

Professional



Ethics

Within any professional environment, sensitive or difficult situations arise which require a decision making process leading to a path of action. The path one follows is based on one or more of the following: an established moral code, written policy or a written code of ethics and a personal value system. In some cases there is not only one acceptable answer, but this is where ethics, rules and regulations diverge in the best approach to resolution. Rules and regulations are established to deal with a variety of situations and outline a single defined path or response for each. However, some areas may not be so black and white and responding ethically to a situation requires an individual to look objectively at the circumstances and then make a determination based on both logic and sensitivity. A personal trainer with a solid ethical background is able to judge almost any situation and make the right choice for that particular event. Additionally, a personal trainer with a strong value system is likely to make the right choice regardless of the popularity of that decision because he or she has a strong ethical character. To help personal trainers guide and gauge their decisions the NCSF Board for Certification has a published *Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Practices* which define and outline proper professional behavior.

While there is no way to determine each and every potential situation that may occur in the course of a trainer's career, there are several areas in which problems are most likely to crop up and it is these areas that are covered under the NCSF ethical code. In some cases, the quandaries that arise are common to business both in and outside the health-related professions, while others, because of the unique dynamic between trainer and client, or patient in medical fields, are limited to personal training and some allied health domains. Part of the reason professional care givers must be held to a higher standard is due to the uneven dynamic existing between the care provider and the client/patient. This is considered a position of strong influential power, meaning a trainer has the ability to guide the interactions, process, and outcomes by actions and dialogue. Whereas a white-collar banker can manipulate the financial outcomes of

a customer attempting to get a home loan, a trainer has the ability to affect both mental and physical aspects of a client. In both cases the power maintained by the professional can be used to benefit or harm the client/customer directly or indirectly. The personal trainer is responsible for challenging the client and improving his or her overall state of health, and the client trusts that the trainer is acting in their best interest, true to his or her qualifications, is competent, and current within the professional domain.

Most important to any relationship is trust. This level of trust, or lack thereof, can make or break a professional relationship. A trainer who works for a corporate gym, in a clinical setting or at a hospital will probably find a structured environment, with a published code of ethics or company policy, and in most cases the opportunity for casual social interaction is reduced in accordance with the restrictions of the rules and regulations. In these cases, both clients and trainers can benefit from a supervisor who is generally available to assist either person with any difficulties that arise and identify if a client trainer relationship is in the best interest of the client. A competent trainer will attempt to diffuse a sensitive situation before it gets to the level where trust may be lost, but deferring the decision to a supervisor is an easy and ethical course to take.

A trainer who is self-employed will not have a supervisor to aid in the decision making process and as such must establish a code of ethics to follow. An easy way to make oneself accountable is to create their personal code using assistance from other professionals and post it in the place of business. In this way everyone is knowledgeable as to proper practices and specific policy and the actions are in accordance with more generally acceptable practices rather than the decisions of a single person which may be skewed by the events. Using an advisory board or peer group to set policy, limits errors based on emotion or a lack of experience. Although very few self employed trainers establish these self-regulatory policies, likely assuming they will always make the right decision, the process can be enlightening and reduce liability risk. It is important to recognize that professional

ethics not only contribute to others perceptions but they also can be financially, and in some cases legally, relevant.

Ethical behavior is often established over a period of years but single events can set the bar quickly for some individuals as the experience of the event makes them realize a clear path from knowledge of the outcome. Experience can sometimes be the best teacher. In most cases ethical behavior manifests from collective exposure to different situations, different environments and different mentors, as well as those standards instilled in a person from a very young age by a guardian. With such a code in place, the trainer can head off most any issue that may arise with a client without suffering a blow to his or her professional reputation. If a client feels he or she cannot trust the trainer, the trainer is liable to lose that client, and any referrals that might have come his or her way. Remember ethical conflicts can occur at any point of personal/professional exchange. Money is often a key area, but so is the level of interpersonal relationship, and responsibility of due care.

One glaring example of how important trust is to such an association is the risk of exploitation. Is the trainer working with a particular client solely for the purpose of improving the client's health or otherwise helping the client achieve his or her goals, or has the trainer taken on the client solely for financial gain? This type of situation may arise from false representation of one's knowledge, skills and abilities or providing inappropriate services which are outside the scope of one's profession. A trainer who is not qualified to handle special situations, is unable to assist a client in achieving his or her goals safely and effectively, or finds a conflict in the process of service delivery should either request the assistance of a more qualified professional or refer the client to a trainer who is capable of providing safe and effective training. It is unethical to retain a client simply for the financial gain if it is not in the best interest of the client. Additionally, a trainer should look for a potential conflict of interest between the needs of the trainer and needs of the client. For example, is the trainer encouraging a client to purchase a particular supplement because the trainer is knowledgeable in the product and truly believes the product will benefit the client, or are decisions being made because the company is paying the trainer a commission to promote the product? In many gyms, trainers are encouraged to sell

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supplements as a means to increase the gym's profits, but ethically, a trainer should not sell ergogenic aids unless the client demonstrates a true need for the product. It is also unethical, and outside the scope of practice, for a trainer to provide specific nutritional counseling or to write diets if the laws in the State of practice require additional credentialing or mandate education or other qualifications. Anytime a trainer steps outside of the scope of the profession and enters a realm regulated by another profession it is unethical and may also be illegal.

