

A Call for Greater Cultural Inclusivity in the ICF Code of Ethics

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As Muslim coaches, we advocate for a truly global coaching practice—one in which ethical standards reflect the diversity of cultures and worldviews they are meant to serve.

As coaching evolves globally, so must its ethical framework. This letter highlights key considerations and proposes a direction to strengthen inclusivity and clarity.

key considerations¹

- 1- **Obligation & Pledge Tone:** No individual may opt out, nor are they permitted to delete or modify.
The language can feel forceful and legalistic rather than inviting commitment. This "policing" tone may reduce psychological safety and trust, especially in cultures valuing relationship over rigid contracts.
- 2- **Specific Anti-Discrimination Lists:** Enumerating specific groups (gender identity, Sexual orientation, etc.)
Explicitly listing categories can be seen as culturally prescriptive or exclusionary of unlisted groups. A principles-based approach (e.g., "discrimination on any grounds") is more universally applicable and less contentious.
- 3- **Cultural Filters & Identity:** Respecting all identity groups (often implies full endorsement of behaviors)
While inclusion is key, wording should distinguish between respecting the person (Adab/Courtesy) and necessarily validating all behaviors or identities that may conflict with religious beliefs.
- 4- **Systemic Equality & DEIB Terms:** Systemic Oppression, DEIB definitions.
These terms often carry specific Western political connotations. Including them in a global code can be perceived as imposing a political agenda rather than establishing neutral professional ethical standards.

Proposed Direction

Adopt principle-based language: Move from prescriptive to principle-based

Adopt general, context-sensitive phrasing. Avoid exhaustive identity lists that risk exclusion or cultural conflict. Focus on universal applicability.

Cultural Respect (Adab): Emphasize respect (Adab) without enforcing ideology

Remain alert to cultural filters, engage differences with courtesy (Adab), seeking understanding without imposing behavioral change or ideological conformity.

Governance & Review: Create Cross-Cultural Ethics & Translation Board

Establish a Cross-Cultural Ethics & Translation Review Board. Ensure representation from Muslim-majority cultures and academic linguists and societies across the region to audit translations and core concepts.

Implementation Strategy: Pilot changes in diverse regions

Pilot revised language in select regions. Gather structured feedback from accredited schools (including Islamic institutions). Iterate before global rollout to ensure true inclusivity.

Our intention is not to dilute ethical standards, but to strengthen their global relevance and impact. A truly global Code of Ethics should unite cultures under shared human values—without imposing one perspective over others.

¹ Please see Dr. Ghadah Angawi footnotes and comments on the CoE below for further elaboration.

ICF Code of Ethics

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The International Coaching Federation (ICF) Code of Ethics is composed of five main parts and an appendix:

1. PURPOSE

2. ICF CORE VALUES AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

3. COMMITMENTS FOR ALL WITHIN THE ICF ECOSYSTEM

4. ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR ICF PROFESSIONALS

5. THE PLEDGE OF ETHICS

APPENDIX

KEY DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED IN THE CODE

GLOSSARY OF OTHER TERMS

1. PURPOSE

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is the world's leading coaching association.

The ICF is made up of six family organizations (FOs). Together, they form the ICF Ecosystem. The FOs are: ICF Professional Coaches, ICF Credentials and Standards, ICF Coaching Education, ICF Foundation, ICF Coaching in Organizations, and the ICF Thought Leadership Institute. The ICF Global Board provides strategic direction for and coordination of the complete ICF ecosystem.

Based on its mission and responsibility, ICF provides a code of ethics setting out ethical standards² of professional conduct required to be adhered to by all within the ICF Ecosystem, whether acting as ICF professionals (see definition) or in any other capacity. The roles and responsibilities governed by the ICF Code of Ethics include ICF professionals, ICF staff (see definition), volunteers, members of ICF boards, leaders of ICF Communities of Practice, and members of ICF global committees, task forces, and core teams (whether they are ICF professionals or not).

The ICF Code of Ethics incorporates the core values of the International Coaching Federation (ICF Core Values) as a foundation to understanding the ICF Code of Ethics, ethical principles, and ethical standards of conduct.

The ICF Code of Ethics serves to uphold the integrity of ICF and the global coaching profession by:

Setting standards of conduct consistent with ICF core values and ethical³ principles.

² You will observe that certain standards explicitly contradict Islamic law; we will address these contradictions in our commentary.

