
COMPLEX SITUATIONS IN COACHING: A CRITICAL CASE-BASED APPROACH

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CHAPTER 9: CODES IN COACHING

Case 18: Embracing One's Freedom

Flora was working as a sub-contractor for a company that she knew well, for which she had mostly provided training. But this time, she'd been hired for a coaching assignment. This situation caused two issues for her. First, because she was in a situation of subordination with this company, she had to follow the coaching process, methods and tools that they had sold and were providing to her. This included using a certain coaching model (based on behavioral and cognitive theories). She was familiar with this method because she'd used it in training, but applying it to coaching constrained her, making it difficult for her to determine her own "zone of freedom."

Secondly, Flora progressively worried that her coachee might be the victim of mistreatment by his boss. She told herself, "This guy might be in a situation...I will not say it's active harassment, but it seems like his boss doesn't really trust him and is progressively pushing him aside. And my coachee is totally blind to what's taking place."

Flora felt very much at ease because of what she called "her principle of neutrality." She believed that there were two major schools of thought: neutral coaches and engaged coaches. Given her psychoanalytical background, she believed in neutrality. At that time, her philosophy was to base her intervention on what the client brought to the coaching. In this situation, if she were to speak up, she would do something that departed from what her coachee had told her. Her dilemma was the following: "Should I warn my coachee of a worrisome situation, between him and his manager, when he isn't asking me to work on that? Who am I to 'shake the tree,' taking on this issue over those agreed upon in the contract?" Indeed, this action was totally outside the scope of the predefined contract. Flora continued, "I feel guilty using time paid for by the organization to work on something they didn't ask me to...but I realized the barn was on fire while we were enjoying a cup of tea!"

Reflexive questions

- How do you define your coaching philosophy?
- In forming your coaching intervention, how much comes from you? From the paying organization or the subcontracting company? From the coachee?
- Under what circumstances might you share your analysis with the coachee?

Flora dealt with the situation by talking to her supervisor. “He first comforted me in my analysis of the situation, saying that given all the elements I had gathered, I could legitimately conclude that the coachee might be the victim of moral harassment. Second, he helped me take distance from the situation and avoid falling into the deontological trap that was threatening me.” The supervisor explained to Flora that while neutrality was indeed important and represented “a certain commitment, there was a higher commitment.” In this situation, given her psychological background, she was able to make an informed analysis, draw some conclusions about the coachee’s wellbeing, and speak up. Today, she feels that in a similar situation, she would not be so skittish. She would speak up more easily and “embrace [her] freedom.” “But,” as she said, “this is an ethical choice, not to explicitly follow the code of conduct – and the expected neutrality. And embracing one’s freedom is scary.”

Reflexive questions

- Like Flora, have you ever experienced a “superior commitment” or “duty alert”? If so, what brought you there?
- Have you ever voiced your concerns or analysis about a coaching situation to a supervisor or other party? If so, how and when?
- How do you understand Flora’s statement: “Embracing one’s freedom can be scary”?
- What factors might discourage you from voicing your concerns to your coachee, the organization, and/or other stakeholders? What factors might encourage you to do so?

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I found this case interesting on many levels. First of all, it is about the coach as a person, working on the self during coaching supervision, a topic that is close to my heart. Secondly, it touches on a fundamentally important philosophical issue concerning what coaching is for, something that I currently explore. It also clearly touches on psychological issues about human nature that we all hope to understand, at least to some degree, in our coaching work. On a personal level, it was also interesting to observe and moderate myself commenting on this case as I have a tendency to contradict “the obvious.”

It would be fair to say that there is much more to this case than this brief account makes available to us, and it is possible that some points which I will be raising could have been sufficiently considered by both Flora and her supervisor but were left unaddressed here. Nevertheless, this is a commentary on what seems to be missing for me in this case rather than on what has been described.

Being a coaching supervisor, my particular concern is about the quality of supervision on the case that Flora quite rightly brought to discuss. It is possible that Flora’s supervisor had good reasons for thinking that “embracing the freedom” was the most important developmental step for her, but I want to argue that staying doubtful, if not “skittish,” for a sufficient amount of time might be useful in these types of cases, probably more useful than “embracing one’s

freedom.” Cases such as these “ask to be explored” systemically, in light of the potential consequences for all parties involved.

In terms of these potential consequences, my first concern is whether sufficient attention has been paid to the client’s “blindness” to what Flora identifies as “moral harassment” and to what the client’s role is in relation to the matter. This “blindness” is an important element of the picture, but is not explored in this case. “Blindness” may indicate a self-deception for protection or a defence mechanism that a client uses in a situation that might need to remain as it is at that stage of life. “Revealing the truth” of the situation as it appears to the psychoanalytic coach may be the last thing the client needs, creating disequilibrium in his life when he may not be ready to confront that particular problem (Vaillant, 1992). Defenses may be about an important issue for the client that could indicate a developmental theme in its own right, which needs to be dealt with in an appropriately sensitive manner in order for the client to be able “to see more” (Fingarette, 2000; Bachkirova, 2016).

