



Supervisors' perspectives on the contribution of coaching supervision to the development of ethical organisational coaching practice

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Orientation: Organisational coaches operate in an increasingly complex environment where they regularly face ethical dilemmas. Because of the confidential nature of coaching, coaches may find themselves isolated with limited means to deal with ethical challenges.

Research purpose: This research investigated the typical ethical dilemmas that coaches bring to supervision and the role that supervision could play in helping coaches deal with ethical challenges.

Motivation for the study: The role of coaching supervision in promoting ethical coaching practice is important but not well studied or understood.

Research approach/design and method: In this qualitative study, 13 South African coaching supervisors were interviewed about the role of supervision in developing ethical organisational coaching practice. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Main findings: Coaches typically bring two types of ethical challenges to supervision: three-way relationship and confidentiality and coach–organisation contracting. Supervisors employ several strategies to assist coaches with ethical dilemmas: they analyse the ethical dilemma using frameworks, observe supervisor–coach boundaries, remind coaches of contracting and encourage coaches' professional competence development.

Practical/managerial implications: Coaching supervision offers a space for reflective practice for coaches to understand and deal with their ethical dilemmas. Coaches are encouraged to actively seek and engage in ongoing supervision to safeguard themselves, their clients and the organisations they serve against the potential harm of ethical dilemmas.

Contribution/value-add: This study adds knowledge on the value and application of the important, growing phenomenon of coaching supervision.

Keywords: coaching; coaching supervision; ethical dilemmas; contracting; continued professional development.

Introduction

Organisational coaching is a well-established and rapidly growing human development practice that can be beneficial to individuals and their organisations (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma, & Van Vianen, 2014). Organisational coaching involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee and other stakeholders, including the sponsoring organisation (Bachkirova, Cox, & Clutterbuck, 2014, p. 1). Some of the benefits of organisational coaching include improved performance and skills, well-being, goal-directed self-regulation, improved work–life balance, psychological and social competencies, self-awareness and assertiveness, adapting to change more effectively, helping to set and achieve goals, role clarity and changing behaviours (Blackman, Moscardo, & Gray, 2016; Theeboom et al., 2014).

When coaches apply the core coaching competencies correctly, they add value to the well-being and success of their clients and their organisations. The rapid development of coaching comes with great responsibility and simultaneously a certain degree of notoriety, because coaching, unlike other similar professions (such as medicine, nursing, social work or counselling and psychotherapy), continues to remain unregulated, despite its growing popularity (Brennan & Wildflower, 2010). As a result, coaches sometimes find themselves in situations that are ethically

challenging. There are ethical frameworks available to help guide coaches through these challenges. However, these frameworks fail to offer practical guidance (Bond, 2000). Because of the confidential nature of coaching interventions, coaches may therefore feel isolated and unsure of how to handle ethical dilemmas appropriately, and they need external support.

Coaching supervision plays an increasing role in supporting and developing professional standards for coaches (Passmore, 2011; Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2020). Coaching supervision is a process to support the efficacy of the coaching practice through reflection, evaluation, sharing of skills and ensuring the continuous growth of the coach (Bachkirova, Stevens, & Willis, 2005; Passmore & McGoldrick, 2020). Coaching supervision has grown significantly in recent years and is now an established practice, supported and encouraged by most professional coaching bodies (Bachkirova, Jackson, Henning, & Moral, 2020). Supervision allows the coach to mirror their coaching practice in the company of a knowledgeable supervisor and stimulates continuous learning and development of the coach (Bluckert, 2005). Supervision also provides the coach with specialised support that contributes to their growth and the efficacy of their practice (Bachkirova et al., 2005). Such development is achieved through interactive reflection, interpretive evaluation and sharing of expertise (Lucas, 2020). Supervision provides an ideal platform where a coach can reflect on ethical dilemmas they face in practice. However, despite the importance of supervision, there is currently no single agreed-upon model of coaching supervision, and there is little research available on the praxis of supervision and its efficacy (Joseph, 2016), especially regarding dealing with ethical dilemmas. The question this research therefore asked was: how does supervision contribute to organisational coaches' ethical practice?