³ Global ethics research includes many philosophical theories that are alien to our Islamic Sharia and may contradict it in detail. In my research on ethical leadership, I turned to the concept of altruism as a distinguishing boundary for what constitutes ethics in each context. What is moral in one context may not be moral in another. ICF needs to regard other cultures when defining a moral or ethical code. It is important to acknowledge 2 billion Muslims who are also a culture and segment of ICF population benefiting from coaching.

- Guiding ethical reflection, education, and decision-making.
- Adjudicating and preserving ICF ethical standards through the ICF Ethical Conduct Review⁴ (ECR) process.
- Providing the basis for ICF ethics training⁵ in ICF accredited programs.

This Code of Ethics is intended to assist those people subject to the Code by directing them to the ethical factors, values, and principles that need to be taken into consideration whenever they need to engage in ethical reasoning and ethical decision-making.

The ICF Code of Ethics applies when people represent themselves as belonging within the ICF ecosystem and/or ICF professionals in their professional interactions.

The challenge of working ethically means that those within the ICF ecosystem will inevitably encounter situations that require responses to unexpected issues, resolution of dilemmas, and solutions to problems.

People within the ICF ecosystem strive to be ethical, even when doing so involves acting courageously⁶ and making difficult decisions that uphold the “DO GOOD” principle when it comes to their stakeholders.

Part 4 of the Code articulates the ethical obligations of ICF professionals who are acting in their different roles as coach, coach supervisor, mentor coach, trainer, and student coach-in-training.

The ICF Independent Review Board serves to uphold this Code of Ethics through the Ethical Conduct Review (ECR) process, which is applicable to all ICF professionals.

ICF mandates that all credentialed ICF professionals have continuous ethical education and training. Furthermore, ICF accredited coaching education programs are required to provide ethics training as ICF considers ethics to be the foundational element of the coaching profession.

The ICF Code applies to all individuals or entities falling within the ICF ecosystem. No individual or entity falling within the ICF ecosystem may opt out of any section or part of the Code⁷, nor are they permitted to delete, modify, or amend any provisions within the Code.

2. ICF CORE VALUES AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

⁴ Conducting a review under the independent review board must have consideration of Muslim current culture and sharia law where coaching is practiced in Muslim countries. This can be done by having a representation. Not doing so, is considered discriminative as one group of cultural values takes over another.

⁵ Accredited ICF educational providers operating in Muslims communities are obligated and regularly point the issues that are not aligned with Islamic values in the Code of Ethics.

⁶ This provides the basis for our analytical commentary on the ICF Code of Ethics.

⁷ This puts a strong obligation (not just guidance) that everyone without exception to their Islamic beliefs, ethics, and Sharia laws should not opt out of any part or section, amend or modify any provisions.

The Code of Ethics provides guidelines for implementing the core values and ethical principles and shows how they are put into practice. All values and principles are equally important, support one another, and are aspirational. All within the ICF ecosystem are expected to honor the core values and align with the principles in all their professional interactions.

The core values and the related ethical principles are listed on the ICF website and are reiterated below. (See <https://coachingfederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ICF-Core-Values.pdf>)

Professionalism: A commitment to a coaching mindset and professional quality that encompasses responsibility, respect⁸, integrity, competence, and excellence.

I demonstrate professionalism by:

- Ensuring my professional conduct is consistently aligned with the value of humanity and the coaching mindset competency in all my professional interactions.
- Being true and accurate in my statements.
- Committing to my life-long professional learning and personal development.
- Supporting the ongoing personal and professional development of my clients, students, and ICF professionals.
- Delivering on my commitments.
- Being aware of ethical dilemmas⁹ and issues and responding with adherence to the ICF Code of Ethics.
- Adding to the knowledge base and sharing expertise and skills as described in the ICF Core Competencies.
- Being resilient and confident when faced with challenges.
- Behaving with respect and transparency in all business dealings related to coaching.
- Making clear and accurate representations in all my professional interactions in relation to coaching.
- Committing to honesty, courage, consistency of action, ethical practice, and the highest standards for ICF and the coaching profession.

Collaboration: A commitment to developing social connection and community building.

I work collaboratively by:

⁸ The word "Respect" in this context means (adab) relating to manners or behavior, not a status. Respect as Adab reflects the obligation or sanctity between a Muslim and the non-Muslim because of an existing treaty or humane cause. As for the second, in the Quran, only Muslims are held in high regard for their beliefs and commitment. This applies to all 'Respect' words used in this context.

⁹ Our effort in requesting the rephrasing of the Code of Ethics to align with Islamic beliefs and values is considered a necessary awareness in the code.

