, such as counselling and psychotherapy (Bond, 2015), creating a consensus of morally acceptable behaviour that transcends professional activities and encompasses all aspects of human interactions (Brennan and Wildflower, 2018).

From a practical perspective, in coaching, ethical principles determine the virtue of helping clients, focusing on their needs and interests, honouring trust and confidentiality, and promoting individual autonomy (de Jong, 2006). Yet, unlike other relevant 'helping' professions, such as counselling and psychotherapy, social work, nursing, and even medicine, which are subjected to intense regulatory scrutiny, coaching continues to remain largely unregulated. As a result, ethical standards of professional practice are primarily self-imposed and no coach is obliged to comply with any specific codes of ethics, unless they wish to do so. Accordingly, as Jonathan Passmore (2009: 8) aptly explained,

Most coaches, in most cases, are 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.

To be sure of building an ethical coaching practice, 'a few solid principles' are inadequate to safeguard ethical standards, especially considering the widely unregulated landscape in coaching. It is due to lack of regulation that codes of ethics have been deemed crucial for the discipline of coaching (Iordanou, Hawley, and Iordanou, 2017; Brennan and Wildflower, 2018). Generally speaking, codes of ethics provide a widely acknowledged set of guidelines against which coaches and clients can measure a coach's performance and evaluate their practice for continuous development and improvement. Moreover, as coaching is still not universally recognized as a legitimate, stand-alone profession, codes of ethics allow it to move away from 'pseudo-credentialising mills' Grant and Cavanagh (2004: 2). Indeed, in 2008 the Global Convention on Coaching (GCC), a symposium of coaching scholars and practitioners from around 40 countries, prioritised the issue of ethics as of paramount significance to the legitimisation and preservation of the coaching profession. It is for the above reasons that several professional coaching bodies have produced their own codes of ethical practice which coaches seek to be accredited by them must adopt (Iordanou et al., 2017; Brennan and Wildflower, 2018).

It is important to note here that while the various professional coaching bodies operate independently from each other, their 'codes of ethics' or 'codes of conduct' bear several similarities. A useful list of the primary ethical priorities and responsibilities of there major professional coaching associations (the International Coaches Federation [ICF], the European Mentoring and Coaching Council [EMCC], and the Association for Coaching [AC]) has been compiled by Ives and Cox (2014). Nevertheless, some caution needs to be exercised when using professional associations' codes of ethics to base our ethical decisions on. This is because, while codes of ethics can provide some excellent guidance on building an ethical coaching practice, paradoxically, they can be too complex to be followed in detail and too simplistic to offer solutions to inherently complicated issues coaches might face in their practice.

Accordingly, while prescribed codes of ethics can confer some 'moral shortcuts for ethical behaviour', they should not be used in isolation, without the input of conscious and critical reflection on one's beliefs, assumptions, behaviours and actions (Iordanou et al., 2017, p. 177).

Why Understanding Personal and Professional Values Matters (1 173)

In coaching, it is important to develop understanding of how we make choices and take decisions in our practice (Law et al, 2007: 196). We describe this as a moral compass to guide us (Iordanou et al., 2017). Our values, our technical knowledge, and our coaching experience, can take the form of such a compass to guide our coaching practice. However, such characteristics, are rarely challenged and questioned (Bolton, 2001: 22). We share the perspective held by Professor David Clutterbuck, that 'unethical and illegal behaviour in organisations rarely happens because people, as individuals or a group of people set out to do wrong. Rather it starts with small breeches and gradually grows in scope and scale'. Therefore, to become a truly ethical as a coach, it is first necessary for us to step outside of our self; to be prepared to share our experiences with others, and to challenge our assumptions and beliefs (Iordanou et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, we suggest that engaging in the development of an ethical coaching practice stimulates a kind of critical self-dialogue, which is necessary to understand our personal and professional values, within our coaching context, with greater awareness.

Words such as 'good', 'bad', 'right', and 'wrong', which are often used when we discuss one's coaching practice, frame our understanding of coaching ethics (Iordanou et al., 2017). A variety of terms are used interchangeably, sometimes with little or no agreement, often concerning values and ethics. We view ethical coaching practice as a 'way of being' (van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p. 150), a term 'way of being' was first introduced by the influential humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, who was the founder of the person-centred approach. His approach was premised on two fundamental beliefs: that people are their own best experts; and that people have the ability to realise their full potential (Rogers, 1980). Many coaches consider Rogers' writing on person-centred approaches, the cornerstone of the coaching practice. (Thomson, 2009, 139, 151-60). Despite the passing of time, this still influences the way coaches see and work with clients across professional coaching contexts.