Understanding the role of supervision in helping coaches deal with ethical dilemmas is important not only to supervisors and coaches but also to organisations who employ coaches. Organisations are not privy to the details of the coaching conversations because of confidentiality. Therefore, knowing that coaches have a platform to discuss and resolve ethical challenges is of significant importance to organisational sponsors.

Ethics in coaching

Ethics is defined as a branch of philosophy dealing with values that relate to human conduct concerning the rightness or wrongness of specific actions (Chandler & Plano, 1988). Rightness refers to what ought to be or what is acceptable, and wrongness to what ought not to be or what is unacceptable to a particular society or group (Kirkpatrick, 1987). Ethics is concerned not only with distinguishing right from wrong and good from bad but also with the commitment to do what is right or acceptable (Chapman, 1993). People have the capacity, knowledge and tools to be ethical and distinguish between right and wrong. However, whether or not a person

will act morally depends on their principles, values and experience (De Jong, 2006; Passmore, 2009; Weiner, 2004).

Translated to the world of coaching, these definitions can be interpreted to mean that ethics in coaching promotes coaching practitioners' acceptable behaviour and the right actions in performing entrusted duties. A coach practitioner would be deemed ethical if he or she portrays acceptable conduct (Stout-Rostron, 2012).

To guide coaches in terms of ethics, ethical codes of conduct are provided by most of the coaching associations and are similar but by no means identical in content (ICF-International Coach Federation, 2016). The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) (as cited in Gray, 2011), for example, requires that coaches ensure that their level of competence is sufficient to meet the needs of a client, to understand and identify potential conflicts of interest and boundary issues and to maintain confidentiality and high standards of work. The EMCC-European Mentoring and Coaching Council (2009) emphasises that coaches must avoid conflict of interest and ensure proper contracting with their clients and sponsor. The ethics code of the Association for Coaching (2010) highlights the need for coaches to refer clients to experts either for coaching, psychotherapy or other specialist services in cases where their skills prove inadequate (Gray, 2011). The ICF is committed to high ethical standards for coaches (Gray, 2011). The purpose of the ICF Code of Ethics is to promote professional and ethical coaching practices and to raise the awareness of people outside the profession about the integrity, commitment and ethical conduct of ICF members and ICF credentialed coaches (ICF-International Coach Federation, 2019). The non-statutory professional body for Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA) has aimed to set ethical standards for coaching and mentoring in South Africa. The Code of Ethics and Conduct outlines values, standards and fundamental principles with which members of COMENSA agree, and by which they may be measured, supervised or assessed (COMENSA-Coaches and Mentors of South Africa, 2015). It is necessary for coaching bodies to consider the capacity of various codes to complement each other, the likelihood of conflict between the codes and processes to resolve such issues (Gray, 2007).

Codes of ethics are a catalyst for moral thinking and are useful in providing means of discipline and quality control (Passmore, 2011). Nevertheless, they cannot replace the individual ethical decisions that coaching practitioners need to make (Bailey & Schwartzberg, 1995). Ethical codes are supportive systems to expand the coaches' knowledge; however, they have gaps because they cannot address the dilemmas faced by coach practitioners in diverse situations and reflect on one perspective only, namely that of professional bodies on ethics (Turner & Passmore, 2018). It is important to note that no unified code of ethics has been able to ease the challenges of making ethical decisions, and for this reason, scholars and practitioners have proposed the

development of ethical decision-making frameworks as an option for making ethical decisions (Duffy & Passmore, 2010; Passmore & Mortimer, 2011). De Jong (2006) notes that codes of ethics are useful as basic guidelines for ethical coaching practice, yet they do not provide answers as to how coaches should respond to those dilemmas. Neither do codes of ethics instil the power of judgement necessary to develop a sense of professional ethical responsibility in coaches (De Jong, 2006; Weiner, 2004).