- Making commitments and progress towards promoting professional coaching through fostering joint creativity and resourcefulness.
- Partnering with others, both within and across multiple social-identity¹⁰ groups.
- Being mindful and intentional in my own participation while working in any collective effort.
- Cooperating with other ICF professionals working with client(s) and sponsor(s).
- Partnering and communicating with related professions, associations, and people in other coaching organizations and professions.

Humanity: A commitment to being humane, kind, compassionate, and respectful towards others.

I demonstrate humanity by:

- Accepting that, as humans, I am not meant to be perfect, and with a coaching mindset, expressing imperfections is an opportunity for me to spread a culture of openness and self-acceptance¹¹.
- Knowing I always have more to learn and being open to other points of view.
- Creating authentic relationships that support honesty, transparency, and clarity.
- Continuously seeking and developing self-awareness.
- Being willing to acknowledge and own my mistakes.
- Accepting responsibility for my actions and learning from them.
- Being modest about my achievements.
- Avoiding any behaviors or communication that suggest superiority in any way.
- Committing to inclusivity, dignity, self-worth, and human rights¹².

Equity: A commitment to using a coaching mindset to explore and understand the needs of others so I can practice equitable processes at all times that create equality for all.

I am equitable by:

- Recognizing and respecting all identity¹³ groups and their contributions.
- Treating everyone with the same dignity and sense of fairness.
- Bringing awareness to systemic patterns of conscious and unconscious biases¹⁴ in myself and in others.

¹⁰ Partnership is governed by the boundaries between a Muslim and a non-Muslim identity, preventing one from dominating another.

¹¹ Based on Islamic moral system: acceptance of self is different from acceptance of the behavior. The behavior must be pointed out or reported if it is in direct violation of Islamic Code of Ethics based on implication on self, others, or the community. In some cases, self must be connected to the behavior and helped to be transformed along with it so as to prevent harm on self or on others.

¹² Within the boundaries of Islamic Code of Ethics and moral behaviors.

¹³ Islam advocates for the recognition and acknowledgment of different groups' contribution not necessarily agreeing to each group ideology, identity, or beliefs unless they are congruent with Islamic Sharia and ethics.

¹⁴ Islam strongly encourages awareness of conscious and unconscious bias, in service of creating equality and fairness and abolishing any discrimination in how people communicate or behave with each other.

- Exploring to understand and bring awareness to social diversity¹⁵, systemic equality, and systemic oppression, and how they show up in the coaching profession.
- Maintaining equality and partnership in all my coach-client, trainer-student, mentor-coach, and supervisor-coach relationships.

3. COMMITMENTS FOR ALL WITHIN THE ICF ECOSYSTEM

The values are aspirational and a robust guide for ethical reasoning and decision-making. All within the ICF ecosystem are expected to honor and uphold these values in all their professional interactions.

We:

- Mindfully perform our duties with integrity and accountability by thinking globally¹⁶, being courageous in our thoughts, actions, and speech, being aware of our impact, and bearing the responsibility of any consequences.
- Commit to excellence through continued personal, professional, and ethical development.
- Remain alert to cultural filters and demonstrate respect¹⁷ for cultures different from our own through open conversations¹⁸ about cross-cultural and multicultural differences.
- Maintain awareness of relationships and how they are influenced by factors including biases, power dynamics, and forms of systemic oppression, and actively address these factors through continuing education and open conversations.
- Cultivate our ethical growth and maturity through continuous self-reflection and increased self-awareness. If an ethical dilemma arises, we will pursue assistance where needed to resolve the matter.
- Respectfully attempt to communicate our concerns with others if we become aware of unethical conduct by them, and if necessary, seek ethical guidance for next steps.
- Communicate with those who need to be informed of the ethical responsibilities established by this Code by providing access to this Code of Ethics.
- Accept that behaving ethically means going beyond what is written in the Code of Ethics.

4. ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR ICF PROFESSIONALS

¹⁵ Diversity requires that we Muslims, maintain our beliefs, culture without bias, abandonment, concession, or compromise, and we call on ICF to implement what they advocate for, by proposing a language that includes Muslims in the Code of Ethics.

¹⁶ A better term here is holistically, as we differ from other global ideologies that clash with Islamic Sharia.

¹⁷ The appropriate term is “acknowledgment and understanding of others distinction, while preserving our own identity, clearly expressing our beliefs and values, and transitioning to dealing with courtesy, manner and adab”.

¹⁸ This commentary is part of this cross-cultural conversation.

Meeting these ICF ethical standards of conduct is the first of the ICF core coaching competencies (ICF Core Competencies): “Demonstrates Ethical Practice: understands and consistently applies coaching ethics and standards.”

