Standard 11 – Case Study

Title: Managing Power or Status Differences

Background
An ICF Professional actively maintains that a coaching-client relationship is a partnership. The ICF Professional is not the superior one, there is no hierarchy of power. And the Coach is to be aware and manage any power or status differences between themselves and their clients. What should the coach do when a client’s issue is part of the coach’s history? How can the coach be sure to maintain a partnership with their client and not let personal history get in the way?

Case study
Camille had started her career in the world of Education. She had been a professor at the local University in her town and had several adjunct professor opportunities with esteemed University’s such as Harvard, Oxford, and Toronto. Even though she had loved her career, she had felt a need for change and investigated coaching. After taking several life coaching courses, Camille was hooked.

Through her website, she was able to connect with a potential client named Mathilde. Mathilde participated in Education as well at the same local University that Camille had dedicated her career to for so many years. Camille and Mathilde decided that a coach/client relationship would be the right step for them both.

Camille noticed that Mathilde was on the quiet side. She was more reserved than Camille and it would typically take Mathilde at least 30 minutes to warm up to Camille during each session. Once Mathilde warmed up, she was very pleasant, and Camille could see why the University had hired her. The dedication she had for her students was admirable.

One day, Mathilde mentioned a delicate situation within the Education department. Camille knew exactly what the situation was about and was familiar with the history. Camille could feel her blood pressure rising as Mathilde talked more about it. Once Mathilde finished the details, it was all Camille could do not to burst out and tell her exactly what to do. In the back of her mind, Camille understood that this was really Mathilde’s decision, but she also wanted what was best for the University.

Camille was torn. On the one hand, she could work with Mathilde to see what was so clearly obvious to Camille. But on the other hand, she could reach out to her former colleague, who she was still close to, and see if it came up naturally. Camille wanted both Mathilde and the University to benefit, but this meant she would not be able to control the situation as much as she wanted.
Implications for Coaching

- Actively manage any power or status differences—the coach should be able to create equality and partnership with their client. The coach is not a superior and the client should feel like an equal in the coaching relationship. ICF Code of Ethics (2020) Section 1, Standard 11 (Coachingfederation.org)

- Commitment to excellence—the coach should always be professional and always learning. It is important to understand their own strengths and areas for development to see where they can grow. An ICF Professional should understand who they are and any conscious or unconscious bias they may hold. And lastly, they should know their own personal history and how these could affect the way they could coach. ICF Code of Ethics (2020) Section 2, Standard 16 (Coachingfederation.org)

- Recognize personal limitations that could interfere with coaching performance—the coach should be mindful of any personal or professional bias that could impede performance as a coach. And they should be mindful if these biases cause judgement or strong emotions that may cause them to lose presence. There may be times where a coach will need to seek out advice from a trusted party or even remove themselves from the coaching engagement. ICF Code of Ethics (2020) Section 2, Standard 17 (Coachingfederation.org)

Possible outcomes or next steps

- Seek outside support. A coach in any ethical conundrum may choose to turn to their coach, mentor coach, coach supervisor, training program, or coaching organization for support in navigating ethically confusing situations. This process will include much reflection and thought on the coach’s side. In addition, the coach may choose to utilize outside support after a coaching engagement ends (or is cancelled) to fully learn from the experience.

- The coaching relationship is a partnership. A coach should be aware of and actively maintain a partnering relationship with their client. The client is the expert in their own lives and situations. And if the coach is not able to maintain this partnership, then it should be introduced to the client. This allows both parties to discuss and determine the best path forward in a collaborative manner.

- End the coaching engagement. If it is determined that the coaching engagement should end, the coach should support the client as they transition to another coach and/or allow for the cancellation of the coaching arrangement.

Discussion Points

- What boundaries can a coach put into place to avoid this kind of situation?
- If you were this coach’s coach, mentor, or supervisor, how would you support the coach?
- Can a coach ethically coach a client when their history has so many triggers for the coach?

Reference