Clearly, coaches need mechanisms to deal with ethical challenges. One suggestion is that they should build their awareness of ethical dimensions and responsibilities in preparation for difficult situations (Anderson & Williams, 2006). The coach practitioners must explore and reflect on their moral standards and how they influence their coaching competence. However, ethics cannot be applied by just reading a book (Rossiter, Walsh-Bowers, & Prilleltensky, 1996). Hence, discussions with fellow professionals are crucial and are to be held in a non-judgemental setting (Rossiter et al., 1996). Supervision provides such a space and could therefore potentially play a role in helping coaches deal with ethical dilemmas. In fact, coaching supervision is emphasised as beneficial because it develops new approaches and learning (SGCP-Special Group in Coaching Psychology, 2007). However, it is unclear to what extent supervision is used to deal with ethical issues and the manner in which it is carried out.

Ethical dilemmas in coaching

Ethical dilemmas in coaching develop under a variety of circumstances where coaches are faced with situations in which sound ethical decisions are required (Turner & Passmore, 2018). Various researchers have identified and classified typical ethical dilemmas. Pomerantz and Eiting (2007) found that common ethical dilemmas faced by coaches relate to serving multiple clients, confidentiality, breach of contract and overstepping boundaries (e.g. acting as a psychologist). Passmore and Mortimer (2011) found ethical challenges relating to issues with the coachee, issues with the coach, confidentiality and boundary management issues and challenges stemming from the multiple-role relationship nature of coaching in organisations.

Several strategies are suggested for coaches to manage ethical dilemmas. A fundamental strategy is the ongoing review of the coaching contract (Bennett, 2008). A coach may, for example, find it difficult to terminate a coaching contract when the situation so requires. To address this challenge, the coach must ensure that there is a clear agreement that defines the services (Passmore & Mortimer, 2011).

The challenges related to the multiple-role relationship nature of coaching stem from working with many clients in the same organisation, meaning that a coach must ensure that confidentiality is upheld at all times (Passmore & Mortimer, 2011). Success in navigating multiple-role relationships depends on full disclosure of any conflict

of interest; clearly defined roles, responsibilities and boundaries; a client-focused approach; reflective practice; and supervision (Zur & Anderson, 2006). Here again, the coaching contract must spell out the rules of behaviour of the coach-coachee relationship to safeguard against crossing certain boundaries (Passmore & Mortimer, 2011). The importance of the client's autonomy and the boundary responsibility of managing oneself within this relationship is emphasised by Bond (2015).

The research regarding ethical decision-making is underdeveloped, especially in the area of coaching as an intervention (Duffy & Passmore, 2010). An ACTION decision-making framework was developed to assist individual coaches in addressing the limitations of ethical codes of practice (Passmore, 2009). The model consists of six stages of ethical decision-making and seeks to offer a flexible and nonlinear approach to the resolution of dilemmas (Passmore, 2009). The six stages are as follows: awareness; classify; time for reflection, support and advice; initiate; option evaluation; novate. However, Passmore (2009) cautioned that the ACTION model is not conclusive and encouraged others to reflect on it through research to enhance both the understanding of the dilemmas and ethical challenges faced by coaches and to build comprehensive models to guide coaches in resolving ethical problems.

In conclusion, dealing with ethical issues can be complex, and inexperienced coaches can become overwhelmed with the decision-making process (COMENSA-Coaches and Mentors of South Africa, 2015). Research by Turner and Passmore (2018) on how coaching supervisors handle ethical dilemmas in practice highlighted gaps in the practice, which may have negative effects on the profession and its status: 'the findings suggest a lack of clarity and understanding around ethical decision-making and a lack of consistency in the possible implementation of codes' (p. 139). They emphasise the complexity of ethics in organisational coaching and state that there is often not a simple case of right or wrong. Clearly, coaches need help with managing ethical dilemmas, and supervision provides a potential mechanism in this regard.