The following ethical standards are applied to the professional activities of ICF Professionals – regardless of an existing formal coaching relationship (see definitions) or not. These ethical standards are divided into five sections:

1. Agreements for Client and/or Sponsor Engagement.
2. Confidentiality and Legal Compliance.
3. Professional Conduct and Conflicts of Interest.
4. Commitment to Delivering Consistent Value.
5. Professional Integrity and Accountability.

Section 1: Agreements for Client and/or Sponsor Engagement

As an ICF Professional, I:

1.1 Communicate (before coaching begins) with coaching client(s), sponsor(s), and/or other involved parties that the coach is in a direct relationship with to explain the nature of coaching and to co-create a coaching agreement regarding roles, responsibilities, confidentiality, financial arrangements, and other aspects of the coaching engagement.

1.2 Respect all parties’ right to terminate the coaching relationship at any point for any reason during the coaching engagement, subject to the provisions of the agreement.

Section 2: Confidentiality and Legal Compliance

As an ICF Professional, I:

2.1 Maintain the strictest level of confidentiality with all parties involved, regardless of the role I am fulfilling.

2.2 Have a clear agreement about what information is exchanged and how it is exchanged among all parties involved during all coaching engagements.

2.3 Have a clear agreement with client(s), sponsor(s), and other involved parties about what confidential information may need to be disclosed to the appropriate authorities, e.g., illegal activity, required by law, valid court order or subpoena; or imminent/likely risk of danger to self or to others.

2.4 Maintain, store, and dispose of any records, including electronic files and communications, in a manner that promotes confidentiality, security, and privacy, and complies with applicable laws and agreements.

2.5 Fulfill my ethical and legal obligations to my coaching client(s), sponsor(s), colleagues, and to the public at large directly and through any technology systems I may utilize (i.e. technology-assisted coaching tools, databases, platforms, software, and artificial intelligence).

2.6 Am responsible for my support personnel's adherence to the relevant standards of the Code of Ethics.

2.7 Maintain the privacy of ICF professionals and use of their contact information (email addresses, telephone numbers, and so on) only as authorized by ICF or the ICF professional.

2.8 Comply with copyright laws and recognize and honor the contributions and intellectual property of others, only claiming ownership of my own material.

Section 3: Professional Conduct and Conflicts of Interest

As an ICF Professional, I:

3.1 Am aware of and discuss with all involved parties the implications of having multiple agreements and relationships, and the potential for conflicts of interest.

3.2 Manage conflicts of interest and potential conflicts of interest with coaching client(s) and sponsor(s) through self-reflection, coaching agreement(s), and ongoing dialogue. This includes addressing organizational roles, responsibilities, relationships, records, confidentiality, and other reporting requirements.

3.3 Resolve any conflict of interest or potential conflict of interest by working through the issue with relevant parties, seeking professional assistance, or suspending or ending the professional relationship.

3.4 Hold responsibility for being aware of and setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern professional interactions, physical or otherwise.

3.5 Maintain fairness by being aware of my biases and addressing them so that I do not discriminate toward others based on race, color, gender identity, sexual orientation¹⁹, socio-economic status, age²⁰, spiritual practice²¹, ability, and other groups, classes, and categories of human differences²².

¹⁹ In the Muslim world, gender identity and sexual orientation issues are clearly defined in the Quran and Islamic Code of Ethics. We have a Sharia law and a set of helping approaches. We Muslim coaches are obliged to follow our own Islamic approach for helping these individuals. We preserve the dignity and humanity of individuals as long as it does not transgression to others in preservation of our Islamic moral code.

²⁰ Our faith requires proper etiquette (**adab**) between the young and the old. In our Islamic teaching, we respect the elderly regardless of their status or education and are compassionate to the young.

²¹ The Arabic ICF translation of Code of Ethics included phrases diverting from this English text, such as "spiritual beliefs," which is an inaccurate translation of "spiritual practices." The translation of this paragraph concluded with adding one more phrase that is not in the original text: "Religious affiliations" in the last sentence where ICF mentions "Other groups, classes and categories if human affiliation".

²² It is very important to meet the client where they are, and we Muslims have no issues coaching any individuals from any group or religion as long as the coach is aware of all the codes regarding no conflict of interest and abiding to those codes. Taking in consideration that the main core of the session in ICF is assisting and enabling the clients finding their own compass not implying the coach's paradigm on them. First and foremost, it is an ethical unspoken pledge after all that basically relies on the coach's own integrity. If a coach does not feel comfortable with the values of another person and realizes it conflicts with their own

3.6 Am mindful of the level of intimacy in the coaching relationship. I do not participate in any sexual or romantic relationship with client(s) or sponsor(s). If I detect a shift in the relationship, I take appropriate action to address the issue or cancel the coaching engagement.