The investment of time, to develop understanding of our personal and professional values can help to both identify, and address, ethical issues and moments of choices. Consistent with Van Nieuwerburgh (2014), our focus is on making the 'right' decisions during coaching conversations. As a coach, whether new or seasoned, it is inevitable that you will be faced with 'ethical moments of choice'. It is important to be able to recognise these moments by developing the kind of critical consciousness that grows from understanding 'self' and our personal values. Just as Van Nieuwerburgh (2014) and de Jong (2010), we are drawn to the term 'ethical choice' as an alternative term to that of 'ethical dilemma'. We use this because 'dilemma' may bring a negative feeling to critically important moments in the coaching conversation. In contrast, the term 'ethical moment' shifts this perspective. By virtue, framing ethical moments in this way, helps us to focus on those moments in the conversation when the coach is faced with an ethical issue or question and needs to make the best choices in order to respond appropriately and ethically.

Understanding our values requires curiosity, courage and commitment. It is an on-going journey of discovery and learning. So often we think we know our story well, yet as we explore our personal and professional values more closely, we tend to discover new insights, gaining greater awareness of how our values influence our coaching practice (Iordanou et al., 2017). Indeed, the way in which coaching practice, is premised on conversation and discourse in order to construct meaning (Alred et al 1998), is the cornerstone for the insights and learning that is cultivated within the coaching practice. This approach to learning is a stark contrast to the dominant linear learning that has been imposed by the

intellectual movements of the last two hundred years (Garvey and Williamson 2002). We consider the learning that is generated in coaching to be the product of interaction with others; thus non-linear. Against this backdrop, our learning about our values can be seen as ‘socially constructed, so that we create rather than discover ourselves’ (Alred et al 1998, p. 14).

Understanding your professional values as a coach: Understanding our values moves beyond our personal values, to consider our professional values as a coach. Each have a part to play. As we have observed values are the bedrock of ethical decision-making. They shape everything we do, not only in the coaching relationship but beyond, in our day-to-day lives. Indeed, they underpin human agency. Similarly, in our coaching practice, every decision we make is influenced – if not dictated – by our values and beliefs. Critically, the question is, are we consciously aware of them, or not? When we enter a coaching session as the coach, we bring a particular attitude – our attitudes, are premised on our beliefs. In essence, our attitude is the ‘mental filter through which we experience the world’ (Keller, 3007, p. 12) and it is bound to influence the coaching relationship and the ethical issues that emerge within it. Values and attitudes sit hand-in-hand.

Understanding coaching in context: Our personal and professional values are influenced by the context in which we choose to practice. Therefore, context is a key factor for developing an ethical coaching practice. Organisational contexts, values and cultures are diverse. So too is the coaching practice. Essentially, the role of context, ‘governs coaching practice changes along with our values and principles’, underpin our coaching. Ultimately our understanding of context, has the potential to foster coherence of disparity between our personal and professional values.’ Coaching in UK healthcare is congruent with a shift away from ‘doing to’ people to ‘doing with’ people providing an important role for coaches in building more collaborative relationships in healthcare. (Iordanou et al., 2017). Understanding context is crucial for ethical coaching. Once we are clear about the nuances, we will become able to be more ethical. Adopting a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach does not achieve the best results, nor does it guarantee high ethical standards. Rather, as we become more seasoned in our coaching practice, it is as tough we develop a tool-box that, over time, we fill with theories, knowledge, models and our learning from experience. Navigating ethical issues commands that we select the best combination of tools according to the coaching context.

Practising reflectively and reflexively: Coaching offers an opportunity for learning through conversation. Engaging in narrative expression can be enriched in a variety of ways; spoken, written and visual, which can help us “to discover hidden meaning and become more adventurous” as we explore our values (Iordanou., 2017: 29). Establishing a commitment to reflective practices enables us to critically assess our reaction to situations, words and actions. In consequence, this allows us to gain a richer understanding of our personal and professional values. When we start to critically reflect back on our reactions in the coaching relationship – rather than simply consciously acknowledging such reaction – we reach a tipping point. This is where the process of reflexivity begins. This is not a linear process; rather the act of reflection and reflexive practice ebbs and flows. The challenge lies in learning to recognise the difference between the two processes. In essence, reflexivity is in depth reflection on our reflection. This, in consequence, allows us to enhance our ethical maturity.