Research method

Methodology

The research study was undertaken as a primary qualitative study. In using the qualitative research method, the aim was to explore the nature of ethical dilemmas coaches bring to supervision and how supervisors deal with them, as perceived by those who have an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). The collection of qualitative data allowed flexibility to address issues as they arose during data collection (such as finding appropriate participants) and to access the deep insights and personal meanings of the supervisors in relation to the contribution of coaching supervision to the development of ethical practice for coaches.

Sampling and research population

The primary data was collected via interviews with 13 supervisors from COMENSA and the ICF. Invitations were sent to supervisors via the research committees of ICF and COMENSA. Supervisors contacted the first author and were asked to sign an informed consent form that explained the research and participants' rights. To qualify for participation, supervisors had to have:

1. A diploma or master's degree in coaching
2. More than 5 years' coaching practice experience
3. More than 20 one-on-one or group supervision sessions
4. Formal training in supervision.

Participant demographics

Table 1 shows that nine of the participants had between 5 and 10 years and four participants had 10–15 years of coaching experience. Five participants had diploma qualifications, and eight participants had postgraduate degree qualifications. All participants had received formal training in supervision. Based on the aforementioned features, the participants were regarded as suitably qualified and experienced to provide the necessary data and insight into ethical coaching practices.

Data collection

One-on-one interviews lasting between 45 and 60 min were conducted using open-ended questions to collect data on typical ethical dilemmas that coaches bring to supervision and strategies and tools that supervisors use

TABLE 1: Demographic representation of participants.

No.	Pseudonym	Qualifications	Years of coaching experience	No. of coaching supervision sessions held with clients
1.	Daisy	Diploma in coaching	5 years	40 sessions
2.	Charne	Master's degree in coaching	13 years	More than 20 sessions
3.	Amanda	PhD in coaching	5 years	50 sessions
4.	Ella	Master's degree in coaching	10–15 years	More than 20 sessions
5.	Kate	Advanced business coaching programme Supervision training	5 years	32 sessions
6.	Peter	PhD in coaching	5 years	200 sessions
7.	Greg	Master's degree in coaching	9 years	150 sessions
8.	Vanessa	Diploma in supervision Diploma in coaching	5 years	350 sessions
9.	Sarah	Master's degree in coaching	5 years	60 sessions
10.	Shirley	Diploma in coaching	8 years	30 sessions
11.	Frank	Master's degree in psychology MBA Professional business coaching programme Advanced professional business coaching programme	12 years	100–120 sessions
12.	Ally	Diploma in coaching Certificate in supervision	5 years	351 sessions
13.	Bella	Honours in psychology ACC in coaching Credentialed at master coach level	12 years	200 sessions

ACC, Associate Certified Coach.

in advising coaches to deal with dilemmas. Example questions include: 'what is your understanding of the term "ethical dilemmas"?' and 'describe the importance of having strategies to deal with ethical dilemmas'. Interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed by the first author.

Data analysis

The data analysis process involved in-depth interrogation of data from the interview transcripts. Reflective notes were made on the key elements that were dominant in the interviews. The interview notes were validated against each transcript as confirmed by the participants to ensure accuracy of the information and to check for errors in the transcripts or notes.

The ATLAS.ti version 8 software tool was used to code data. Interviews were analysed inductively into codes, categories and themes, using a thematic analytical procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify, analyse and report the patterns or themes within the data. Coding of the data was done per paragraph, searching and identifying concepts. The first round of coding generated 592 codes. Codes were merged and refined through a process of memo-writing where ideas of possible code groupings were noted. The codes were merged into possible main themes and subthemes aligned to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The code-refining process resulted in two main themes and six subthemes, as illustrated in Table 2. These subthemes were checked against the data numerous times, observing the linkage to the research objectives and questions.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the research study that explored the contribution of coaching supervision to the development of ethical coaching practice from the perspective of supervisors. The findings are grouped into two main themes and six subthemes, as illustrated in Table 2, and presented in detail below.