3.7 Understand that ICF professionals often serve in multiple professional roles based on prior training and/or experience (i.e. mentor, therapist, HR specialist, assessor), and it is my responsibility to disclose to the client when I am acting in a capacity other than the role of an ICF professional.

3.8 Disclose to Client(s) the information of compensation and benefits that have been paid/received or will be paid/received for referrals.

Section 4: Commitment to Delivering Consistent Value

As an ICF Professional, I:

4.1 Am aware of and, in partnership with my client, actively manage any power or status differential between us that may be caused by cultural, relational, psychological, or contextual issues.

4.2 Recognize my personal limitations or circumstances that may impair my coaching performance or professional commitments. I will seek support if necessary, including relevant professional guidance. This may require suspending or terminating my coaching relationship(s).

4.3 Remain alert to indications that there might be a shift in the value received from the coaching relationship and discuss this with the client. If appropriate, explore changes in the coaching relationship and/or the potential for a different coach, professional, or resource.

Section 5: Professional Integrity and Accountability

As an ICF Professional, I:

5.1 Accurately identify my coaching qualifications and work within the boundaries of my level of coaching competency, expertise, experience, training, certifications, and my ICF credential.

5.2 Make verbal and written statements that are true and accurate about what I offer as an ICF professional, what is offered by ICF, the coaching profession, and the potential value of coaching.

5.3 Adhere to the philosophy of “doing good” versus “avoiding bad,” recognizing the impact of my professional conduct on my clients, stakeholders, the coaching profession, and society.

value, then a coach must bring this to the attention of the client and end the coaching session with integrity and adab.

I understand that ICF may, at its discretion and according to the ECR process, hold me accountable for violations of the ICF Code of Ethics. I further agree that my accountability to ICF may include sanctions for any violation²³, such as mandatory additional coach education, mentoring, supervision, or loss of my ICF membership and/ or ICF credentials.

5. THE PLEDGE OF ETHICS:

While fulfilling any role within the ICF ecosystem, I promise to uphold my ethical obligations by adhering to the ICF Code of Ethics in all my professional interactions. I commit to doing my best to represent the integrity and professional reputation of coaching and the ICF.

²³ What is the definition of a violation? And is following my Islamic faith a violation

Comments on the APPENDIX:

In our comments we will only bring the issues we feel are in conflict of the global community agreement of in conflict of Islamic culture.

KEY DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED IN THE CODE

“Coach Supervisor” – an experienced coach who engages in reflective dialogue and a collaborative process with a coach (or group of coaches) for personal, professional, and ethical development and learning. (See Parts 1 & 2).

Comment: I disagree with the ICF in defining the supervisor as an expert coach, as supervision is not limited to being a coach only. A supervisor can be a clinical supervisor in the field of therapy and psychiatry with knowledge in coaching – clinical supervision is the primary origin of coaching supervision – or a non-coach supervisor but trained in coaching supervision. The limitation on who qualifies for guidance supervision among those in human-supporting professions fundamentally contradicts the definitions and breadth of guidance supervision found in academic books and references (Placeholder1).

“Equality” – a situation in which all people experience inclusion and access to resources and opportunity, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, color, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, immigration status, mental or physical disability, and other areas of human difference. (See Part 2 and Standard 3.5)

Comment: listing all groups and types is not inclusive rather exclusive and raises questions on the coach who exists in Muslim countries with the identified gender is male or female and no other identification is acknowledge based on the Sharea law. Therefore, putting Muslim caches in conflict with their conscious and law.

GLOSSARY OF OTHER TERMS

“DEIB”

“Diversity” – race, color, caste, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, rank, socio-economic status, age, spiritual practice, national origin, ability, and other groups, classes, and categories of human differences, such as personality characteristics, appearance, communication styles, and leadership styles.

Comment: while the above definition of diversity is valid in the United States and western cultures, it is not adopted in the Muslim countries and by Sharea law with its current reference to Sexual orientation. Something again that will present a conflict of interest to the Muslim coach. The other terms and definitions should be stripped of the implication of activism and encouragement for participation in decision-making as it invites direct violation to the governance system in most Muslim countries. It is important to understand that these terms are practiced in countries with democratic systems and that the words have to be moderated for a coach to use and present the code of ethics to their beneficent organization.

