

# Where Do We Align Our Ethical Code?

Learning from other professions



**In 2004** I wrote a paper to assess legal regulations and ethical codes in effect for the coaching profession. The purpose was to determine their appropriateness and alignment with the basic foundation and beliefs of the profession, and to make recommendation for revisions if pertinent. Two years later the landscape within and outside the coaching profession has changed and yet the question

remains the same: “Where do we align our ethical code?” With professions whose clients are healthy and functioning, such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Organization Development Network (ODN) and American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)? Or with professions whose clients seek emotional or psychological healing in a therapeutic context, such as the American Psychological Association (APA)?

**“...only the coaching field...addresses caring for self and how to deal with limitations.”**

coaches. I found none. When there is an absence of laws or regulations in a new field or occupation, the courts and legislatures are often influenced by, or draw analogies from, areas that are closely related. Therefore, we must look to the standards of other professions for guidance (Allison Tiffany 2001). In the future, there will most likely be changes to existing laws, so coaches

tions involved in coaching or related training.

- European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) [www.emccouncil.org](http://www.emccouncil.org). EMCC, renamed to include coaching in 2002, was based in the UK until it realigned in 2005 to serve all of Europe. The EMCC is a unifying and inclusive body covering a broad spectrum of organizations from the voluntary community, professional training and development, counseling at work, life coaching and academic psychology sectors.
- International Association of Coaches (IAC) [www.certifiedcoach.org](http://www.certifiedcoach.org). IAC, founded in 2002 by CoachVille, is now an independent certifying body to the coaching industry.
- International Coach Federation (ICF) [www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org). ICF is an individual membership organization and has been the leading professional and credentialing body for the coaching profession.
- International Consortium of Coaching in Organizations (ICCO) [www.coachingconsortium.org](http://www.coachingconsortium.org). ICCO’s focus is primarily on the business market and includes client companies, training institutions, researchers and associations as well as coaches among their member-

would be advised to consult with an attorney to keep informed of any developments.

This article compares and contrasts the American Psychological Association ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)), Society for Human Resource Management ([www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org)), Organization Development Network ([www.odnetwork.org](http://www.odnetwork.org)) and American Society for Training and Development ([www.astd.org](http://www.astd.org)) with the seven leading coaching organizations. These coaching organizations are:

- Association for Coaching (AC) [www.associationforcoaching.com](http://www.associationforcoaching.com). AC is UK based and their focus is professional coaches and organiza-

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## *Legal regulations*

My initial paper looked first to United States laws or regulations that are specifically directed toward

ship. ICCO is in the process of developing an ethics statement.

- Professional Coaches and Mentors Association (PCMA) [www.pcmaonline.org](http://www.pcmaonline.org). PCMA was founded in 1996 with members and chapters located in California. The PCMA has a six point values statement rather than a code of ethics.

- Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC) [www.wabc-coaches.com](http://www.wabc-coaches.com). WABC was originally launched as the National Association of Business Coaches in 1997 and is a for-profit business that connects member coaches with the business community.

#### *Comparison with APA ethics code*

ASTD, ODN, and SHRM members deal with healthy, independent, functional people as does the coaching profession, and their codes are principle, guideline and values based. In contrast, APA's ethical code sets forth enforceable standards and rules for conduct as psychologists, in addition to an unenforceable preamble and general principles.

The APA Ethics Code was first released in 1953. Its structure today contains the following ethical standard sections:

- Resolving Ethical Issues
- Competence
- Human Relations
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- Advertising and Other Public Statements
- Recordkeeping and Fees
- Education and Training
- Research and Publication
- Assessment

There are no coaching codes that include anything similar to the section called Assessment in the APA guidelines. Though coaches do use assessments, the primary intent is to raise client awareness with regard to communication style and ways of being in their life.

#### *Contrasts in key areas*

Let's look at several key issues addressed by the HR, OD and Training professions as well as the psychology profession and how they compare with the coaching profession.

#### **1) Professional Conduct/Obligation**

*Human Resource, OD and Training Professions:* Adding value to organizations served, responsible for decisions and actions, advocate for the profession.

*Psychology Profession:* Respect and protect civil and human rights, freedom of inquiry and expression, increase scientific and professional knowledge.

*Coaching Profession:* No harm to profession, promote and protect human dignity and diversity, honor agreements, construct clear agreements, respect and honor efforts and contributions of others, value rigorous and respectful debate.

#### **2) Integrity**

*Human Resource, OD and Training Professions:* Be honest and truthful.

*Psychology Profession:* Accuracy, honesty and truthfulness in science, teaching and practice of psychology.

*Coaching Profession:* Honest and fair, cognizant of competencies and lim-

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itations; aware of own belief systems and impact on their work, clarify roles being performed.

**3) Confidentiality**

*Human Resource, OD and Training Professions:* Maintain confidentiality.