Coaches' ethical dilemmas

To understand how supervisors deal with ethical dilemmas presented by coaches, it is helpful to have insight into what supervisors consider to be ethical dilemmas and the types of ethical dilemmas coaches bring to supervision. The first theme that emerged from the data deals with this aspect.

TABLE 2: Main and subthemes that emerged from supervisor interviews.

Theme	Sub-theme
Coaches' ethical dilemmas	Three-way relationships and confidentiality Coach and organisation contracting
Supervision strategies	Analysis and frameworks Supervisor and coach boundaries Contracting Developing professional competence

Supervisors' understanding of what constitutes a coach's ethical dilemma was captured by Bella:

'Ethical dilemmas is [sic] about the potential harm to a client – client-company, even – for the coach, and it is about the notion that there would be more than one way of approaching something, each of which has consequences. It is about exploring those approaches, the consequences and selecting the most appropriate approach to take amongst those options.' (Bella)

There were two major types of typical ethical dilemmas that coaches brought to supervision: three-way relationships and confidentiality (Greg, Sarah, Vanessa, Amanda, Charne, Daisy) and contracting (Ella, Kate, Peter).

Three-way relationships and confidentiality

Coaches seemed to encounter ambiguity in the face of the complex three-way relationships in organisational coaching between the coach, coachee and sponsoring organisation. Several ethically challenging situations were observed by supervisors. A particularly challenging situation is when the organisation expects coaches to break coach–coachee confidentiality and provide feedback to the organisation about the coachee, as described by Daisy, Sarah, Kate, Charne, Frank and Greg:

'I think the biggest one for me was organisations asking the coach (whom I supervise) – I am thinking of an SOE here, where management asked them for a report on a coachee. And they simply refused to do it. They said: "I won't unless I give feedback in front of coachee." So if they invite the coachee into the room and me into the room, I'd have an open conversation, but I'm not prepared to do a confidential report about the coachee.' (Greg)

'The biggest one is confidentiality, which is about the organisation wanting a coach to reveal what's happening in the coaching session.' (Frank)

Supervisors also observed how some coaches unintentionally blur the lines between being a work colleague or friend and a coach, as expressed by Kate and Greg:

'You know, coaches sometimes get themselves into a bit of trouble because they coach colleagues and that becomes an ethical dilemma, because one colleague will tell the coach something and then their colleague will tell the same coach something else, and it puts the coach in a very awkward situation.' (Kate)

'It is about people bumping into friends at parties and recognising that you know someone who you're coaching or that you know a family member and then behaving with integrity, because you have inside information as to what's going on. You know, that is always a tricky one as well.' (Greg)

A variation on this theme is where the coach and coachee initially do not have an existing relationship, but then a friendship develops as a result of the coaching:

'So ... often when the coach is involved with the client in a relationship, and I'm talking about coaching relationship[s] that can actually overstep boundaries quite easily, ... the friendship develops or it starts to become more social.' (Vanessa)

Coach and organisation contracting

Supervisors stated that coaches often seem to struggle with either creating a clear contract or sticking to the rules of the contracts once the coach starts:

'A very common one is contracting, particularly when coaches are new; they tend to think of the contract that they have with the client [coachee], but if the organisation is paying for the coaching, then they must understand that the organisation is also a client. The ethical dilemma often happens when the coach starts to collude with the client against the organisation or the manager against the client.' (Vanessa)

Another illustration of how a contract could be breached by a coach was shared by Daisy:

