KE Hub Perspective: Dual Relationships in Coaching

EMCC UK’s Knowledge Exchange (KE) Hub is about facilitating how we can better tap into, and share, our community’s coaching and mentoring knowledge. So when it came to sharing on leading-edge learning, we turned to our member EQA accredited training providers.

Dr Geoff Pelham, Director of Research, from PB Coaching responded with his take on ‘Dual Relationships in Coaching’. Geoff argues that “some of the most challenging issues that confront coaches involve dual roles” particularly in the context of internal coaching. Intrigued? Then read on. Prefer a video? Then watch EMCC UK KE Hub’s YouTube™ video with Geoff and EMCC UK volunteer Stuart Haden.

Dual relationships in coaching

Some of the most challenging issues that confront coaches involve dual roles. By dual role I mean the situation where the coach has more than one role influencing the coaching relationship. Internal coaches can be the most challenged by such dual roles.

Imagine you are an internal coach and hold a senior position in Human Resources (HR) (a scenario that I frequently encounter). You have a coachee who is talking about what they see as the aggressive, almost bullying style of their manager. This is the same manager you are involved with, in your HR role, in relation to his/her promotion. Alternatively, you may know that there are - as yet unannounced - restructuring plans ahead which will significantly affect the person you are coaching. This person has come to coaching to explore their career progression. How do you manage these situations: ‘in your own head’ as you try to focus on what the coachee is saying but also act with integrity in both roles?

Such dual roles are commonplace in coaching. In fact, they may seem so much part of everyday life that they are hardly worth comment. However, as a supervisor and coach, I have seen such situations become so complex and entangled that the very viability of the coaching relationship is put into question. Paradoxically, however, as far as I can tell, very little is written about how to make sense of and manage these situations. How then do coaches manage, how do they ‘get by’, and how might we develop more resources in this area?
What are the resources for managing dual relationships?

A key resource here is contracting. If done properly contracting can go some way to naming and addressing some of the issues that might arise. Likewise, ethical codes provide some important guidelines. However, a lot of what we are dealing with here cannot be addressed through contracting or ethical codes because much of it is just woven into the background tapestry of the coaching conversation. In our examples, coachees may often be talking about something or someone in the organisation that the coach has knowledge about and perhaps is involved with. It would severely disrupt the coaching if every such background involvement was named. Indeed, the very act of naming it might well involve a breach of confidentiality for the third party involved.

Over and above contracting and ethical frameworks I don’t know of much that has been written that provides help and guidance in the complexity of all this. Yet coaches do manage. So how do they do this? My sense is that most of the time we can draw upon the experience of being in groups – family, friendships – which have given us a tacit form of knowing; a kind of ‘familiarity’ with managing confidences and multiple sometimes conflicting roles in ways that are ‘good enough’ so that we remain trustworthy, even though we may feel uncomfortable at times. Yet at times this tacit knowing can be almost overwhelmed by the complexity of situations. This can evoke powerful feelings of anxiety and confusion, and undermine a sense of professional well-being, competence and integrity.

Some questions from Geoff to consider

In the spirit of shared learning, and as part of EMCC UK’s KE Hub, it would be great if you have some thoughts about what I’ve written here and get back to us. Here are some questions that might prompt reflection and discussion:

- Does the account of dual relationships above tally with your experience as a coach?
- How do you manage such complex situations?
- What additional resources not mentioned here do you draw upon?
- Do you know of any authors/publications that would be valuable resources enabling us to better address dual roles? If so, please share.

Share your perspective

As its name implies, KE Hub is about exchanges of knowledge. So join the discussion and share your perspective in EMCC UK’s LinkedIn Group, our Regional Network LinkedIn Groups, on Twitter using the #EMCCUK hashtag or contact Geoff directly: geoff.pelham@pbcoaching.com

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