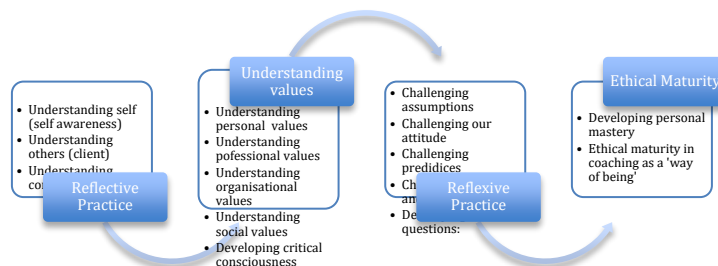


Figure 1: The reflexivity chain for ethical coaching (Iordanou, Hawley and Iordanou 2017)

Ethical coaches need to have great insight into their own thinking processes in relation to their values and beliefs as well as the context of the coaching interactions. We encourage the view that understanding personal and professional values is 'a creative adventure, right through the glass to the other side of the silvering' (Bolton 2014: 116). There is no single theory that accounts for the entire journey of values and ethics in coaching. Rather, this is a complex artistry (Iordanou et al., 2017). Practising coaching reflectively and reflexively, leads to new insights; of self, of others and of the coaching context. The continuum for reflective-reflexive coaching harnesses the potential for ethical practice (Iordanou et al., 2017).

Navigating ethical issues across professional contexts

Coaching ethically across diverse contexts is complex. So, what do we mean by 'context'? The term context refers primarily to the professional settings in which coaching takes place, such as, healthcare, education, sports and business. To explore ethical issues across professional contexts more closely, it is important to extend this view, to include what Cox et al. (2014) call applied contexts or genres. Applied contexts, or genres of coaching, are particular styles of coaching that can be used in a variety of professional settings, such as performance coaching, career coaching, life coaching, etc. Despite the historical narrative in the coaching literature, the context in which you coach will determine your perception(s) of the coaching practice; the values and beliefs you bring into your coaching, and the ethical issues that may arise in your coaching relationships. Therefore, in order to understand values and ethics in coaching, it is first essential that we seek to appreciate the context in which we coach (Iordanou et al., 2017).

Earlier enquiry into navigating ethical issues across professional contexts showed that to help you reflect on the significance of having a clear understanding of the diverse coaching contexts, in the following sections we will ask you three important questions that carry ethical implications: who are you when you coach? Where are you when you coach? And how do you coach? (Iordanou et al., 2017). Our hope is to illuminate that, while coaches often navigate from one specific role or context to another, it is important to be aware of the nuances of these variations. Being aware of such differences makes us more able to identify and deal with the diversity in ethical issues that arise in our day-to-day practice.

Developing curiosity, about types, and varieties, of coaching identity can enrich our understanding of our own professional identity as a coach. Importantly, we become more aware of the influences on our identity, and thus of how our coaching identity is constructed and sustained. When we each enter our coaching practice, we bringing our earlier lived experiences is inevitable. Each lived experience, has the power to impact on how we understand, construct and sustain our coaching identity and consequently frames our stance on ethics in our practice. We use our own experiences as an example here to explain this further. As authors, we began the shared experience of writing from our unique perspectives and diverse professional backgrounds; Rachel with a background in UK healthcare and Ioanna as an academic. It is our shared commitment to coaching, which fosters an on-going connection. We recognise that our professional backgrounds influence our perspectives on our writing and our coaching practice in important ways, which we cannot ignore (Iordanou et al., 2017).

Navigating ethical issues across professional contexts, is dependent on addressing the boundaries of where coaching starts and stops. So how might we consider the ethical issues that arise in relation to working across professional context and, therefore, managing professional boundaries? If, for example, you are a practising coach with a background in counselling or nursing, are these roles competing or complementary? Are there any ethical issues that may arise from practising coaching with a distinct professional background?

