

## Dear Master Coach

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October 2014



### Dear Master Coach:

I have been told by an employee in a coaching session that she is on the verge of leaving the company that hired me for coaching. I have a very good, open working relationship with the human resource department and her confidence has presented me with a moral dilemma: do I share the information and risk losing the trust of the employee or do I retain the information and risk losing the trust of the human resource department? Please help!

Yours truly,  
Ethical Dilemma

Dear Ethical:

Well nice job asking a colleague on this one. (Seriously, I agreed to do this column because I feel so strongly about us coaches staying connected. It keeps us safer and our work stronger.)

Anyhoo. Let's break you out of that binary trap. I have a couple of ideas:

To start, as your client's decision to leave clarifies, get curious with her about whom she will tell and when—she doesn't have to start at work. And from there, how she will tell her colleagues at work (team members, boss, HR). How does she want to use her time with you to frame her communication strategy? And to maybe do some emotional rehearsal.

If a client is scared or angry, I slow down a bit. I assure her that we can probably work together to find the answers. In some cases, I can even be present for key conversations. As always, I acknowledge the strengths I see in her that will make it possible to share this news well.

On the rare off chance that she's just determined to keep her departure a secret from the people who sign my check as her coach, and I have to ask myself, "Well Patty, who would you rather be in trouble with?"

What have you learned through this? What will you do differently next time? Think about how you want to anticipate these things in future agreements when there's a third party in the picture. If a company or a boss is signing the check, it's natural for them to want to make sure that they hear about anything that will be potentially costly. In my own agreements, I include something like this:

*"When I'm coaching you as a team member I like know what the goals are of your leadership. We'll keep those things in mind along with your own areas of focus. If your boss wants contact with me during the time we work together, I like to be able to talk about overall trends I notice, but the specifics of our coaching belong to you. When your decisions affect your team or your boss, I'll help you to decide how to talk about those things. The only exception to this: If I see something that is a clear threat to the performance and well-being of the company and your colleagues, and we can't find a way for you to bring it up, then I will."*

*And I add this note to the boss: "When I'm coaching team members, they will grow—and sometimes in the direction of new responsibilities or even a new career path."*

Good luck Ethical. That client is blessed to have you.

PEB, MC

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