*Psychology Profession:* Primary obligation and take reasonable precautions to protect confidential information obtained through or stored in any medium, recognizing that the extent and limits of confidentiality may be regulated by law or established by institutional rules or professional or scientific relationship.

*Coaching Profession:* Respect confidentiality of all client information (including company and/or client name) except as authorized by client or required by law.

**4) Conflict of Interest**

*Human Resource, OD and Training Professions:* Protect the interests of our stakeholders as well as our professional integrity and should not engage in activities that create actual, apparent, or potential conflicts of interest.

*Psychology Profession:* Refrain from taking on a professional role when personal, scientific, professional, legal, financial, or other interests or relationships could reasonably be expected to (a) impair their objectivity, competence, or effectiveness in performing their functions as psychologists or (b) expose the person or organization with whom the professional relationship exists to harm or exploitation.

*Coaching Profession:* Seek to avoid conflicts between my interests and the interests of my clients; whenever any actual conflict of interest or the potential for a conflict of inter-

*Comparison of Ethics Codes*

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Founded</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Ethics Code</i>	<i>Review 2004/ Changed Since 2004</i>
APA	1890s	USA	150,000+	Yes	Yes/No
ASTD	1944	USA	70,000+	Yes	Yes/Yes
ODN	?	USA	5,000+	Yes-credo	No/?
SHRM	1948	USA	200,000+	Yes	Yes/No
AC	2002	UK	1,000	Yes	No/?
EMCC	2002	UK/Europe	?	Yes	No/?
IAC	2002-May	USA	8,500+	Yes	Yes/No
ICCO	2004-Nov	USA	- 100	No	No/?
ICF	1995	USA	10,000+	Yes	Yes/Yes
PCMA	1996	USA	400+	No	No/?
WABC	1997	Canada	500+	Yes	Yes/No

est arises, I will openly disclose it and fully discuss with my client how to deal with it in whatever way best serves my client.

**5) Fairness and Justice**

*Human Resource, OD and Training Professions:* Ethically responsible for promoting and fostering fairness and justice for all employees and their organizations.

*Psychology Profession:* Entitle all persons access to and benefit from contributions of psychology and to equal quality in the processes, procedures, and services.

*Coaching Profession:* Treat clients with dignity and respect being aware of cultural differences, promoting equal opportunities and the client's right to autonomy, privacy and confidentiality.

**6) Social Responsibility**

*Human Resource, OD and Training Professions:* Aware of cultural filters, develop human potential, advocate

for human beings as employees, and be sensitive that one's actions may alter lives and well-being of people and systems.

*Psychology Profession:* Entitle all persons access to and benefit from contributions of psychology and to equal quality in the processes, procedures, and services.

*Coaching Profession:* Acknowledge the dignity of all humanity, being aware of cultural differences and offering only services in the interests of the client.

Sections on Record Keeping and Fees, and Research and Publication are addressed in Coaching and APA, though not in SHRM, ODN or ASTD. Only APA addresses the assessment area.

Coaching clients are healthy, functioning and independent as are SHRM, ODN and ASTD clients. Much of a coach's work is done with individuals as is the work of SHRM and APA. Bottom-line, the APA code identifies client 'welfare and protec-

tion' as paramount and is focused on 'compliance' as the profession's foundation. Only the IAC code addresses 'safety and well-being' of the client. This approach does not align with basic premises of the coaching profession of 'holding client responsible and accountable' (ICF Ethics Code) and commitment to 'acknowledge and agree to honor ethical obligations' (ICF Ethics Code).

Three other interesting items came to my attention as I was stepping back and taking a global perspective on the topic of ethics. First, only the coaching field, specifically in the ICF, IAC and AC guidelines, addresses caring for self and how to deal with limitations. Second, cultural sensitivity is addressed directly in

most of the codes, with the exception of ICF and EMCC who address diversity. ASTD does not address either area. As professions become even more global, cultural sensitivity is a key ethical guideline. Third, the EMCC code contains a statement and guidelines around 'Understand professional responsibilities continue beyond the termination of any coach/mentoring relationship.' This is a welcome addition and reminder to all practitioners.

### Conclusion

The coaching profession would do well to take a further look at where it aligns with existing professions and, based on that determination, adjust its ethics codes as indicated. My vote

is for alignment with the human resources (SHRM), organization development (ODN) and training (ASTD) professions whose stakeholders are emotionally healthy individuals. This decision will allow the coaching profession to be in alignment with regard to the standards to which we hold ourselves accountable and may reduce the potential of regulation from interests outside the coaching profession. For those readers interested in exploring this further, websites have been provided above for each organization referenced in this article. •

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**The European Mentoring and Coaching Council**  
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www.emccouncil.org

**The Institute for Life Coach Training**  
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**International Coach Federation (ICF) USA**  
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joanne@newagreementscoaching.com  
www.newagreementscoaching.com

**Peer Resources Network (PRN)**  
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www.peer.ca/coaching.html

**Professional Coaches & Mentors Association (PMCA)**  
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www.pcmaonline.com

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