Coaching for Ethical Decision-Making
In a Profit-Driven Environment

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How do we deliver our best quality service to our clients, and how do we keep our personal bias from sabotaging our work? When confronted with ethical decisions in a corporate context who's opinion is more important – coach or client? In this article Karlin Sloan proposes a model of ethical decision-making that can clarify the style of coach and coachee, and assist in creating a constructive dialogue about ethical leadership.

As an executive coach, my job is to assist my clients to both define and live by their own personal principles of leadership and right action. Or is it? I am hired by corporations to help leaders to perform better. When executive performance is measured solely on quarterly earnings or shareholder value, my role may directly conflict with the above statement. What constitutes right action in a corporate environment?

Personal Bias

None of us is immune from opinion. Every coach, no matter how well intentioned, is biased in his or her actions, beliefs, and attitudes toward the beliefs and actions of the client. For example, if I have a coaching client, a CEO, who has approved the layoffs of 10% of the organization, but is taking a $5 million bonus for the year, I have a personal belief that condemns that action. I will communicate that belief system, either explicitly by judging that action negatively, or by harboring discomfort or upset at my client.

The Story of Gillian

Gillian is a Vice President in a worldwide media organization. She is in a personal crisis with a daughter who is anorexic. She is struggling with her belief that the products she is promoting are sabotaging the mental and physical health of young girls, and she is bringing this situation to her coach. She tells the coach that she is considering either quitting, or taking on projects that negate what “evil” the company has done.

As a coach, whether peer or expert, it is critical to have a level of self-knowledge and clarity around one's own values and beliefs, and how they might impact your judgment and coaching of a particular individual, particularly when it comes to assisting a client to make ethical decisions.

Questions we must be able to answer for ourselves are:

Who decides what’s right?

Who is my primary client, the individual or the organization?

What is the result I want for my client – is what they want for themselves always right?

What is my role when my values conflict with my client’s values? With the products or services of the
organization? With a decision they make?
What are the moments in which my sense of what’s
time might get in the way of the goals set by the
company?
What is my ethical style?
How can I quickly determine and communicate the
ethical style of my clients?

A Proposed Model of Ethical Styles
When we answer basic questions about our philo-
sophy, it is useful to have a simple model for the complex
process of ethical decision-making. How do you make
decisions? From the heart? From the bottom-line result?
The following ethical styles are based on Ned
Herrmann’s research on brain dominance and thinking style, and shine a light on how we process ethical
decisions.

The Rule of Consequences
1.) I make decisions based on shareholder value.
2.) I make decisions based on their political impli-
cations.
3.) I look carefully at the bottom line before mak-
ing decisions.

The Rule of The Law
1.) I make decisions on the letter of the law (either
corporate or religious).
2.) I am careful to understand company rules, reg-
ulations, and ethics statements.
3.) The best path is the least amount of risk for the
organization.

The Golden Rule
1.) I believe that the best outcome is the best result
for the most people.
2.) I make decisions based on the impact on staff.
3.) I make decisions based on how I would want
to be treated.

The Rule of Natural Law
1.) I base my decisions on what I believe to be right.
2.) I want to understand the impact of my deci-
sions on future generations.
3.) I base my decisions on societal impact.

If we take Ned Herrmann’s work and extend his find-
ings to comment on ethics, we can summarize that each
person has multiple ways to approach ethical decision-
making or problem solving. Many of us have established
patterns based on one or more of these Rules. In using
this model to explore ethical decision-making, we can
understand more about our clients and ourselves. If we
look at the decisions we make from multiple perspec-
tives, or from a “whole brain” approach, often the dia-
log created brings about greater awareness of the issues
at hand, and greater simplicity in problem solving.

Back to Gillian...What Questions must the Coach An-
swer?

Who is the client? Is the individual paying for your ser-
dices – is the organization? What are the contracted
goals? Are you an expert or a peer? What are the mea-
surements of coaching success? What do you want for
your client? Is what’s good for Gillian good for the orga-
nization? Do you have an ethical style that either helps
or hinders your ability to guide Gillian through this di-
lemma?

If the coach aligns with Gillian’s values around protect-
ing the health and well being of young girls is she going
against the measurement of performance dictated by bot-
tom-line results and sales? What if Gillian wanted to
change the product, disrupt the process of output, and
challenge the strategy of the division? What part of our
client do we reward with our attention, praise, con-
gratulations? Do we reward the risk-taker? Do we re-
ward the diligent worker who does not question the strat-
Gillian’s answers lead her to generate options she hadn’t thought of before. She shifted off of the project and on to a different piece of client business, and spoke frankly with the president of her division about her position. She handled the situation gracefully without compromising her own values or the profitability of the business.

Through the peer approach and without aligning with only one ethical style, the coach helped Gillian create a win-win outcome.

