



Internal coaches are great value to their employers. But are they getting the support they need to deal with ethical dilemmas? **Katharine St John-Brooks** reveals the results of her research for the EMCC

MORAL SUPPORT

How would you handle it if one of your clients were being bullied by a colleague but didn't want you to tell anyone? Or if your client wanted to discuss problems he had with a colleague who also happened to be a long-standing work friend of yours? Or if your client wanted to work with you on "developing her career" outside the organisation but had not told her boss she was planning to leave?

Following ethical awareness workshops run by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC)'s Ethics Committee in 2008/9, I was invited to lead some research exploring how internal

coaches experience ethical dilemmas at work and how far they feel equipped to deal with them.

Admirable work

Now that I have met many internal coaches, I have become a fervent admirer of the work they do. They put so much energy and thought into the role – and on top of their day jobs too. I suspect that many employers have no idea how multifaceted the job can be. I hope that my findings shine a helpful light into some dark places.

Looking at the types of dilemma revealed, two main issues arise:

1. What ethical action should be taken? For example, should the coach refuse a line manager's

Table 1: Help for internal coaches (%)

● Facilitated shared learning opportunities	56
● Coaching network	56
● CPD opportunities, eg, visiting speakers	49
● 1:1 supervision	45
● Group supervision led by a trained supervisor	37
● Coaching library	22
● Action Learning Set	20
● Shared webspace/internet chatroom	15
● Email groups	14
● Coaching 'buddy'	13

Top 10 dilemmas for coaches

1 Third parties in the organisation wanting information/feedback about the client

"Being asked by the line manager how someone is doing. I said 'great' in response and encouraged him to have the discussion with his direct report (my client), reminding him of the contract discussion and expectations laid out about progress updates they had agreed between the two of them. He accepted this."

2 Role conflict. Where the coach is coaching a client on whom, or on whose work area, their 'day job' impinges

"I have been involved in coaching individuals around their performance and then subsequently been asked to provide HR support to a disciplinary process or grievance involving the same individual."

3 Client wanting to discuss an issue involving someone the coach knows well or works with

"I was coaching a client who had a difficult stakeholder relationship with another member of staff within HR. Following a restructure, I then took on line management responsibility for the member of staff in HR. At that point my client and I agreed that it would not be appropriate to continue."

4 Being told by a client about inappropriate comments or behaviour by a third party and not being able to act on them

"Where a client was referred and it turned out she had been bullied and was clearly suffering emotionally and confidence-wise. I encouraged her to speak to her boss about it and took it to supervision. I kept asking the question about whether I could get involved in blowing the whistle on the bully but in the end had to accept the person's choice not to take it further."

5 Client's personal issues having an impact on performance (but the client not wanting anyone to know)

"Recently I've been coaching someone who has been diagnosed with depression. Her

partner is also having a nervous breakdown, and she has three children. The sponsor wanted more details as to why she was not performing at work. It was not my duty to disclose any information but I suggested to the client that we set up a meeting with HR and her sponsor to discuss reduced workload for a short term."

6 Where relationships between clients can set up difficulties

"I ended up coaching both a member of staff and their line manager (due to one of them changing roles). I asked each of them whether it was a problem for them to continue being coached by me. They both said it wasn't but I found it difficult as a coach, since working with both of them at times compromised my objectivity."

7 Knowing something about the client/client's future that they don't know (and you can't tell them)

"I have been told about a client's lack of suitability for a senior position, but the client has not been told and I can't tell them."

8 Being unable to use information that could benefit the team/organisation

"I have been informed that clients seen as potential high performers by the organisation are planning to leave. This information might be useful to the organisation, but as the information is 'content' I have not shared it."

9 Client attempting to use sessions to further their own agenda (by influencing the coach)

"I was asked to coach someone who had received feedback that he had been behaving inappropriately. He tried to use the coaching relationship to build a case for his defence."

