



## Ethically Speaking: Ethics and the Executive Coach

### From the Editorial Desk

Pick up any issue of the Wall Street Journal and you'll read more than you care to know about the unethical conduct of businesses and leaders in today's corporate marketplace. We chose to devote an entire issue of the IJCO to an exploration of ethics as it pertains to coaching, a topic critical to protecting the future of executive coaching.<sup>1</sup>

As we embarked upon the creation of an IJCO issue dedicated to ethics and coaching, it struck us that we had stumbled upon a deep and meaty subject. As we further engaged with the contributing authors and our own research, we learned that ethics in general is a topic that gets only deeper and more complex the more you know about it – and as it pertains to coaching executives there is no shortage of food for thought. We determined to set forth a journal issue that is more pragmatic in tone than academic – our goal being to provide leadership for our profession regarding this timely topic and a context for future discussions of ethical coaching and the coaching of ethics in leadership.

The field of psychology, unlike our field, has clear constructs to support a definition of ethics and ethical standards of conduct that are regulated and apply to all in the field. One can easily find statements of ethics at the APA and the American Counseling Association that establish clear boundaries and consequences for psy-

chologists. As executive coaches, we are not so regulated, mainly because we do not have the licensing and privilege elements in our profession that psychiatrists and psychologists have. We do not have licenses to practice coaching, therefore we do not stand to lose our license to practice if we engage in unethical behavior.

We do not have the privilege of confidentiality that mental health professionals and lawyers have with their patients and clients, thus we can be subpoenaed to reveal conversations we've had with clients who may be on trial for unethical conduct. We do, however, have several sources to draw upon for guidelines regarding ethics and standards for coaching. In this issue, you will find two such sources: the ICF's code and the WABC's code. Many of the coach training schools, such as CTI and CoachU also have their own published standards regarding the ethical practice of coaching.

Our journey raised many questions for us regarding the profession of executive coaching and business ethics. Any one of these would easily lend itself to an entire journal edition. Isn't everything we do as coaches ethics-laden? Don't we coach from a place where ethics is critical but it operates in the background? Are we operating from an ethical basis unconsciously, and if so, what do we need to do to bring it to the forefront of what we are doing with our clients? Do we have an obligation

to reveal the unstated ethical issues by which we already operate? What do we, as coaches, need to do to promote ethical behavior in our clients? Should we volunteer an ethical perspective or should we remain neutral? Given what's happening in business (Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, etc.), can we as coaches afford to keep neutral?

We are uniquely positioned in many corporations and with the leadership of many companies to take a position towards promoting ethical conduct by business leaders, but should we do so? Does that violate a boundary or misuse the coach's power? Is it our job to lead our clients somewhere regarding ethics? As executive coaches are we ethically bound to intervene or ethically bound not to intervene with our clients regarding their behavior and business practices? How do we, as coaches, train our clients to deal with their own ethical quagmires as well as the dilemmas their employees and organizations face? How do we maintain ethical conduct when a client demonstrates inappropriate behavior towards us? How do we keep coaching and therapy separate and not overestimate our competence when we bump up against therapy issues in a coaching context? The most troubling question raised was one of definition...how do we, as a profession, define ethics?

In this issue you will find Leff's 2003 outline providing a guide for considering ethics in executive coaching followed by an artfully articulated distinction by Bergquist and Granier regarding coaching versus consulting and counseling. This important work beautifully sets up the groundwork from which to delve into the related questions of ethics in our profession.

Business leaders are not the only ones who face ethical dilemmas. This issue explores some of the general philosophical views of ethics in business (Kraus, Boyd) and

moves to more specific explorations of ethics as it pertains to coaching with case studies (Kidder, Sloan, Johnson/Mendes), research (Pomerantz/Eiting, Roman), the application of codes of standards (Garlo/Prior, Johnson), and then concludes with a look at ethics as commitment versus compliance (Lee). Whether or not you read the entire issue cover to cover, we encourage you to find the deeper patterns and connections that link the articles together.

Anyone who has coached more than one person in the same organization, particularly when coaching those in direct reporting lines of each other faces ethics in coaching. Given the fact that all coaches have an ethical perspective, whether it is overt or not, whether or not we have faced specific ethical dilemmas per se, ethics informs the work we do as coaches. There are the ethics of our role (coaching) versus their role (management/leadership), which can create dilemmas when our clients ask us to take on leadership or management tasks with their employees. There are the issues our clients raise with us that have an ethical component and in turn raise for us the question of whether or not to address it as such. There is the issue of dual relationships and the power a coach has in the coaching relationship that may raise ethical questions. Coaches must be attuned to issues of ethics in our work and think about it in advance so that we may each know our stand on the subject. That way, when a quagmire of ethical proportions smacks us in the face, we'll be ready.

There are plenty of resources available for those seeking more information about ethics in business.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration has recently created a first-of-its-kind business ethics center, The Business Roundtable Institute for Corporate Ethics, funded by a national organization of major corporate leaders to conduct research, create a business

ethics curriculum, and provide ethical business practices training to underscore the link between ethical behavior and smart business.

We are tremendously appreciative of the thought and energy our contributing authors put into the articles they submitted, and we invite you to engage in your own exploration of ethics as it pertains to your work with leaders and executives. We also invite you to engage in a discourse with colleagues about ethics, for we know you will find, as we did, that it is a deep and provocative topic with many complexities that are rooted in the very foundation of what it means to be human. As you read the following articles, we offer our humble attempt to define ethics as Morals, Values and Meaning.

Happy reading!

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Maher, Sheila and Suzi Pomerantz (2003) The Future of Executive Coaching: Analysis from a Market Life Cycle Approach, *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 1(2), 3-11.

<sup>2</sup> Resources on ethics in business:

### Websites:

[www.ethics.org](http://www.ethics.org),  
[www.ibe.org.uk](http://www.ibe.org.uk),  
[www.walkerinfo.com](http://www.walkerinfo.com),  
[www.business-ethics.com](http://www.business-ethics.com),  
[www.ja.org/programs/  
programs\\_ethics.shtml](http://www.ja.org/programs/programs_ethics.shtml),  
[www.focusonethics.com](http://www.focusonethics.com),  
[www.corporate-ethics.org](http://www.corporate-ethics.org),

### Books:

*The Inner Work of Leaders*, by Barbara Mackoff and Gary Wenet (AMACOM, 2001)

*In Search of Ethics: Conversations with Men and Women of Character*, by Len Marrella (DC Press, 2001).

## The IJCO Logo: What Does It Represent?

The co-executive editors of *IJCO* have been asked about the logo that adorns all covers of the journal as well as subscription forms, policy statements, etc. This logo comes from a much larger work of art--a statue called *Kabala*--that was created by Julian Harr. The logo represents two birds (vision), two hands (support) or two flames (energy). We think that vision, support and energy are three of the key ingredients in effective organizational coaching practices. What do you think? Let us know.

- Bill Bergquist and John Lazar

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## Tentative Themes for Future Issues of IJCO

### *Research Perspectives on Coaching in Organizations*

Is Organizational Coaching Effective?

How does organizational coaching work when it is effective?

### *Coaching with Wisdom*

Ancient Wisdom and Coaching

Organizational Coaching with the Enneagram

Rabbinical Tradition and Coaching

Is It Safe: Creation of Coaching Sanctuaries

### *The Future of Coaching: New Clients and New Processes*

Practice Management: Coaching with Professionals

Organizational Coaching in Government

Organizational Coaching in the Intersect [Utilities and Beyond]

Organizational Coaching in Closely-Held Enterprises [Family Businesses, Small Businesses, Professional Practices]