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# Leader as Coach: Navigating Ethical Complexity Through Core Coaching Values

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**Abstract:**

Today's leaders are increasingly expected to adopt a leader-as-coach mindset. This study explores how leaders can apply the International Coaching Federation's (ICF, 2022) four core values of professionalism, collaboration, humanity, and equity when responding to ethical situations related to their roles. In this study, 40 public and private sector leaders from multiple industries spanning five Western nations, all applying a coach approach, shared their experiences in an online survey. All were leaders, with over half holding executive or senior leadership positions; 60% had taken leader-as-coach training; and 88% informally adopted a coaching style and were not ICF-credentialed coaches. Participants described real-life ethical challenges and reflected on the role each ICF core value played in their decision making. Thematic analysis revealed value-specific practices, such as boundary management, cocreating solutions, and cultural sensitivity. Findings highlight how leaders interpret and embody coaching values while managing confidentiality, role clarity, and systemic equity. The study also revealed the evolving support needs of leaders as they expand their ethical coaching practice. Practical implications for organizations include developing role-specific, stage-appropriate resources and fostering peer-based learning communities. These findings offer insight into the ethical development of leader-as-coach practitioners and inform future support systems in leadership development programs.

**Keywords:**

Leader-As-Coach, Ethics in Coaching, Coaching Values, Leadership Development, Coaching Practice

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## Introduction

The embrace of coaching cultures and the vision of the leader-as-coach or coaching-based leadership (Peláez Zuberbuhler et al., 2020) has gained momentum in recent years, with an increasing number of organizations developing coaching skills for leaders. The intentional and consistent incorporation of a coach approach to leadership is key to enhancing the quality of working relationships, job satisfaction, and engagement in organizations (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2020; Grant & Hartley, 2013; Ibarra & Scoular, 2019; Koskinen & Anderson, 2023).

The Center for Creative Leadership defined coaching as “a helping relationship with a developmental focus played out in conversations that stimulate the person or group being coached to greater awareness, deeper and broader thought, and wiser decisions and actions” (Sass & Fly-Dierks, 2015, p. 313). Increasingly, organizations are embracing the idea that effective leadership requires embodying effective coaching skills (Bachkirova, 2024; Peláez Zuberbuhler et al., 2020).

## Literature Review

Ethics is central to leadership (Hunt, 2017; Metwally et al., 2019; Northouse, 2016). Resick et al. (2006) defined ethical leadership as “leading in a manner that respects the rights and dignity of others” (p. 346). With the implementation of a coach approach comes greater attention to the ethical implications for leaders as they navigate the dual roles of leader and coach, including ethical dilemmas related to boundaries of confidentiality, power dynamics, balancing obligations to the organization and the employee or team member, and balancing a coach approach with performance management and accountability (Bachkirova, 2024; Koskinen & Anderson, 2023; Milner et al., 2022).

The ethical dimensions of coaching are comprehensively addressed in professional guidelines for certified professional coaches, such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC, 2021) and the International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2025). The four core values that underpin the ICF’s (2025) *Code of Ethics* are professionalism, collaboration, humanity, and equity (see Figure 1).

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| **Professionalism**: | A commitment to a coaching mindset and professional quality that encompasses responsibility, respect, integrity, competence, and excellence. |
| **Collaboration**: | A commitment to developing social connection and community building. |
| **Humanity**: | A commitment to being humane, kind, compassionate, and respectful towards others. |
| **Equity**: | A commitment to using a coaching mindset to explore and understand the needs of others so I can practice equitable processes at all times that create equality for all. |

Figure 1: Core values of the International Coaching Federation.