'Among the issues relates to neutrality of the coach in situations where the company's Human Resource is responsible for paying for the clients' coaching fees. In some cases, the client may be planning to resign, while the company is still paying for his [or] her fees. This becomes an ethical dilemma because the coach will be caught between the Human Resources, which is the paying client, and the client who is going through the coaching.' (Daisy)

Supervisors also observed that organisations sometimes abuse the coaching process and the contracting to get rid of employees:

'I'm thinking it's a bit of an ethical dilemma sometimes when they are the coaches told by the company that they want to performance-manage the person out by putting them into coaching. I mean, that is a serious one.' (Vanessa)

Coaches are also faced with loyalty issues by having to decide whether they should be loyal to the coachee or the organisation who is paying them:

'So one of them [an ethical dilemma] would be coaching somebody who's being groomed for a future position, and this person has now been approached by another company, and they're wanting to take that job. The coach often feels torn around loyalties.' (Bella)

Finally, supervisors observed how certain coachee actions could lead the coaches to want to take sides with the organisation, but they were hesitant to do so:

'One of the ethical dilemmas is a situation whereby the coach is aware of the incongruence or unethical behaviour, such as fraud or incriminating evidence. However, reporting or disclosure becomes an ethical dilemma since they are bounded by the confidentiality clause [of the contract].' (Vanessa)

Supervisors noted that ethical dilemmas represent potential harm to clients (Peter and Frank), and as a result, the coach has the responsibility to apply the correct framework or guidelines (e.g. the ICF code of ethics) to make an ethical decision. It is the role of the supervisor to remind coaches of this duty.

Supervision strategies

The data revealed several mechanisms used by supervisors to help coaches deal with ethical dilemmas, as captured by

the four subthemes: analysis and frameworks, supervisor and coach boundaries, contracting and professional development.

Analysis and frameworks

Despite building ethical intelligence and using all of the tools at supervisors' disposal, there may be times when coaches are faced with ethical decisions that have to be made or an ethical dilemma that has to be faced. Supervisors noted that such matters could be managed more easily with the use of an ethical decision framework.

Considering the challenges of dealing with ethical dilemmas, this research found that there is a strong reliance on ethical frameworks and tools when dealing with ethical dilemmas. Supervisors mentioned that they relied on models such as the six-step ACTION decision-making framework (Passmore, 2009), the seven-eyed process model of supervision (Hawkins & Smith, 2006), the ICF standards and guidelines in coaching (ICF-International Coach Federation, 2019) and the tool that goes by the acronym RIGHT (Cochrane & Newton, 2017). Supervisors employ these tools in the interaction with coaches and also remind coaches to use these tools in their own practice.

One of the supervisors explained their use of the RIGHT framework as follows:

'A little strategy by Trudi Newton, which is an acronym called RIGHT, is quite useful for ethical dilemmas. It is a reminder to look at the rules. So the R is for rules, and the I is for integrity, and that the G is looking at good – what is good for whom – and the H is around harm – is there any harm being effected in this situation? And the T is the truth of it. What is the real core issue here that needs to be declared or noticed or responded to?' (Daisy)

Other supervisors cited personal strategies such as listening to ignite, avoiding harm, assessing the dilemma at systemic levels, peer supervision and referring to previous experiences on how dilemmas were resolved (Amanda, Daisy, Kate and Sarah).

One of the supervisors pointed out that a dilemma must be analysed to determine the cause and effect thereof:

'What [is] the actual dilemma ...? Then what is the actual agreement that the coach has with the client? So what was the mandate that was given? Are there any grey areas that needs to be defined or clarified? Is there conflict of interests?' (Sarah)

The supervisors reported that they assess and analyse the dilemma in detail, as dilemmas are usually complex. The dilemmas are assessed from the point of origin, and the risk level or impact is also assessed.

