

# Coaching at Work

## “pp20-21– Troubleshooter: Where are my loyalties?”

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# Where are my loyalties?

An internal coach discloses in supervision, client reports of bullying. She must take a stand but also she wants to leave. How can supervision help?

## The Issue

**B**eth is a highly qualified, experienced internal coach in a global organisation. She has been working with you, her supervisor, for six months, and is normally very upbeat when she comes to sessions.

Today she's come to her supervision with a frown on her face and her energy feels very different. She tells you that she's been hearing in her coaching, and through her employee engagement role, stories about some disturbing behaviours. She's starting to see a pattern of micro-iniquities and outright bullying in the organisation, which are undermining her coaching clients' confidence and their ability to stand up for themselves.

Beth wants to figure out what her responsibilities are in this situation; and she is also realising that this is changing her own employment relationship with the company, as she didn't honestly think that this kind of thing happened here.

She's disappointed that it has been allowed to happen, and that it feels so pervasive. She doesn't know whether she can continue to work in this kind of environment, but she also knows that she does not want to simply walk away without standing up for what she sees as right, as that would be modelling avoidant behaviour to her coaching clients.

How might you supervise Beth in this situation?

## The Interventions



### Clare Norman

Clare Norman  
Coaching  
Associates

To illuminate the complex issues, I might ask Beth to draw all the elements in a mind-map, so she is aware of the constituent and potentially conflicting questions, including:

1. How can Beth stay neutral in her coaching, when what she's hearing clashes with her values – and the organisation's stated values?
2. How does she keep her confidentiality agreement clean, when she's heard some

of this through her coaching, and some in her employee role? What can she do with what she's heard?

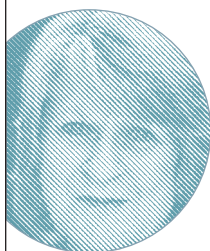
3. What's the role of the coach as whistle-blower? What is Beth's duty of care and how could her code of ethics inform her thinking?
4. She can't unhear things, so how does that impact on her psychological contract with the organisation?
5. Where else can Beth go for support for herself as an employee, bearing in mind her confidentiality agreements?
6. How does the organisation harvest this kind of learning across coaches, to address such issues at a systemic level?

Beth can now decide where she wants to focus her thinking time. Is this work normative, restorative or formative?

Where we go next depends on what she wants to be different by the time we finish our work together, and how she wants to do it. We may use transactional analysis<sup>1</sup> models to get a handle on what's happening; or the seven-eyed model<sup>2</sup>, to look through different lenses; we may acknowledge the system and what is, particularly in relation to the principle of exchange, the giving and receiving between parts of the system.

Whatever we do, I need to model behaviour that could be a positive parallel process for her, enabling her to do what she sees as right.

1. I Stewart & V Joines, *TA Today*, Chapel Hill, NC: Lifespace, 2012
2. P Hawkins & R Shohet, *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, New York: OUP, 2012



### Alison Hodge

Executive coach &  
coach supervisor

I would explore Beth's concerns through at least three lenses.

● **Beth's coachees**  
The language of bullying is highly charged and it might be easy to accept coachees' description of such behaviour as 'truth', especially where Beth's values are challenged. I might invite her to explore behaviours her coachees describe that might fall under the banner of 'micro-iniquities' or 'bullying',

and according to whose definition?

As an internal coach, she may be able to establish whether the pattern lay with one 'bullying employee' across several coachees or several employees?

● **Beth as an internal coach**

What is Beth's coaching contract in terms of confidentiality with coachees? Is she responsible to just the coachee or does she have a 'contract' with the organisation to deliver the coaching and does she know what the terms are? Are there guidelines for all internal coaches that would inform her course of action when she learns of behaviours 'against company policy'?

How are these stories impacting on her capacity to support coachees, if they are actually true? As she can't not know

what she now knows, how appropriate and possible as an internal coach would it be to investigate their validity without compromising confidentiality agreements with coachees?

● **Beth as an employee**

What's the company's policy around bullying? What's the declared responsibility for employees when they learn of such behaviours? Should she decide to leave the company, what would inform her decision?

We could also consider how the system and the culture may have been eroding her commitment and confidence in the company that triggered a strong response to want 'to help' her coachees and stand up for what she saw as being 'right'.