The three key principles, which we introduced earlier in this chapter the foundation for enabling a more ethical practice for coaching across professional contexts. Iordanou et al (2017) encourage that following the following steps leads us to greater critical consciousness in a number of ways; firstly, 'who' we are in the relationship (understanding self, personal and professional values) and secondly 'where' we coach (understanding professional contexts and the nuances of ethical issues) means we become more able to navigate ethical issues, across professional contexts with competence and confidence. As we become more able to align these three dimensions of ethical practice, see values and ethics in our coaching more clearly. Engaging in a critical self-dialogue around the questions of who we are when we coach; where we are when we coach; and how we coach, we hope, illuminates the implications for ethical practice. Embedding the questions, we pose around - why the 'who', where, and how are important ethical reflections that help to raise our awareness about ethical coaching to hold this into our consciousness. Once we are clear about the nuances, we will become able to be more ethical.

The very nature of coaching across diverse professional context is complex. The complexity of coaching contexts will always hold with it ethical implications. Navigating ethical issues requires us to select the best combination of tools according to the coaching context; theories, knowledge, models and our learning from experience. When we ask of ourselves, so we cultivate understanding; – Who we are in the relationship – Where we coach and why – and how we coach – we move from the blurriness of ethical issues that we first described at the beginning of this chapter. Instead we become more akin to holding a kaleidoscope, just as we recall from childhood days (Iordanou et al., 2017). To be able to see clearly it is therefore important to understand our personal and professional values. The questions of; 'who', 'where' and 'how' are central to our writing and our practice. Ethical issues will always be present in coaching practice. The art navigating ethical issues across professional contexts rests in developing and maintaining an ethical coaching practice; you are not putting together a puzzle you already know; you're constructing a picture that takes a shape as you collect and examine the parts (Bogdan and Biklen 2006: 6).

Developing and Maintaining an Ethical Coaching Practice

'A strong coach, in my view, is one "who knows what he or she doesn't know" and has a strong enough ego to admit it'. This is the apt view expressed by Beverly Brookes (2001: 99), who went on to argue that an ethical coach is not only conscious of their knowledge and expertise but, importantly, are acutely aware of the limits of their knowledge, skills, and competence and, thus, the need to refer their clients to a different authority if they deem their competence insufficient to support their clients' needs (Brooks, 2001).

Competence features prominently in the codes of ethics of all major professional coaching bodies. The newly launched, second version of the Global Code of Ethics (2018), co-signed by five leading coaching and mentoring associations (AC, Association for Professional Executive Coaches and Supervisors, Associazione Italiana Coach Professionisti, EMCC, and Mentoring Institute at the University of New Mexico) states that

Members will have the qualifications, skills and experience appropriate to meet the needs of the client and will operate within the limits of their competence. Members should refer the client to a more experienced or suitably qualified practising member where appropriate.

Being reflexive of one's competence as a coach is an important step to developing and maintaining an ethical coaching practice. This includes evaluating one's knowledge and expertise in order to identify any intellectual and practical gaps that call for further training and development. Accordingly, some of the key steps coaches can take to ensure they develop and maintain an ethical coaching practice are

education and training, continuing professional development; and regular supervision (Iordanou et al., 2017: esp. 70-77).

Coach education and training: Currently there are no specific guidelines as to what constitutes appropriate coach education and training, and, accordingly, coaches enter the profession with a great diversity of educational and professional backgrounds. This ranges from education and management to counselling and psychotherapy, to name just a few (Bluckert, 2004; Bachkirova et al., 2018: xxxii-xxxiv). Moreover, while professional or university-based coaching programmes are proliferating (Gannon and Myers), their evaluation is lagging behind (Devine, Meyers, and Houssemand, 2013). While it is important to celebrate the variety and diversity of knowledge and expertise that coaches bring into the discipline of coaching, it is also prudent to be aware of the significance of being reflexive about our constantly increasing training and development needs in order to practise consciously in a discipline that has a gradually developing body of knowledge (Iordanou et al. 2017). Accordingly, and as coaching, as a discipline, is in constant need of a shared body of applied knowledge (Grant and Cavanagh, 2004: 3), the starting point should be addressing the question of what constitutes reliable and effective coach training and education that can enable an ethical coaching practice (Iordanou et al., 2017).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD): Following from the above, developing and maintaining an ethical coaching practice entails engaging with a range of learning activities, on a regular basis, with the purpose of constantly updating one's professional knowledge base and, by extension, expertise. Within the discipline of coaching, such activities include reading empirically and theoretically grounded research published in specialist coaching journals; participating in or conducting relevant research; attending and participating in workshops, conferences, and other relevant scientific meetings related to coaching; pursuing further coaching qualifications; attending peer-coaching and/or peer-mentoring initiatives; and, of course, pursuing regular supervision (Iordanou et al., 2017).

