

The role of ethical principles in Coaching Psychology

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I would like to take this opportunity in the first issue of *The Coaching Psychologist* to introduce myself as your founding committee member with a strategic responsibility in all ethical aspects of our Special Group. I am a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and have had 20 years experience in central government and private practice. I was instrumental in helping Professor Stephen Palmer to set up the former Coaching Psychology Forum by communicating the development to the Division of Occupational Psychology. I also contributed to the special edition of Coaching Psychology in *The Occupational Psychologist* (Law, 2003), and was the former Head of the Professional Forum for the Association for Coaching.

Being a member of the Association of Business Psychologists, Divisions of Counselling Psychology, and Sport and Exercise Psychology, I advocate diversity in coaching. I have long been engaged in championing diversity and embedding ethical thinking in our profession. I was one of the first equality advisors to the Assistant Permanent Under Secretary of State in the Home Office, and the Deputy chair of the BPS Standing Committee for Promotion of Equal Opportunities. So my specific contribution to the CPSG is to develop ethical principles and its relationship between coaching and psychology. I regard these disciplines as two central pillars in making coaching psychology as a discipline and a profession. Within this context, the development of ethical principles would have an important implication for the way we define and practise coaching psychology. Within this context this article aims to address two key questions:

- What forms should ethical thinking take?
- What is the impact of ethical principles on the practice of coaching psychology?

Ethical thinking and its principles are usually embedded in many professional bodies in the form of self-regulation. Members are required to commit to ethical standards and code of practice. The main aim is to protect clients/the public from dangerous practice with the objectives to:

- Benefit clients.
- Ensure safety.
- Protect clients.
- Manage boundaries.
- Manage conflict.

Translating the above objectives to code of practice requires us as a coaching psychologist to:

1. Do no harm.
2. Act in the best interest of our clients and their organisation.
3. Observe confidentiality.
4. Respect differences in culture.
5. Apply effectively the best practice in everything we do.
6. Help our client make informed choices and take responsibility to improve their performance and well being.
7. Recognise our role of a coaching psychologist.

There are many common aspects in the above objectives and code of practice across a wide range of professions such as counselling and psychotherapy (for example, see Barnes & Mudin, 2001; Hill & Jones 2003; and the BPS's *Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles & Guidelines*). However, there are also many aspects that are unique in coaching that distinguish coaching psychology from many other disciplines. For example, a coach is asked by a Director (the budget holder) to coach a team of senior managers (the job holders) with an objective to improve their performance (see Law, 2003). In this case, the term 'client' within such an organisational context is very different from those of counselling and psychotherapy. A

number of questions would arise from such a coaching process:

- Who are the clients?
- Whose benefit has priority?
- Whose interests is the coaching psychologist serving?
- What is the coach's ethical duty?
- What is the responsibility of the coaching psychologist to manage different values and interests between all the stakeholders?
- How the differences are managed?
- Is there potential for abuse of power?
- What are the issues of confidentiality?
- What are the implications of vicarious liability?

Managing the multiple boundaries, relationships and conflicts are particularly important in the above situation and in coaching psychology in general. Coaching is a different practice from counselling and therapy. It requires us to have different attitudes, knowledge, skills and ethical thinking as part of our professional competence.

There is not enough space for me to answer all of the above questions here. To unpack the complexity in this area would require further research and development. As indicated at the beginning, the aims of writing this article are to introduce my role and open up this space for reflection and discussion about ethical principle in our profession. In the time of writing Clare Huffington and I are in the process of preparing a strategy for the working relationship with other organisations. I hope in future issues I will have the opportunity to continue reporting on the development of the ethical aspects of coaching psychology to our readers. Future work may include:

1. Developing ethical principle in coaching psychology.

2. Identifying the ethical implications for supervision of coaches and coaching psychologists.
3. Developing quality control procedures.
4. Promoting diversity in coaching.
5. Developing training in coaching psychology.
6. Embedding ethical principles as part of the core competence and continual development in our profession.

I would welcome any comments and contribution on these topics. Please email me on:

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References:

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