Unconscious Expectation Setting and Ethics
We are constantly, either consciously or unconsciously, setting expectations for our clients. Those expectations directly relate to our personal belief systems and our ethical style. We may expect greater bottom-line performance, excellence in a negotiation, captivating public speaking, greater self-awareness, or greater social responsibility, and those positive visions of our client’s success are powerful motivators of performance. Our negative expectations are just as powerful catalysts to the creation of poor performance or unwanted behaviors.

For the peer coach the idea that coaching follows the clients’ agenda may be helpful. But is your client’s version of excellence something that you personally feel comfortable affirming? Might your personal, political beliefs stop you from being the most effective coach in that situation?

Recent research into positive psychology demonstrates that the expectations we set have more to do with performance than was once believed. Part of our role is to set high expectations. Our coachees are more often than not competitive, high achieving individuals who want to
perform up to those expectations. We need to understand what our expectations are, and what our own agenda is for our client. When we understand that, we can make conscious choices about those clients we will work with most effectively.

A story of unconscious expectation setting and ethics:
Carole, a long-time executive coach, is working with the CFO of a large financial institution. The goals of the CFO are to become more effective in managing his staff, and to create better ways to manage stress in his work life. During the coaching initiative there is negative press about the company. Questions are arising about the ethical practices of the organization. Carole, though she wishes to assist her client in managing the crisis, is fearful of the CFO’s involvement with the breach of ethics charged against the organization. She expects that the CFO will lie to her, and will be forced through the Rule of Results to make poor decisions for the sustainability of the organization, and for the future of his reputation. This presupposition impacts the dialog between coach and client in a profoundly negative way. Carole is not expecting a positive outcome, and those expectations set the stage for the client to live down to them.

Best Fit and Ethics
According to a recent Corporate Leadership Council report on executive coaching, one of the most important components of maximizing return on investment for executive coaching is determining best fit. When a coach and coachee are well matched the results are exponentially better.

In order to have this “best fit” conversation, the coach and the coachee must be aware of their biases and belief systems...and it’s the coach’s job to facilitate that discussion. In determining fit the discussion of values, expectations, and beliefs should not be one-sided, but a peer-to-peer discussion that results in a conscious choice by both the coach and coachee to work together.

The best way to address our perceptions of ethics, values, and personal achievement is to talk about it up front with our clients. It is a mistake to believe that a good coach can work with anyone. In order to assist our clients to define and live by their own principles of right action, we must disclose our own biases and discuss what will happen when our values are at odds.

We may be comfortable working with goals that are not commensurate with our values system, because our philosophy is that of peer. Within the peer model the belief is that the agenda of the client supercedes our bias, and we will support them in being their own best self within their own belief system.

Conclusions
Coaching for ethical decision-making is more complex than simply affirming your client’s choices. It requires thoughtful self-examination for our own beliefs and biases. If coaching is to remain effective not only for the individual but for the organization, we need to take into account the impact of expectations, measurements, and what styles are ultimately rewarded.

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As the founder and president of Karlin Sloan & Company, Ms. Sloan provides organization development consulting, team facilitation, executive coaching and coach training to corporate clients across the United States and abroad.
Endnote

1 The Herrmann Brain Dominance Model ÓNed Herrmann Group, is adapted with permission of Herrmann International. For more information please contact Herrmann International at www.hbdii.com.
3 Maximizing Returns on Professional Executive Coaching, Corporate Leadership Council, Washington, DC, May 2003

"The legacy of the Enlightenment is the belief that entirely on our own we can know, and in knowing, understand, and in understanding, choose wisely. … So here we are, no one having guided us to this condition, no one looking over our shoulder, our future entirely up to us. Human autonomy having thus been recognized, we should now feel more disposed to reflect on where we wish to go. …

In the course of all of it we are learning the fundamental principle that ethics is everything. Human social existence, unlike animal sociality, is based on the genetic propensity to form long-term contracts that evolve by culture into moral precepts and law. The rules of contract formation were not given to humanity from above, nor did they emerge randomly in the mechanics of the brain. They evolved over tens of hundreds of millennia because they conferred upon the genes prescribing them survival and the opportunity to be represented in future generations. We are not errant children who occasionally sin by disobeying instructions from outside our species. We are adults who have discovered which covenants are necessary for survival, and we have accepted the necessity of securing them by sacred oath. …

I believe that in the process of locating new avenues of creative thought, we will also arrive at an existential conservatism. It is worth asking repeatedly: Where are our deepest roots? We are, it seems, Old World, catarrhine primates, brilliant emergent animals, defined genetically by our unique origins, blessed by our newfound biological genius, and secure in our homeland if we wish to make it so. What does it all mean? This is what it all means. To the extent that we depend on prosthetic devices to keep ourselves and the biosphere alive, we will render everything fragile. To the extent that we banish the rest of life, we will impoverish our own species for all time. And if we should surrender our genetic nature to machine-aided ratiocination, and our ethics and art and our very meaning to a habit of careless discursion in the name of progress, imagining ourselves godlike and absolved from our ancient heritage, we will become nothing."

-- Edward O. Wilson, Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge
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