

“Is my client just angry, or potentially dangerous?”

STICKY SITUATIONS GIVES US A WINDOW INTO CRITICAL COACHING MOMENTS. THIS SITUATION DEALS WITH A NEGATIVE AND ANGRY CLIENT.

the situation

“I recently took on a client who hates her job, speaks very negatively about her boss, feels belittled by other employees and doesn't see how she can get ahead in the company because of all the bad things others are doing. She has a goal to get close to one powerful executive there because he has turned other companies around and she wants him to notice her. I understand that she sees an opportunity in working with him, but I wonder if she is getting a little bit off-base (stalker-esque?). I wouldn't say she's dangerous, but she's so intense and angry, I am not sure I can make any headway with her. What should I do?”

Are you grappling with a sticky situation of your own? You don't have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Please send your situations to: letters@choice-online.com



Craig Carr, PCC, observes, “This client is offering you a grand opportunity to step up and define more fully who you are as a coach.”

Definitely a sticky question. I want to respond first, however, by pointing to a couple of gaps in the information you offer, both as a caveat to any advice that is here as well as to highlight a subtle learning point I think is valuable.

First, you say she doesn't see how to get ahead in the company yet a few words later contradict that by saying her goal is to attach herself to a powerful executive assessed to be going to the places she wants to go. I'm filtering a lot of emotion, obviously, but in and of itself that is a corporate-ladder strategy that's been around a long time and is not too shocking. What I'm not clear on is what you and she have designed as the primary focus of the coaching relationship.

Second, I've listened to enough human nature (including my own!) to know that when someone says something is “not” a certain way they've usually given a lot of thought to that something in an attempt to talk themselves out of it. It's a corollary to the Law of Attraction where the “not”-thing is actually closer to what is truly believed. I'm not convinced, in other words, that you are sure she is not malevolent, stalker-esque and dangerous in this context.

We're back to either clarifying the purpose of the coaching relationship, or it's possible you have hit an ethical hotspot in which you don't want to participate in dirty office politics where people get hurt. The bottom line here is that you wouldn't coach a thief to be a better bank robber, would you?

If it is an ethics conflict, that's easy: you're out. If the client is just not capable or ready to explore her inner motivations and drives, you have some work to do to clarify that and decide then if exiting is the right thing for you at that time. Most likely it's a combination of things and until now you have been shy about naming what you see and taking a stand for what your coaching practice is about.

This client is offering you a grand opportunity to step up and define more fully who you are as a coach. Design anew with her to find out if it's even possible for her to play the same game you are playing. Most important, be willing to just say this client is not for you and move on to sweeter pastures.



Carol Adrienne, PhD, advises, “Gently suggest that she might be better served by working with a therapist who could help her work through some of the deeper issues that you are not qualified to handle.”

I have a feeling this client needs therapy more than coaching. I’ve also had two or three clients like yours, who have been stuck in the victim mentality and seem to have very little ability to see their part in creating their circumstances – such as your client’s interpersonal problems with co-workers. I even consulted with a therapist friend to figure out how to respond. She raised the possibility that these clients might have a personality disorder that makes it very hard to create a positive change through coaching since the person is certain they are in the right and is usually extremely sensitive to any remarks that could be perceived as criticism.

I went to Wikipedia for a description, and found that this so-called “borderline-personality” diagnosis “... is one of four related diagnoses ... the others being narcissistic, histrionic- and antisocial personality disorders. Disturbances ... are wide-ranging ...

and typically include a pervasive instability in mood, extreme ‘black and white’ thinking ... chaotic and unstable interpersonal relationships, self-image, identity, and behavior, as well as a disturbance in the individual’s sense of self.”

You have your work cut out for you in keeping this client on track in reaching any goals. She will most likely avoid taking any responsibility for her issues with her boss or co-workers. See what she chooses to focus on in the next couple of sessions. If she’s using most of her time to blame others and vent anger and frustration, and you can’t redirect that energy, I would suggest finding a way to terminate your relationship. Gently suggest that she might be better served by working with a therapist who could help her work through some of the deeper issues that you are not qualified to handle. Yes, you are firing her, but it may be doing both of you a favor.



Victoria Trabosh, CDC®, points out, “Your job as coach may be to develop a different type of professional relationship with the client than she has with others with whom she works.”

I’ve worked with intense people. Without major accountability on their part, the issues they struggle with will always be ‘someone else’s issue.’

Your job as coach may be to develop a different type of professional relationship with the client than she has with others with whom she works. You’ll know if that’s happening by the tenor of the conversation, how often you’re able to move on to new issues rather than rehashing old ones, a shift in your client’s perspective of the effect others have on her professional life, and a point where she proactively offers more insight into who she is versus you having to come up with all the great questions that give her the opportunity for self analysis.

Regarding the “hunt or be hunted” behavior you fear she is exhibiting: if she tells you how she’s behaving and it strikes

you as inappropriate, tell her in your experience, it doesn’t work. Encourage her to take responsibility for her actions, own the results, and work only in a place that allows her to be her personal best.

I believe establishing a strong rapport with clients who face very difficult issues is paramount to coaching. Giving a tough message is never easy. Giving it to someone with whom you can’t be straightforward makes time stand still.

I have faith that if she’s agreed to work with you and is honoring her commitment to participate fully in coaching, and if you can honestly give her your best, she’ll begin to shift. With the shift comes greater success in all she does. And success will show her that it was always about her – but now she’s empowered to be her best rather than a victim of her circumstances. •