

## How can you help a family member who needs coaching?

STICKY SITUATIONS GIVES US A WINDOW INTO CRITICAL COACHING MOMENTS. THIS SITUATION QUESTIONS CONFLICT OF INTEREST.

### the situation

“My nephew has been going through some tough times and I’ve been talking to him as an uncle through listening and general advice. Now we’re talking about moving into a more formal coaching relationship. I feel I can be objective. And I know there will be family issues that come up about his mom, my sister. But I really feel I can deal with it all and hold everything objectively. Am I getting myself into a mess and potentially stepping into a family fire that I’ll regret? Are there ethical issues involved here? I really want to help him see the possibilities in life.”

Do you have a sticky situation that you want help with or a different perspective on? You don’t have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you a hand. Please send your situations to: [letters@choice-online.com](mailto:letters@choice-online.com)



Carol Adrienne, PhD, states, “Whenever we make a decision to go against our better judgment, we need to look at what we are afraid of.”

The short answer is yes, you would be better off referring your nephew to another professional. I believe you know that in your heart of hearts. It’s clear that your concern and love for your nephew is strong, and you want to see him succeed in life. However, whenever we go against our intuition — which, in your case lies in your statement that you “might be stepping into a family fire” — then we have to wonder what else is influencing our thinking.

For example, are you thinking that it’s a good idea to start a coaching relationship with him because you already know his background story? Because you know what’s best for your nephew? Because you are afraid he won’t stick it out with another coach? Because you have an unspoken contract with your sister to help her with her family? If so, then these considerations may

be a sign of a deeper lack of trust in your nephew’s process. Whenever we make a decision to go against our better judgment, we need to look at what we are afraid of. What are we trying to control? Are we being — to use an overworked word — co-dependent?

You may feel that you can be objective, but you are not truly a disinterested party. As an uncle, you are rightly placed in the family dynamic, and are entitled to your opinions about other family members. You have the advantage of being able to advise and care, but are not obligated to produce results.

**“Yours is not an ethical question so much as it is a conflict of interest...”**

Yours is not an ethical question so much as it is a conflict of interest between a professional relationship and a family relationship. You can do things as a professional that you might not do as a relative, and vice versa. This is why professionals in the medical community do not treat or operate on their own relatives. I would suggest that you continue spending time with your nephew as you are — as a caring uncle — and, if he wants it, refer him to a good coach.



**Craig Carr**, PCC, notes, “The reason most trainers and advanced coaches recommend against coaching family and those in the coach’s inner circle, is that it is near impossible to detach from the other-than-conscious agendas we have for these folks.”

**T**he first thing I want to say is that you are an exemplary uncle! Your nephew is truly fortunate to have you on his side, and you are right not to want to make a mess of that.

The second thing is to share with you a viewpoint that you probably already understand but want to forget in this case: namely, that *great coaching is also largely subjective*.

I have little doubt you can create objective and measurable goals, tasks and the like. You can also manage boundaries and separate out the hard stuff that might be going on with other family members, and effectively keep it to the side of your coaching conversations. It is exactly your hyper-concern with doing so, however, that will stall the coaching from reaching its potential. All that is felt, intuitive and hidden will be excluded.

About now you may be saying to yourself, “but I think I can handle being objective about the subjective experiences we are having.” Good luck. The reason most trainers

and advanced coaches recommend against coaching family and those in the coach’s inner circle, is that it is near impossible to detach from the other-than-conscious agendas we have for these folks. Here’s one: what’s the real reason you are willing to risk damaging your relationship with your sister? You see, it gets complicated very quickly.

There are no specific references in the ICF ethics guidelines; it is appropriate that it is left to the good sense of the individual coach. I have seen great value in a family member/coach getting a relative going in coaching while having the very clear intent of priming them for a referral to another coach.

Please make this overt in your coaching plan with him. You are strongly invested that he give coaching a shot and you will help him get started. If you both find it working for him after a month or two, you will work with him to locate his next great coach. Now, doesn’t that sound like a relief!



**Vicki Trabosh**, CDC®, is a new voice for the Sticky Situations column. She says, “You are first his uncle, and that role was decided long before you became a coach.”

**I**love the fact that you care so much for your nephew that you want to be there as his coach. But you said it best: you could potentially be stepping into (or starting) a family *oil* fire that will not be easily extinguished with a little coaching *soda*.

Your job as a coach is clearly defined: to assist your clients in finding their answers and partnering with them in their defined issues and goals. Ask yourself this question: “Would I risk my relationship with my sister, and possibly my nephew, in order to be his coach?” This is the highest price you must be willing to pay. And its consequence is that you may no longer be warmly invited to Thanksgiving and all other holidays to pass the gravy boat. That’s a lot of gravy you could be missing...

Are there ethical issues? Not necessarily, if you believe that you can be impartial. But then something will happen or be said that

makes you *very partial* to the outcome. Now you’ve crossed the line. The appearance of a conflict in many business situations *is* a conflict. That’s all it takes. Appearance. And what you want to do, to serve as his coach with the best of intentions, is rife for hurt feelings, hidden agendas, unexpected consequences and family disharmony.

Consider using your great skills to refer him to another coach. If you and he have identified the issues, help him to meet with other qualified coaches who have no stake other than to help your nephew be his personal best.

You are still his uncle. Love him, support him, encourage him and continue to be a listening ear. But do not risk everything to do your job. You are first his uncle, and that role was decided long before you became a coach.

Your gift to him is this lifelong relationship that you both cherish. ●