

Importance of Ethical Integrity within the Trainer-Client Relationship

Introduction

Maintaining ethical integrity as a professional is essential to quality business practices within any career field. Personal trainers should advocate and promote ethical behavior to enhance personal attributes and the profession as a whole. On the personal level there must be significant trust and rapport linking the fitness professional and the client for goal attainment. A client who does not display trust in their personal trainer may be less inclined to adhere to the entirety of the trainer's recommendations for fitness improvement. This can be especially applicable outside of the fitness facility where the client may need to make lifestyle, diet, or activity modifications without direct supervision.

Unfortunately, modern culture frequently places ethical integrity lower on the scale of significance when compared with image, monetary gain, or professional success. This may lead one to contemplate what ethical integrity really is, and if it is particularly essential as a professional when so many others blatantly disregard ethical behavior. The majority of theoretical definitions on ethical integrity depict it as the ability to do what is right even if it is not considered desirable or most affordable. An individual displaying ethical integrity will do the right thing even when it provides limited personal benefit, if any at all; regardless if anyone is watching. Ultimately, when a personal trainer fails to uphold ethical integrity in the workplace; the best interest of the client is potentially lost.

The majority of successful personal trainers are usually individuals who display the

highest level of professionalism and competence. One may be pleased to learn that many aspects of ethical integrity are intertwined with these career-enhancing qualities. The following list, depicting major points of optimal professionalism, illustrates this idea.

Major Factors of Standard Professionalism

1. Make certain to treat all individuals with respect.
2. Maintain personal and professional ethical standards.
3. Be honest; refrain from participating in gossip, rumor, and other deceptive behaviors.
4. Do the best job you can while understanding and admitting your limitations and ability to make mistakes.
5. Make certain to be consistent in your actions, straying away from the image of being biased or "two faced".
6. Make certain to be a proficient communicator; verbal and nonverbal.
7. Make certain to be a proficient collaborator with colleagues and clients.
8. Maintain a forgiving attitude and give people a fair chance.
9. Maintain current knowledge and skill sets, and stay involved in the progression of the profession.
10. Be a model for others to base their professional actions upon. Try not to be self serving.

Modified from Nativio D:
Professionalism revisited, *Nurs Outlook* 49:71-72, 2001.

Trainer-Client Relationship

Many tangible examples of ethical integrity (or lack thereof) in the personal training profession are relevant to the relationship between the trainer and client. There are many facets to the relationship where failure to maintain professional integrity can threaten to diminish essential trust and respect. Overall, the welfare of the client is central to all considerations in the relationship. The trainer is obligated to respect all applicable rights of the client, and must be sure to communicate factual information while appropriately representing his/her level of competency and scope of practice. The trainer should remain conscious of the fact that the client has the right to make his/her own choices concerning their health. Additionally, the trainer must strictly avoid any type of discrimination of clients. These can be challenging measures to uphold due to specific dynamics currently present in the field of personal training. Therefore, these concepts will now be extrapolated upon to help further illustrate how maintaining ethical integrity in the trainer-client relationship is favorable for all parties involved.

As previously emphasized, the central result of maintaining ethical integrity in the trainer-client relationship is the well-being of the client. First and foremost, the trainer must exercise all reasonable means to ensure that the most appropriate health/fitness protocol and recommendations are provided to the client. This means that the trainer must maintain an updated knowledge and skill base reflecting modern research, and that the trainer applies this knowledge to all aspects of the program at all times. Also, the trainer must be aware of their professional limitations and not attempt to implement exercise prescription for clients within

special populations that the trainer is not educated or trained to manage safely or effectively. The personal trainer, like any other professional, must stay within their scope of practice. Secondly, the trainer must be aware that a positive relationship with his/her client is built upon confidence, trust, and honesty. Failing to support these critical building blocks of any healthy relationship can be devastating for the client's success and desire to continue working with the trainer or the profession. For example, a client's health and performance deficiencies should be primary to the program and not shared with other clients or colleagues unless completely necessary. This displays emphasis on well-being and respect for the client and his/her privacy.

Furthermore, sexual misconduct in any form is a severe abuse of professional power. Any sexual contact or development of a romantic relationship between a trainer and current client is always considered unethical. Properly defined boundaries should be implemented as sexual relations have no part in prudent business interactions. Aside from obvious ethical concerns, sexual misconduct can complicate many dynamics of the trainer-client relationship. For example, if a trainer and client engage in romantic relations, the level of professionalism displayed in the fitness facility may be diminished. This not only compromises professionalism in the eyes of others but also places other aspects of the trainer's ethics in doubt. Additionally, what any employee does reflects upon the employer and may even translate to departmental colleagues.

When one level of ethical compromise is committed there is a tendency to continue moving in the negative direction. Simply stated, lack of professionalism can breed further unethical behaviors. This is

particularly common when the first actions of unethical behavior go without consequence. In the same way marijuana is considered a gateway drug, crossing the ethical boundary once or twice can lead to more occurrences and additional areas of ethical compromise.

A further component to maintaining ethical integrity in the trainer-client relationship pertains to referring, prescribing, or seeking compensation for therapies or products that are of genuine benefit to the client. This is particularly tricky considering the modern trend of some corporate facilities is to use personal trainers to promote and sell supplements and ancillary products to their clients to increase revenues. The prime reason behind this is three-fold 1) the significant profit margin on supplements that can reach as high as 300% - 400% or more, 2) the market belief that supplements are ergogenic, and 3) trust in a trainer's knowledge of supplements and connecting them with the client's needs. People inherently want a pill to make the results occur faster. The fundamental issue is not that the client will be injured from the product but more so that many clients have no need for additional supplementation.

Research dictates that many common supplements and purported 'performance enhancers' provide little benefit to healthy individuals. It appears that supplements usually help those who are significantly unhealthy or in high-stress scenarios; such as burn victims, the morbidly obese, or ultra-endurance athletes. What a trainer may do is recommend supplements that would be most applicable to the client's goals to fulfill their job responsibilities while still looking after the client's best interest. For example, there would be minimal risk/harm in recommending a whey protein supplement to a healthy individual who has a primary

goal of gaining lean mass or recommending Vitamin D3 if insufficiency is identified. Conversely, recommending ineffective/non-applicable supplements to a client simply to push overstock off the shelves would be an example of low ethical integrity.

Finally, the trainer should not discriminate against any client based on race, color, national origin, religion, or any other basis (such as weight) that would constitute illegal discrimination. All individuals should be treated with equal respect. The trainer should attempt to realize if he/she has any innate or subliminal bias towards one group of people or another, and work towards viewing all people on an individual basis. The trainer should also be aware of any personal nonverbal communication they display that could be considered biased or hurtful. These principles are applicable to any professional environment.

In a culture driven by money, image and success, ethical integrity may appear to have taken a backseat in significance within the business realm. This however, does not affect the importance of ethically driven decisions. As revealed in the numerous aforementioned scenarios, maintaining ethical integrity can aid in exposing acceptable decisions in a field where tenets of law oftentimes fail to directly apply. Moreover, ethical integrity is the backbone characteristic to develop a client's confidence in his/her trainer. In the health and fitness field where anecdotal information, unsubstantiated training protocol, and profit-driven recommendations run rampant, the call for fitness professionals who uphold a high level of ethical integrity within the trainer-client relationship is strong. Even though doing the right thing is not always the easiest decision, it inadvertently promotes professional excellence and success.