Supervisor and coach boundaries

One of the findings of the research related to the scope of profession for coaches. Supervisors observed how coaches were caught in ethical dilemmas where their clients (coaches)

presented psychologically embedded problems that required therapeutic intervention. It was important for supervisors to help their coaches with a clear understanding of their scope of practice to ensure that they did not overstep their boundaries. One of the supervisors noted that very few supervisors have a solid grounding in psychological theory, which is problematic:

'It is one of the reasons that I believe it is essential for supervisors to have a solid grounding in psychological theory, because if you do not have a grounding in psychological theory, you are not going to pick these things up.' (Bella)

Contracting

Supervisors noted that contracting remains one critical strategy that is used by coaches to manage the complexity with clients and sponsors. It is used as a safeguard for supervisors in maintaining the coach–client relationship. Daisy expressed the importance of contracting in managing the coaching relationship and the client's expectations:

'Multilevel contracting is important to check if there are multiple stakeholders involved. Sketching that triangle to see where the client is located, where the coach is or the client or the sponsor and where HR is in the picture.' (Daisy)

Greg noted that he regularly reminds coaches of the importance of contracting:

'In addition, contracting and understanding what that contract means. It is helping coaches to learn to contract well and to hold the organisation to the contract.' (Greg)

Developing professional competence

Supervision provides a reflective container to develop competencies and to provide continuous professional development and action learning for the coach practitioner. The competence of the coach has an impact on the ability to deal with ethical dilemmas. Supervisors expressed their concerns regarding the training of coaches and their competence in dealing with ethical dilemmas. Although there are legislative frameworks that provide guidelines in resolving some of the ethical dilemmas, the competence of the coach has a bearing on how the coach interprets and applies the knowledge in a situation of ethical dilemma. The supervisors supported the notion of supervision enhancing the professional competence for coaches:

'Coaching supervision is a collaborative learning practice that continually build[s] the capacity of the coach through reflective dialogue. The intention is to benefit both the coach and their clients. It offers coaches an opportunity for continuous professional development in a safe, supportive and confidential space.' (Sarah)

Discussion

This research investigated the role that supervision plays in developing coaches' ethical coaching practice. The findings reveal firstly which ethical dilemmas coaches bring to supervision and secondly the strategies supervisors employ to assist coaches.

In this study, the ethical dilemmas that coaches brought to supervisors were in line with what was observed by other coaching ethics researchers. Confidentiality and contracting as well as the complex multiparty relationships were the primary causes of ethical challenges, as also observed by Pomerantz and Eiting (2007) and Passmore and Mortimer (2011). The complexities of organisational coaching contracting is well known especially in terms of creating and maintaining alignment between the coach, the coachee and the sponsoring organisation (Van Coller-Peter & Burger, 2019). It seems that this complex landscape with potentially competing objectives provides fertile ground for ethical challenges, because situations arise where appropriate decisions are not always straightforward. Problems occur because of many alternatives or approaches that could be taken to resolve the dilemmas. It was clear that the responsibility is upon the coach to apply the correct framework or guidelines to make an ethical decision. In fact, strong contracting can help coaches decide whether they are in fact the right coach for the situation (Turner & Passmore, 2019).

Findings show that supervision provides coaches with an opportunity to debrief and develop their capacity to handle ethical dilemmas. The supervisors noted that strategies and tools are key in dealing with dilemmas. They felt that a multipronged approach is required to resolve dilemmas successfully. The research by Turner and Passmore (2018) highlighted gaps in supervision and ethical practice, suggesting that there is not sufficient clarity and understanding around ethical decision-making and observing 'a lack of consistency in the possible implementation of codes' (Turner & Passmore, 2018, p. 139). The findings of the present study, however, suggest that there is a fairly mature awareness and use of standard ethical frameworks by supervisors during supervision. Supervisors agree with the notion that strategies and tools provide resources and show a clear way forward to coaches in working with their clients. Thus, the coaches' capabilities in resolving dilemmas are strengthened. Supervisors rely on models such as the ACTION decision-making framework (Passmore, 2009), the seven-eyed process model of supervision (Hawkins & Smith, 2006) and the ICF standards and guidelines in coaching (ICF-International Coach Federation, 2019) to assist coaches in dealing with dilemmas. The use of these frameworks points to a possible maturing of the level of training supervisors undergo. In addition to ethical frameworks, supervisors could also use ethical case studies to help sensitise coaches to potential ethical dilemmas and explain how to deal with them (Turner & Passmore, 2019). Using these approaches could help develop ethical maturity by developing confidence in ethical understanding (Turner & Passmore, 2018).