Note: Based on The ICF Code of Ethics (pp. 4–5), by International Coaching Federation, 2025

In recognition of the challenges of adopting a coach approach to leadership, ethical guidelines for human resources practitioners and leaders as coaches are receiving increased attention (Milner et al., 2022; Pomerantz & Eiting, 2007; Sass & Fly-Dierks, 2015; Spaten & Flensborg, 2013). Based on their research, for example, Milner et al. (2022) proposed a code of ethics for organizational leaders to consider. The unique aim of this study was to advance the practical application of ethical guidelines for leaders by grounding an exploration of ethical practice within the globally researched, widely recognized ICF (2022) framework of core coaching values. In our work as executive leadership coaches and leader-as-coach educators, we saw the four core values of the ICF (2022) as an unexplored bridge between organizational codes of conduct and professional coaching ethical guidelines. We consulted with our leadership networks to assess the potential of these values to serve as a foundation for ethical practice guidelines for leaders.

## Methods and Data

### The Study

We developed an online, qualitative survey to explore the adoption of a leader-as-coach approach and the navigation of ethical situations. Leaders from our networks were invited to participate if they met two criteria: first, they currently held a leadership role and, second, they had adopted a coach approach as part of their leadership. Forty leaders from a variety of industries in the public and private sectors, who currently use a coach approach in their leadership practice, participated in an online survey to share their experiences. Respondents primarily resided in Canada, with 13 from other countries, including the US, UK, countries in Europe, and Australia. All were leaders, with over half holding executive or senior leadership positions. A total of 60% of participants had completed leader-as-coach training through their

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own professional development or organizational sponsorship; 88% informally adopted a coaching style and were not ICF-credentialed coaches.

In the survey, participants were asked to describe ethical situations they had encountered in adopting a leader-as-coach approach. They were then invited to reflect on how, if at all, each specific ICF (2022) core value played a role as they navigated the ethical situations identified. If a particular value had not been used, they were asked to consider how that value could be applied in addressing the identified ethical situations.

In addition to gauging their confidence in navigating ethical situations while acting as leader-as-coach, we also asked participants what additional support or resources would help them practice leader-as-coach more effectively. We analyzed the open-ended responses from 40 completed surveys and sorted these into themes under each of the ICF's (2022) core values: professionalism, collaboration, humanity, and equity. The scenarios described by the respondents illustrated the intricacies of holding a dual role as leader and coach.

Key considerations from leaders included navigating complex and often competing and/or hidden priorities at different levels of the organization and acknowledging the inherent power imbalances between employees and managers while seeking equitable interactions. For example, one leader presented an ethical situation as follows. "In our organization's quest to develop the next strategic plan, senior management discovered a 'hidden agenda' which has polarized staff at the National office level vs the Branch executive directors."

### Limitations

For this study, we drew participants from our professional networks of organizations in which leaders may engage in coaching roles within their organizational contexts. This network-based convenience sampling strategy (Etikan et al., 2016) may have resulted in a participant group that was more accessible to, familiar with, or professionally connected to the research team and may, therefore, have reflected some shared professional assumptions, organizational experiences, or orientations toward coaching. As a result, the sample may not reflect the full range of leaders who engage in coaching roles across organizational settings. We addressed this limitation by describing the sampling strategy transparently, situating the findings within participants' organizational contexts, and avoiding claims of broad generalizability. Accordingly, the transferability of findings is best considered in relation to readers' own contexts.

## Results

Emergent themes from respondents' scenarios are described below and exemplified with direct quotations from study participants.

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## Professionalism

Key themes for leaders using the value of professionalism when navigating ethical situations include boundary management, confidentiality practices, role clarity, and modeling integrity.

### Boundary Management

Leaders indicated they paid special attention to maintaining appropriate coach-coachee boundaries, especially when in dual relationships with team members. One study participant stated,

*I usually ask the person I am coaching what hat I am wearing and then I can be clear about the role I will play so I set the expectations — am I mentoring now — coaching or giving advice? Then we are clear what conversation we are having and commit to the mindset for that conversation.*

### Confidentiality Practices

Leaders found professionalism to be integral to managing the balance between maintaining confidentiality and sharing information with other interest holders. One leader noted, “I needed to address the situation with respect for both parties and protect the integrity of the organization as a whole.”

### Role Clarity

When balancing the needs of the individual being coached with team and organizational objectives, leaders emphasized the importance of distinguishing between when to act as a coach and when to be directive related to role authority. A participant asserted, “A coaching mindset is key to supporting a manager/report to develop their own competencies, but sometimes organizational requirements need a more directive approach.”