When structures are in place to guide, trainers' decisions are easy. But in less-structured environments, a personal trainer must be even more careful to maintain a professional demeanor. Because of the "locker-room" mentality of many gyms, it is very easy to slip toward less appropriate behaviors because they tend to be more accepted in such places. The gym, for most members, is a place for recreation or to relieve stress, and as such

people are prone to behave far more casually than they would at their place of business. A trainer must remember, though, that the gym is his or her place of business and therefore there is a greater responsibility to behave accordingly. Although fitness facilities present a social situation to the members, the social aspect should remain with the members and not affect professional actions. Even more importantly, a trainer working with younger individuals needs to remember that his or her clients are not necessarily fully mature and must be treated as such. It is up to the trainer to be vigilant in maintaining order within the facility and keep offensive behaviors to a minimum.

Regardless of where a trainer works, he or she must set personal boundaries when dealing with any client. This is where a clear policy is very useful. In cases where the trainer is an employee of a gym, a hospital, a high school, or other similar environment, trainers are likely presented with specific rules and regulations regarding contact/communication with a client both in and outside the gym. Reality shows and exposés have given the training profession a black eye by showing inappropriate client trainer relationships on television. Although seemingly a case of adult consent it is without question an inappropriate use of power. Would it be normal for a physician to date a patient or a psychotherapist to date someone he/she counsels?

Personal training is by nature a profession in which contact is ordinary and sometimes required for safety; a trainer must touch a client to properly spot a movement and a trainer must sometimes physically position a client when verbal cues are not adequate for proper technique performance. Communication and professional tact are key allies in these situations as a trainer must take care to maintain a competent and trustworthy demeanor and work professionally with the client to accomplish a task.

Sometimes, the trainer client relationship can cross the boundary from friendly chat to sexual harassment and this can occur without the traditional proposition. If a topic seems inappropriate, it is an easy litmus test is to ask “what is the topic’s relevance to safe and effective health attainment?” In some cases, it is the client who brings up inappropriate content in the context of the environment as frequent interactions between trainer and client often reduce the intimacy shield held strong in many other service fields. When this occurs it is the trainer’s responsibility to change the topic and place the environment back into appropriateness, again the trainer is in a position of power. Sexual harassment, as evident by court cases including the Clarence Thomas inquiries remains a fine line. It is a fine line for several reasons, in part because of the nature of the position as discussed above, and in part because of the different tolerances each individual has for particular topics, conversations, and actions.

There are two separate categories of sexual harassment, quid pro quo and hostile environment. *Quid pro quo*, which essentially translates from the Latin to “something for something,” describes a situation in which an uneven power dynamic exists and the person with the greater influence demands or uses that influence for inappropriate outcomes. Often curious to peer review as to how these things come about, it is the power of position that often causes the underdog to feel a non-tangible pressure to act a certain way. The other form of sexual harassment, *hostile environment*, is far more likely to occur. A hostile work environment is one in which an individual offends, or is offended by, others in the workplace, regardless of economic loss. Most companies have a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment in the workplace, primarily because it is such a sensitive area and because the courts have recently decided that companies can be held liable for situations of sexual harassment of which they weren’t even aware. In the client trainer relationship, it is not hard to see how communication can degenerate from friendly banter to inappropriate innuendo, especially if the client or trainer perceives the environment to be casual. The trainer should take care to keep conversations with a client strictly professional for a number of reasons. One, a trainer does not know what is likely to offend a client, regardless of

intent. Two, it appears unprofessional for a trainer to make comments that could even potentially offend a client. Three, if a client is offended but is uncomfortable saying so, the dynamic between the trainer and the client breaks down and the allimportant trust is lost. A client may feel uncomfortable working with a trainer but may not know how to approach the situation or the client may simply decide that silence works best which generally manifests itself into client attrition. Not only does the trainer lose the client, but the client may feel that if one trainer can behave in this fashion, so too will the majority of trainers.

It is crucial that a trainer and a client maintain solely a professional relationship while they are working with one another, but for some people a gray area exists with regard to contact following the termination of the professional relationship. Of course, if the relationship is terminated at the request of one party or the other for whatever reason, then it would be in the best interests of both parties to cease all communication. On the other hand, if a training relationship ends amicably, or both parties would like to continue the friendship once the professional side concludes, several factors play a role in determining the appropriateness of such a relationship. An ongoing debate exists, with most individuals squarely in one camp or the other. Some believe that because of the uneven dynamic between the trainer and the client, the client may not be able to make unbiased decisions due to prior influence, and as such there should be no intimate relationship between the two regardless of the professional status. Others believe that allowing for a specific time frame following the end of the professional relationship limits the likelihood that the trainer is appearing to exploit the client. In all cases if a trainer feels the relationship is anything other than clearly professional it should be terminated. This is not to suggest that people can not be acquaintances outside of the training facility but it does suggest if emotional feelings have developed at any level the relationship has been compromised professionally.

A trainer who aims to behave ethically in his or her dealing with fellow colleagues, clients, employers and other individuals with whom he or she interacts may at some point find him- or herself making decisions that are not always popular and sometimes even fall outside majority rule. However, a personal trainer who remains true to his or her value systems will exhibit the integrity and courage required to uphold the standards of his profession. A profession is often viewed by the actions of the lower half rather than the upper half. Trainers who strive for professional benchmarks will pave the way for growth and recognition. Maintaining these touchstones is crucial to elevating the position of personal trainer to one that is respected in the health fields. 