

The Coaching Profession Grows Up

Why ethical standards matter

By Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC

To become a recognized profession, coaching, like other professions, must have standards, definitions, ethical guidelines, ongoing research and credentialing. Beginning in the early 1990s, the coaching phenomenon intensified with the creation of several coach training schools and two major professional associations. In 1996, the Professional Coaches and Mentors Association (PCMA) merged with the International Coaching Federation (ICF), and the ICF led the way as the most recognized international association representing the coaching profession. Standards of practice, credentialing, and ethical guidelines were soon established.

In 2004, the ICF's regulatory committee wrote the following self-governance model:

The standards and structures built by the ICF over the past decade, which support the emergence of coaching as a valued profession, also provide a solid foundation for the self-governance of our profession. In addition, our rigorous adherence as professionals to these standards and practices provides the necessary assurance that the public is protected from potential harm. ICF's self-governance foundation is comprised of and depends upon each of the following standards and practices, supported by the efforts of the ICF Board, committees, global representatives, credentialed and member coaches.

Core Competencies that define the required skill set of a professional coach and establish the foundation for the professional credentialing examination and accreditation for coach training programs.

A Code of Ethics to which ICF Members and ICF Credentialed Coaches pledge commitment and accountability to standards of professional conduct.

Professional Oversight through an Ethical Conduct Review process for ICF Members and ICF Credentialed Coaches, which allows the public to report concerns and to be confident of objective investigation, follow-up, and disciplinary action.

Professional Coach Credentialing, entailing a stringent examination and review process through which coaches must demonstrate their skills, proficiency, and documented experience in application of coaching core competencies. Credentialing includes Continuing Coach Education requirements for periodic renewal of coaching credentials, to ensure continued professional growth and development.

Professional Coach Training Accreditation by which coach training programs submit to review and continuing oversight to demonstrate their commitment to the highest standards for curricula aligned with defined core competencies, faculty, structure, proficiency, and ethics to support excellence in the training of coaches.

Ongoing Self-Regulatory Oversight initiatives to track the needs and concerns of individual and organizational clients on an international basis, and to demonstrate an active commitment to meaningful professional self-governance.⁽¹⁾



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In addition to ethical guidelines, professional competencies, and certification, the coaching profession recently witnessed a tremendous surge of interest in academic research and graduate studies. This attention is a critical step in the further evolution of the profession, and such research and training are necessary for developing a field of knowledge, theoretical orientations and efficacy studies. Research on the effectiveness of and distinctions among skill sets, competencies, and standardization of education and training is tantamount to any profession finding its place of acceptance in the private and corporate culture.

The historical perspective reveals that professional coaching emerged from other major professions (e.g. psychology, counseling, consulting). These professions have written codes of ethics and professional standards. In addition, they typically are regulated by state licensing boards (at least in the United States) and other government mandates. These government regulations usually determine requirements for training, maintaining a license, and practice laws.

At this time, coaching is not regulated or monitored by a state agency or regulatory board. It is the current belief that the profession should monitor itself. However, some state mental-health regulatory boards think differently, as the following scenario demonstrates.

The Colorado case

In June 2001, the administrator of the Colorado Mental Health Board, Amos Martinez, wrote an opinion piece in

the board newsletter entitled “Coaching: Is This Psychotherapy?” In the article, Martinez contends that coaching, especially personal coaching, meets the very broad definition of psychotherapy in the state of Colorado. Because of that interpretation, word began to spread that coaches in Colorado had to register as unlicensed psychotherapists and follow the regulations in the state’s Mental Health Act that pertain to those individuals.

Immediately after reading that newsletter, Lloyd Thomas and I, both of us licensed psychologists and practicing coaches in Colorado, drove to Denver and met with Amos Martinez to discuss the work of professional coaching, the ICF, its standards of ethics, and so on. Although the meeting was cordial, nothing changed in the next several months. The rumor began to spread across the globe that Colorado was going after coaches, and that the profession was in danger of being lumped together with psychotherapy, a distinction most coaches were trying to clarify.