### Modeling Integrity

Leaders noted the need to approach each coaching opportunity with respect: “I need to role model what great looks like for my team. I need to demonstrate this so they see it in action and understand what it looks like and the positive impact it can have.”

## Collaboration

Participants’ collaboration value responses revealed the importance of cocreating solutions, building psychological safety, and facilitating team dynamics when navigating ethical situations.

### Cocreate Solutions

Leaders stressed the importance of working with coachees to develop approaches rather than imposing solutions. As one participant noted,

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*For the leader, a coach mindset is powerful when leading by influence across the organization, or from a place of influence, which fuels collaboration. Helping people see that they do not have to have all the answers, but if they have the right questions, they can be a catalyst for collaboration and forward movement.*

### Build Psychological Safety

Leaders create environments in which difficult conversations can happen productively. One leader emphasized,

*Collaboration is so important. It means you decide on how you show up at the proverbial table, not losing social connection or relationships — because by the opposite of that — by being rigid in thinking and behavior — is to potentially rule out the inclusion of other perspectives that can have an impact on ultimate outcomes/results.*

### Facilitate Team Dynamics

Leaders use coaching approaches to address interpersonal relationships. One participant shared,

*As a leader with multiple direct reports and relationships with other supervisors, I spend a lot of time coaching people on how to collaborate with their colleagues … rather than tell them what connections need to be made, understand what the gaps are from their perspectives and work together to develop action plans to connect people.*

## Humanity

Leaders using the value of humanity navigate ethical situations by listening with empathy, applying a whole-person approach, preserving dignity, and demonstrating cultural sensitivity.

### Listening With Empathy

Leaders stressed the importance of deeply understanding others' perspectives, particularly during difficult transitions. One participant stated, "To keep humanity top of mind, allows you to bring the elements of kindness and respect to the top of your conduct/behaviors, whilst still being clear in your communication."

### Applying a Whole-Person Approach

Leaders highlighted the importance of acknowledging personal circumstances and mental health while also maintaining a focus on work performance. Discussing their leadership practice, one participant wrote, "The coach approach means I provide deep listening, compassion, and full acceptance of the coachee wherever they are in their developmental journey. This is a systemic, nonjudgmental stance that opens a generative, safe space for the coachee."

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### Preserving Dignity

Participants stressed the importance of maintaining respect even during performance discussions or terminations. One participant stated,

*I seek to find where the employee is at in the given situation and always focus on strengths, competencies and the issues at hand. If the employee isn't the right fit for the job, I try to find solutions that will work for them.*

### Demonstrating Cultural Sensitivity

Leaders highlighted the need to adapt coaching approaches to diverse cultural backgrounds. One leader described cultural sensitivity as follows: "Grounding myself in my culture, leaning in to be uncomfortable and working through that in reflective practices, bringing in knowledge keepers and Elders to support grounding practices for staff and collaborators."

## Equity

Leaders use the value of equity when navigating ethical situations by seeking common ground, recognizing potential systemic barriers, applying individualized approaches, and maintaining awareness of power dynamics.

### Seeking Common Ground

Leaders described seeking common ground as taking the time to understand the full picture and respond with flexibility. One participant stated, "The approach is consistent — specifically that I listen and adjust for each person's situation and allow myself and the employee flexibility in coaching to do what works best for them."

### Recognizing Potential System Barriers

Leaders stressed the importance of identifying and addressing organizational structures and systems that may create disadvantages for individuals or groups. One participant shared, "In a systemic coach approach, I value the diversity of voices in the system, encouraging inclusivity, and recognizing and addressing bias."

### Applying Individualized Approaches

Leaders noted the need to customize coaching approaches to meet individual needs. One participant advised, "Asking, when appropriate, what cultural or other social considerations would a person feel comfortable sharing with me that could help me serve them better as a leader."

