

Dear Master Coach

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Dear Master Coach:

I'm an external coach working with several executives at the same (client) company. One of them has just told me that she will likely resign in the next few weeks with very little notice—and that she wants me to keep her departure a secret. She's mad. If she leaves, I believe it could be a blow to the company, so I feel stuck: Do I share the information (and risk losing the trust of my coachee)? or do I keep the secret and risk losing the trust, and potentially fostering damage to others in the company?

*Sign me,
Ethical, yet Pragmatic*

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Dear E & P:

Well, first of all, nice job asking a colleague on this one. Seriously, I agree to do this column every quarter 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 for you to evaluate.

To start, as your coachee's decision to leave clarifies, invite her to play it out. Get curious with her about how she wants to this go. How does she want to use her time with you to frame her communication strategy? And in the interest of your own self-management, ask yourself, does any part of you want to teach or tell or rescue or nag or advise—or to drive the agenda? (Tempting isn't it?)

When a client is scared or angry or simply in contemplation, I slow down a bit. As our conversations clarify about what could and should happen next, I acknowledge the strengths I see in my coachee—the ones that will help her to share her decision well when the time comes.

On the rare off chance that she's just determined to keep her departure a secret from the people who could be negatively influenced by it, i.e. the people who sign my check as her coach, or that she doesn't care about the wreckage a bad departure might create, I have to ask myself, "*Well Patty, who would you rather be in trouble with?*" FYI this has never happened in my work as an executive coach. Like you, I've certainly had angry coachees, but the coachable ones have always been willing to work with me to create outcomes that aren't punitive.

Here are some questions for you, Ethical-Yet-Pragmatic, What are you learning through this? What will you do differently next time? You may find it useful to think about how you want to anticipate these

"triangles" in future agreements. If a company or a boss is signing the check, it's natural for them to want to want to know about anything that could be potentially costly or damaging to their organization. In my own agreements with coachees, I include something like this:

"When I'm learning about your goals, I also like to find out about the goals of your leadership. I'll work together with you to get that information and then I like to keep those things in mind even as we place our focus solidly on 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, things I notice, and whether or not you're showing up, 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 them. The only exception is this: If I see something that is a clear threat to the well-being of the company and to 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: *"You should know that when I'm coaching your team members, they will grow personally and professionally—and sometimes in the direction of new responsibilities or even towards a new chapter in their career. I can't guarantee that they will stay with you for the rest of their career. I can guarantee that they will be grateful for the opportunity you have provided for them to work with a good coach."*

So Ethical-Yet-Pragmatic, those are a few thoughts. Good luck. Let me know what you think. Your coachee and her company are blessed to have you.

PEB, MC

Listen to Patricia Burgin's "Dear Master Coach" quarterly 4 minute answers at:

<http://www.seattlecoach.com/dear-master-coach-blog>