



Standard 24 – Case Study

Title: Romantic Engagements with a Client

Background

In order to protect the client and in the interest of the ICF Professional, it is important to pay attention to any dependencies and expectations, unspoken contracts etc. which may arise as a result of the coaching process and the relationship as a whole.

Case study

Bill was an easy-going guy. He was an extrovert by nature and had the ability to make everyone around him feel at ease. He had launched his own coaching business during COVID and had been quite successful.

Sierra was one of his initial clients during his start and she had continued to use him as a Coach for a number of years. Life in general had its many ups and downs for her and Bill had been there to walk through it all with her.

One day, after an emotional session for Sierra, Bill went in to give her a hug. He noticed that she lingered a little longer than what was normal. He brushed it off and assumed it was just due to her emotions. The following session she went in for a hug this time and he had noticed in the session that she was flirting with him. Later that night he received several friend requests from Sierra on his social media platforms. Had Sierra developed a crush on him? Should he try to address it with her? Lots of questions were swirling around in his head. He hadn't even done anything wrong, but was he going to have to give up a client because of this?

Implications for Coaching

- Professional responsibilities – the coach should let the client know what the ICF Code of Ethics address so that both the ICF Professional and their client can agree on the importance of following them. It is up to the coach to take ethics seriously within their coaching career. **ICF Code of Ethics (2020) Section 3, Standard 22 (Coachingfederation.org)**
- 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?
- 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>