



Standard 4.1 – Case Study

Manage any power difference

Background

As an ICF Professional, I am aware of and, in partnership with my client, actively manage any power or status differential between us that may be caused by cultural, relational, psychological, or contextual issues. Sometimes people put others up on a pedestal even without the encouragement of the person wanting to be viewed as a hero or savior. But it's important for an ICF Professional to be aware that it could happen and remain alert to any indications that this is happening.

Case Study

Nathan had been coaching for 20+ years and was well-known in his coaching community of colleagues. Dominique had recently started coaching and was still developing a strong base of clients. At an ICF Chapter event, Dominique had been the speaker about creating a website that would attract more clients. This was his other passion outside of coaching. Several people stuck around to ask him more questions afterwards and he loved being able to help each of them. The last person was Nathan, who Dominique had only heard about, but had never officially met him.

Dominique's palms got sweaty as Nathan approached him to ask him a few website questions. They instantly bonded and were laughing and cutting up by the end. They decided to walk out together to their respective vehicles. Dominique mentioned that he was still working on growing his business, and it seemed that he had reached his pique.

Nathan offered to set up a mentoring relationship with him if he would be interested. Dominique was in awe and quickly agreed to it. Over the next several months, Dominique did everything that Nathan recommended that he do to grow more clients. Nathan was a little uncomfortable with the "god" status that Dominique had seemed to give him, but not enough to say anything. Nathan brushed it off and thought it was more like a father, son relationship. A few months later, Nathan received an email from Dominique saying that he wanted to end the mentoring relationship. He hadn't grown his client base and had met another coach who he wanted to hire as a mentor coach.

Nathan was sad about the end to this relationship. And as he reviewed the situation, he began to wonder if he could have managed the perceived power difference that Dominique had automatically given him.

Implications for Coaching

- ICF's definition of coaching – "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential." A coaching relationship is built on a partnership and equality.

- ICF's definition of mentoring – “a collaborative process where coaches receive feedback based on observed sessions to refine their skills and style in alignment with ICF Core Competencies.” A mentoring relationship is built on collaboration and partnership.

Possible Outcomes or Next Steps

- **Managing the power difference.** It will be healthy for Nathan to revisit his relationship with Dominique to see if there was anything that could have been done differently. Maybe Nathan could have pushed Dominique to get to the answers on his own. Or perhaps Nathan couldn't have done anything differently. An honest evaluation of this relationship will be healthy for Nathan regardless.

Discussion Points

- What should Nathan have done differently, if anything?
- When you have a client who looks to you for advice, how do you handle that power difference?
- If you were Nathan's coach supervisor, how would you support him?

Reference

ICF Code of Ethics (2025)