10 Client wanting to discuss leaving the organisation

"The client raised the possibility of leaving the organisation. As an internal coach (and with responsibility for managing the coaching programme), does this raise a 'return on investment' dilemma?"²

“Internal coaches put so much energy and thought into the role – and on top of their day jobs too”

request to talk about a client's progress?; should they end a relationship with a client because a role conflict has arisen?; or should they 'leak' information that could be helpful to the client?

2. How can the coach best handle their own difficult emotions?

For example, the frustration of knowing about bullying but not being able to do anything about it; or keeping quiet in a coaching session about something relevant to the client they cannot tell them.

The research

All coaches may face ethical dilemmas but, as Sandra Wilson has eloquently argued¹, internal coaches work in a unique environment with complex relationships. This makes managing boundaries and confidentiality more challenging than for external coaches.

Some 123 internal coaches (excluding mentors or coach-managers) from more than 30 organisations took part in the EMCC survey. All participants had at least six months' coaching



Key findings

- Internal coaches experienced a wide range of ethical dilemmas in their work. Those who received appropriate training and support felt equipped to deal with these challenges.
- Most internal coaches coached on top of their day jobs and only had one or two clients at a time. They came across as passionate about what they did and found much satisfaction in their coaching work. However, they sometimes felt exposed.
- Some coaches did not feel their training equipped them to deal with issues as they arose – employers needed to provide initial training and guidance.
- Most organisations left it to their coaches to decide the content of their client contracts. Given the importance of tight contracting in dealing with ethical challenges, organisations might give more thought to this. The more experienced coaches made that very clear.
- Some organisations had not completely thought through how they could best support their coaches. The spectrum of support – from CPD to supervision – stretched from comprehensive in some organisations to sparse or absent in others.
- Most internal coaches were not bound by a professional code of ethics. Yet these can provide guidance plus a means of redress that protect both coach and client. They also provide an excellent starting point for conversations about ethical issues.

experience. They described more than 150 dilemmas that they'd experienced, and these form a "top 10 types" of dilemma (see far left).

Support for coaches

Most of the coaches felt their initial training (most had been funded by their employer and nearly half held a recognised qualification) and ongoing support systems equipped them to a reasonable extent to deal with the situations they faced. However 15 per cent felt ill-equipped by their training and 23 per cent lacked the ongoing support they felt they needed.

Guidance about their role

Only a third said there was a contracting document between them and their organisation describing their responsibilities as a coach. When it came to contracting with the clients, while three-quarters had some kind of written agreement with the client there was a degree of "do it yourself". Only a third used agreements from their organisation.

Ethics/complaints processes

Many of the coaches were confused about whether their coaching was subject to an ethical code. A quarter said no; 13 per cent weren't sure. Of the two-thirds who said yes, more than a third were members of a professional body.

Nearly half indicated they were bound by their organisation's own code but when asked about how complaints would therefore be dealt with, most didn't know or thought they would be dealt with under normal grievance procedures.

There was a clear sense that some employers had either not really thought about redress issues or had not told their coaches what the arrangements were.

Supervision/CPD support

This was a very mixed picture. Some organisations provided an impressive array of supervision and CPD opportunities, with some making attendance at supervision groups a requirement of continuing to coach. At the other end of the spectrum, some

organisations offered little, if any, support to their internal coaches. *Table 1 (page 49)* shows the kinds of support offered. ■

● *Katharine St John-Brooks runs her own coaching business, Working Solutions, and is a member of the EMCC's Ethics & Research Committee*

● *The EMCC's ethical awareness workshops use case studies and role play to address ethical coaching issues for members and non-members. The EMCC is also planning a forum for ethical supervision with live issues.*

Contact Steve Nicklen, director of ethics and research, at

Uk.Director.Ethics& Research@emccouncil.org

References and info

1 *Coaching at Work*, vol 3, issue 3, 2008.

2 See *Troubleshooter*, page 18.

● This research was presented at the EMCC's annual conference in November. Full results will appear in the *EMCC's International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching* (June 2010). See www.coaching-at-work.com/category/news for additional results