Regular Supervision: Actively engaged in what is termed a helping profession, aside from relevant knowledge and expertise, coaches need to be equipped with the resilience to support their clients in their developmental needs and endeavours. While, at times, this can be a straightforward process, at other times, emotionally challenging ethical dilemmas can lead to considerable amounts of stress and even burnout. Consequently, the coaches have a moral responsibility to themselves, their clients, and the coaching profession, as a whole, to protect their wellbeing and, by extension, that of their clients and the wider system in which they operate. Hence the significance of regular coaching supervision.

Within the sphere of coaching, supervision is defined as 'the process by which a coach with the help of a supervisor can attend to understanding better both the client system and themselves as part of the client-coach system, and, by so doing, transform their work and develop their craft' (Hawkins and Smith, 2006: 12). According to relevant literature, the three most prominent functions of supervision are: developmental, that is, to develop and enhance coaching skills and capabilities; resourcing, in order to safeguard the wellbeing of the coach and, by extension, the discipline of coaching; and qualitative, with an emphasis on maintaining the quality of coaching, as well as adhering to ethical standards (Hawkins and Smith, 2006). In other words, supervision provides a safe space for the coach to reflect on their practice and relationship with their clients and everyone directly or indirectly involved with the coaching process. Importantly, this understanding allows coaches to articulate and communicate these attributes more effectively to clients, sponsors, and any relevant stakeholders (Hawkins, 2014, Iordanou et al., 2017).

While supervision is mandatory in neighbouring helping professions, such as counselling and psychotherapy (Bond, 2015), within the sphere of coaching it is still optional. It is, to be sure, positive that the debate over the significance of compulsory supervision has been steadily picking up steam over the past decade (Hawkins and Smith 2006; Bachkirova, Jackson, and Clutterbuck, 2011; Passmore 2011; de Haan, 2012; Hawkins, 2018). Still, regular supervision is an indispensable aspect

of developing and maintaining an ethical coaching practice and, in consequence, this raises the question of why coaching supervision has not been made compulsory as yet. In the final analysis, considering the complexity of the coach's work, involving working through individual, interpersonal, and organisational issues, the fundamentality of supervision lies in its instrumental role in supporting the well-being of the coach which, in consequence, benefits and safeguards the coachee (Pelham, 2016: 124).

Conclusion

A good coach is an ethical coach. This does not imply that there are bad coaches lacking in moral principles, rather, this means that it takes constant and conscious effort to hold values and ethics at the forefront of the coaching practice continuously. The following are some of the basic steps coaches seeking to develop and foster an ethical coaching practice can take:

- Wilfully strive to explore and reflect on the personal and professional values that undergird their practice, being particularly reflexive of instances when these might clash. In this process, coaches can reflect on questions such as who we are in the coaching relationship? where (in what institutional context) do we coach? And how (what theories and models we use) do we coach?
- Develop conscious awareness of organisational principles and values that, for better or worse, might influence or interfere with the coaching offered in wider organisational or institutional contexts.
- Enhance their awareness of skills and capabilities needed in order to coach, recognising the limitations and boundaries of their professional expertise.
- Make active use of the array of opportunities that foster the development of an ethical coaching practice, for the benefit of the coach, the client, any other stakeholders involved in the coaching process, as well as the coaching discipline as a whole. Such activities include education and training, continuing professional development, and regular supervision.
- Consider and reflect upon their ethical responsibility, not only to our clients, but to the wider social system we make part of, as a whole.
- Focus not only on solving ethical issues but, also, on creating those conditions and conversations that will bring them to the surface.

Ultimately, ethical coaching entails fostering a professional coaching culture that prioritises a shared understanding of ethical standards, regardless of prescribed recipes for best practice. Developing and maintaining a common ethical mind-set that is geared towards social and collective requirements is vital (Iordanou et al., 2017). In practice, this means capitalising on the ethical strategies we already have in place: clear contracting; conscious reflection and reflexivity through critical enquiry; regular supervision; continuing professional development; and, importantly, open and shared communication between colleagues and relevant shareholders, even inviting the input of clients. These are just some of the strategies that enable us to develop and maintain a conscious (rather than idealistic) ethical coaching practice – creating a positive professional culture that is driven by integrity and commitment to embrace the complexities of contemporary life in an era of ongoing change (Iordanou et al., 2017). Being an effective coach is a journey of discovery; understanding our values and ethics holds the key to navigating this complex landscape.

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