The present study showed that supervision provides a reflective container to develop coach competencies and assist with continuous professional development and action learning for the coach practitioner (Hawkins & Smith, 2013). This satisfies the need for coaches to continually reflect on

their moral standards in a practical, not just theoretical, manner (Anderson & Williams, 2006). It is therefore important that the supervisor and coach relationship is on firm footing. This can be achieved through open conversations, mutual trust, being open to emerging truths, intense listening and remaining flexible (De Vries, 2019). Ultimately, ethical mastery rests on the need for coaches to understand themselves (Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019). Supervisors are in a primary position to help facilitate this self-awareness and hence ethical mastery in coaches.

The study found that the competence of the coach has an impact on the ability to deal with ethical dilemmas. Supervisors expressed their concerns regarding the training of coaches and their competence in dealing with ethical dilemmas. This serves as a wake-up call to coaching training providers to ensure a firm focus on ethics during new coach training (Diller, Passmore, Brown, Greif, & Jonas, 2020). Coaching bodies such as ICF, COMENSA and EMCC also play a role in continued development of coaching ethical practice by ensuring that sufficient continuous development opportunities are made available to coaches and supervisors.

Practical implications

This study has several practical implications for supervisors, coaches, coach training providers, coaching regulatory bodies and organisations that use coaching services. Supervisors should familiarise themselves with practical ethical frameworks to help their clients (coaches) deal with ethical dilemmas. Supervisors should also be aware of the potential ethical dilemmas coaches could face and facilitate a reflective discussion on this with their clients. Coaches should ensure that they continue to stay alert for the possibility of becoming embroiled in an ethical dilemma and mitigate risks through contracting and seeking out the assistance of qualified supervisors. Coaching schools should ensure that adequate focus is placed on training coaches to avoid, identify and deal with ethical challenges. Coaching regulatory bodies should continue to offer continuous development opportunities to both supervisors and coaches on ethical coaching practice. Finally, organisations that purchase coaching services should insist that coaches are enrolled for supervision.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The study has a number of limitations and identifies areas for future research. A limitation is that data were only collected from supervisors. Additional perspectives could enhance the understanding of how supervision interacts with coaching ethics; therefore, the insights and experiences of coaches on how supervision assists them with ethical practice should be included. The voices of coaching bodies such as ICF, COMENSA and EMCC should also be heard in terms of how the training of coaching supervisors prepares them for assisting coaches with ethical dilemmas. A future study could include all these perspectives in a triangulation of data

sources to further enhance our understanding of the role of supervision in promoting ethical coaching practice.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this research study was to investigate the contribution of coaching supervision to the development of ethical practice for coaches. Coaches typically bring ethical challenges relating to relationships and contracting to supervision, and supervisors employ several strategies to assist coaches with ethical dilemmas, including the use of tools and framework. Coaching supervision is an important aspect of coaching that offers a space for coaches to reflect and deal with their ethical dilemmas. This study adds to our growing knowledge on the importance of coaching supervision.

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Authors' contributions

P.R. conducted the field work and wrote the original thesis. N.T. supervised the research and contributed to the writing of this paper.

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Ethical considerations

This research was ethically approved by the University of Stellenbosch Research Ethics Committee (Social, Behavioural and Education Research) (ref. no. 16783).

Data availability

Interview data available on request, but subject to confidentiality and anonymity requirements.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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