In 2003, a case against a Colorado coach brought this whole discussion and the legal issue to a head. An ICF master certified coach who lived and worked in Colorado (although all of her clients lived out of the state) was charged with practicing psychotherapy without a license by the Department of Regulatory Agencies in Colorado. Although the charge was dropped as frivolous, Colorado still demanded that the coach register as an unlicensed therapist, which she refused to do. She was forced to close her practice because she could not afford to hire an attorney to pursue the defense of her position.

That case led to a focused effort by the Colorado Coalition of Coaches to pursue changing the law, and the group hired a lobbyist to help with the effort. After 18 months of hard work by the Colorado Coalition, lobbyists, as well as grassroots support and donations by individual coaches, the International Coach Federation, the International Association of Coaches, the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, and the Association of Coach Training Organizations, the legislature agreed and approved an amendment to the Mental Health Act that exempted coaching from the legislature’s oversight.

All this is not to say that the coaching profession devalues standards and guidelines for professional behavior. In fact, some coaching associations (e.g. the ICF) have worked hard to delineate professional norms through ethics codes. Such standards have been formu-

lated, amended, tested, and applied within many coaching organizations during the field's evolution.

The Colorado Mental Health Law was up for sunset review in 2004; the law would either stay the same, dissolve, or undergo revision. The Colorado Coalition of Coaches began work to propose legislation to revise the statute. In spring 2004, the governor of Colorado signed into law the bill that contains the legislation proposed by the coalition. Specifically, the new clause within Colorado's mental health statutes states *"The provisions of this article shall not apply to professional coaches who have had coach-specific training and who serve clients exclusively in the capacity of coaches."*

ICF regulatory history

The ICF Board of Directors chartered a regulatory committee in 2002 to research, monitor, evaluate and educate the coaching profession. During the committee's initial months, the ICF implemented an ethical conduct review process, a solid step in the process of self-regulation. In

addition, the ICF provided the opportunity for members to participate in a conference call with the ICF attorney as Colorado coaches encountered mixed messages about the coaching case and regulation in their state.

It was not the committee's intent to focus only on coaching versus counseling. However, that was the primary area of concern coaches faced in the key states investigated. In early 2004, these individuals continued the review of all of the United States and Canada. Currently, there are no requirements for coaches to register or be licensed in any state in the United States or in Canada. New mental-health/behavioral-health laws went into effect in New York, Arizona, and Minnesota in 2003 and 2004. The persons responsible for the implementation of these laws have stated that the intent is to tighten up regulation of those performing counseling and therapy services within the respective states. These laws were not intended to, nor should they, include coaches. However, if an individual practices counseling or therapy without meeting the proper state licensing require-

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ments and also engages in coaching, that individual would be in violation of the state requirement as well as the coaching profession's standards.

Distinctions between coaching and therapy or counseling are delineated on the ICF website (www.coachfederation.org) as well as information pertaining to ethics and regulatory issues. The ICF is committed to maintaining coaching as a distinct profession and to strengthening coaching's self-governance model.

Law and Ethics in Coaching: How to Solve and Avoid Difficult Problems In Your Practice, 2005, John Wiley and Sons, a new book by Sharon Anderson and myself along with eleven other contributing authors, is intended to increase awareness of legal and ethical issues in coaching, and to provide information specifically for those who are entering the coaching profession, or who are teaching about or offering consultations about coaching. The authors set forth various aspects of ethical and legal issues related to coaching. But keep in mind that this is a work in progress. While we can share certain rubrics

with other human service professions, the creation of case law, response to ethical complaints, and training in ethics for coaches will be paramount as the profession continues to evolve and create a knowledge base and best-practices mandates in the years to come. •

References:

Williams, P, and Anderson, S, (2005) *Law and Ethics in Coaching: How to Solve and Avoid Difficult Problems In Your Practice*, New Jersey, John Wiley and Sons

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Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC is an ICF board member and CEO of the Institute for Life Coach Training.

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