



Standard 23 – Case Study

Title: Healthy Boundaries

Background

Healthy boundaries are important in all relationships. Boundaries could come in the form of cultural, physical, sexual, emotional and others. And boundaries can look different culturally depending on local customs and cultures. An ICF Professional should always be engaged and aware of their own biases and take time to reflect on their own thinking to be present with an open mindset.

Case study

Alisha and Alex had been in a coach and client relationship for a year. There was no denying that they both felt a strong emotional and physical connection to each other. But they also had a strong coaching relationship and Alex had accomplished a lot of his goals with Alisha as his coach.

They typically met for lunch once a month for their normal sessions and today was no different. After their session ended, their conversation continued. They could see each other as being friends, or even in a relationship one day, if they weren't a coach and client first. Alex casually mentioned a work dinner he had coming up in a few days and his date had cancelled on him last minute. He was concerned that he wouldn't have enough time to find someone else to join him and he didn't want to be the only one without a date. Alex asked if Alisha was available, and she agreed to go with him. It would be fine she thought, they would be around other people and it would be completely innocent.

They had a lot of fun together at the dinner. The whole group was laughing and thoroughly enjoying each other's company. At the end of the night, Alex and Alisha shared a taxi ride to their respective homes. But there had been alcohol involved, good food and most of all an electric connection between Alex and Alisha. One thing led to another, and he ended up staying the night.

Alisha woke up with a headache and a horrible gut feeling. She knew better than this. Either the coaching relationship would need to end today, or she would need to take drastic measures to never let this happen again with Alex.

Implications for Coaching

- Boundaries of coaching engagement—the coach should hold the responsibility of being aware and setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries in the engagement. Boundaries may include cultural, physical, sexual, or emotional—and it should be considered

how religion and/or tradition might affect the coaching engagement. **ICF Code of Ethics (2020) Section 3, Standard 23 (Coachingfederation.org)**

- Do not participate in any sexual or romantic relationship with client—the coach should be mindful of the level of intimacy appropriate for the relationship, have an awareness to recognize and address feelings, be mindful to cultural differences that could be misinterpreted, and take the appropriate action to address the issue or cancel the coaching engagement. **ICF Code of Ethics (2020) Section 3, Standard 24 (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 likely 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.
- **Clarify the relationship with the other party.** A coach may choose to bring their concerns to the client directly. This allows both parties to discuss and determine the best path forward in a collaborative manner. The coach may want to consider the dynamics of that meeting though—perhaps by shifting to a virtual platform and not meeting in person. If it is determined that the coaching engagement will continue, re-contracting with the client and setting up clear boundaries are strongly encouraged.
- **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? What resources can you turn to as a coach?
- At what point did the coaching relationship cross the boundary line?
- If you were this coach's coach, mentor, or supervisor, how would you support the coach?

Reference

ICF Code of Ethics (2020), <https://coachingfederation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>