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### Maintaining Awareness of Power Dynamics

Leaders expressed it was important to recognize and respond to inherent power imbalances in leader-employee roles and relationships. One participant described how challenging it can be to mitigate this:

*Because I am usually the one in a position of authority, in one way or another, over staff coachees, this is one of the trickiest factors to manage I find. Self-awareness is a valuable tool. Also, working my approach back from the needs of the coachee, whether or not they happen to align with corporate goals, is critically important.*

## Discussion

### Key Insights Related to Supports

The data suggested as leaders received more leader-as-coach education, they became aware of more complex aspects of ethical leader-as-coach practices and sought correspondingly advanced supports. Additionally, participants noted that different leadership roles faced distinct ethical challenges, which can drive varying support needs. For example, higher level leaders sought support for complex strategic coaching scenarios, while front-line leaders indicated a need for more practical, immediately applicable resources. Leaders tended to request supports that directly addressed their most frequently encountered ethical situations. This suggests organizations could benefit from targeted support offerings based on common ethical challenges in specific leadership roles.

The data revealed a developmental journey in which support needs evolved from basic guidelines to sophisticated mentorship as leaders progressed in their leader-as-coach practice. As such, organizations might benefit from creating staged support systems that grow with leaders' development. In addition, participants consistently expressed their desire for community-based learning and support. Regardless of their role, leader-as-coach education level, or ethical situations faced, leaders resoundingly valued opportunities to learn from peers and discuss real-life situations.

### Practical Implications

The findings suggest the four core ICF (2022) values of professionalism, collaboration, humanity, and equity can offer a foundation for ethical practice guidelines for leaders. Figure 2 offers key questions for leaders to consider in ethically challenging situations.

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| **Professionalism**: How have I…<br>▪ Clarified my role (e.g., coach, mentor, manager)?<br>▪ Addressed confidentiality boundaries?<br>▪ Modeled the behavior I expect? | **Humanity**: How have I…<br>▪ Responded with empathy?<br>▪ Considered the whole person?<br>▪ Preserved the dignity of the individual? |
| **Collaboration**: How have I…<br>▪ Involved the person in resolving the issue?<br>▪ Created the conditions for psychological safety?<br>▪ Considered the impact on team dynamics? | **Equity**: How have I…<br>▪ Identified potential systemic barriers?<br>▪ Demonstrated awareness and sensitivity to power dynamics?<br>▪ Individualized my approach to the needs of the individual? |

Figure 2: Challenging Situations

Additionally, there are several practical implications for organizations looking to develop effective, ethical leader-as-coach leaders. Organizations could benefit from considering role-specific and experience-level-specific resources. Many leaders specifically requested ethics-focused training and resources, suggesting this is an underserved area in typical leader-as-coach development. Organizations could also consider investing in coaching communities of practice, as participants highly valued these opportunities. Support systems could evolve alongside leaders' development, offering increasingly sophisticated resources as leaders advance their leader-as-coach practice. Practical tools to help leaders apply coaching approaches within their specific organizational contexts and constraints are also in high demand.

## Conclusion

This article expands the conversation to offer ethical practice guidelines for leaders by drawing on the four core values of the ICF (2022). Leaders can benefit from attending to the ethical core values and considerations for practice when adopting a leader-as-coach approach within their organizations. We are grateful to the leaders who shared their experiences in service of amplifying our understanding of the ethical considerations of the leader-as-coach aspect of their practice. Future research directions could include examining the particular ethical challenges faced by leaders in different organizational roles (e.g., executive/C-suite leaders, middle managers, human resources/organizational development/learning and development leaders, team leaders); exploring the impact of coaching skills training duration on leaders' perceptions of and responses to ethical dilemmas; comparing leader-as-coach experiences across sectors (e.g., for-profit, healthcare, education, government/public sector); longitudinal studies to track leaders' experiences over time (e.g., to identify success factors in skill development); investigation of applicability of the ethical framework to leaders in diverse cultural

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contexts; and inquiring into how gender and culture shape approaches to ethical situations. It is our hope that the outcomes of this study contribute meaningfully to ongoing conversations about ethical practice in leader-as-coach development.

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