Another more serious concern is with the assumption that Flora makes that her freedom to “reveal the truth” may solve her client’s problem. Unfortunately, it takes much more than the coach “speaking up” for a client to be able to recognize manipulation or oppression, let alone to empower that individual to deal with this and to grow (as has been shown in an excellent study by Shoukry (2014) on coaching for emancipation). I am also concerned with how small the role of the client is in this dilemma for the coach. It is the coach who has “made an analysis” and decided on the focus of the process. This seems more like the practice of an expert social worker, who comes to assess the case rather than a coach who should intend to explore together with the client a complex situation that might be seen differently from different perspectives. I wonder what now remains for the client to do having been “rescued” (Newton and Napper, 2010) by the coach.

Now, about the coach. It might seem obvious to act according to one’s personal values. As I look at this case from the position of an educator and supervisor, a question that I want to ask is: what has Flora learned from this situation? I am afraid that “embracing one’s freedom” might be something of a limited outcome. The problem seems bigger and starts much earlier for Flora. I wonder if she understands that her freedom is restricted at many different points. At the point of becoming professional coaches we all sign up to following certain expectations. At the point of taking the contract with an organization we commit ourselves to a certain standard of conduct. If what is asked of us does not fit with our principles then contracting is the point at which we must exercise our freedom to walk away or challenge these expectations. If we have “a higher commitment” that overrides all others, it has to be part of our professional code of conduct and/or be identified through explicit discussion with the sponsor and clients.

Another important feature of this case seems to be about regaining the freedom from the code of “neutrality” that Flora has chosen according to her psychoanalytic background. I am not sure, however, that Flora was in any “deontological trap.” This code of neutrality was of Flora’s own choosing and not imposed by the rules and norms of this particular organization. I am also not sure in what way a division of coaching into “two major schools of thought” is particularly helpful. A lot would seem to hang on Flora’s subjective appraisal as to what would count as “engaged” and what would count as “neutral” coaching, and whether such categorical assertions are anything more than somewhat arbitrarily imposed statements of

preference. It is also not clear whether she realized “higher commitment” has now made her an “engaged” coach. Above all I am concerned that she calls not choosing to follow the code of conduct an ethical choice. Why does she need a code of conduct that does not fit with her ethics?

My personal view is that *value-neutral instrumentalism* (Bachkirova et al, 2017) is a philosophical position that creates more problems than it solves, not only in relation to the education and assessment of coaches as has been argued, but also in relation to assessment of ethical decisions in complex situations. According to this view (and what Flora might have meant by neutrality), coaching is seen as “a professional service provided to clients in order for them to achieve their goals, whatever these goals might be” (p. 36). If the coach is almost a value-neutral holder of useful tools professionally applied, there seems to be no place for ethical dilemmas in coaching practice. The alternative, as I see it, is not what is called in this case an “engaged school,” but *developmentalism*, in which development of the client is seen as both the means and the end of coaching. “According to this position coaching is a “meaningful dialogue in which new ideas, values and actions are conceived with an overarching aim of developing the overall capabilities of clients to engage with their environment” (Bachkirova et al, 2017, p. 36). This dialogue may happen in ways that are not specified at the start of the coaching process, thus requiring flexibility of approach with openness and ethical maturity on the part of the coach (Bachkirova, 2016b).

Going back to this particular case, Flora might benefit from understanding that “embracing one’s freedom” sounds very attractive, but it does not free her from the need to:

- create a coherent rationale for her model of coaching (the Why, What, and How of her approach) (Bachkirova et al, 2017)
- reflect on each situation considering as many perspectives and discourses as possible (e.g., Western, 2017)
- consider the effect of her decisions on the developmental process of the client (Bachkirova, 2011)
- explore her role as an instrument of coaching (Bachkirova, 2016b).

In this case, if “speaking up” means being open about her perception of the situation, there is nothing heroic about this, especially if she acknowledges that her inevitably “second hand” perception is limited and might be simply wrong. If “speaking up” is about “protecting the client” against this “evil boss” under the flag of “embracing her freedom,” then it may be merely seen as being little more than an act of self-aggrandizement on the part of the coach.

Finally, my most serious concern is about the quality of the supervision on offer and how easily the supervisor was able to “comfort” Flora for her analysis of the situation on the basis of the “three-times removed” perception of the situation. Although it is very important to support the coach at a time of serious concern, one of the most important forms of assistance that can be provided is to explore the various consequences of potential coaching interventions from as many angles as possible. Among these angles, exploring the potential for self-deception by the coach (Bachkirova, 2015, 2016a) and the employment of defense mechanisms by the client (Vaillant, 1992) may not only be effective in securing beneficial outcomes for the client, but may prove to be developmental also for the coach.

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