

The Key Components Of A Profession

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This fall we attended a two-day workshop on professional discipline and regulation. Organized for professional associations such as those governing dentists, nurses, architects, accountants, and veterinarians, we participated with a view to learning more about how the sport community in general, and the profession of coaching in particular, could improve their disciplinary mechanisms.

Although we have had coaches for decades, coaching is a “new” profession. As a profession, coaching has not established an exclusive “right to practice” and thus exists in a world far removed from professions such as accounting, medicine, engineering, law, and nursing. In these professions, an individual must be a member of the professional body in order to practice the occupation.

However, coaching has established what is called a “right to title” (wherein the title “Chartered Professional Coach” is reserved for those individuals who are members of CPCA) and in this sense can be regarded as a “quasi-profession.” Examples of other quasi-professions include community planning and massage therapy. Anyone can carry out the work of a planner or a massage therapist, but they cannot call themselves a “registered professional planner” or a “registered massage therapist” unless they are members of the professional organization of planners or massage therapists, respectively.

We take the view that the fledgling and evolving quasi-profession of coaching can benefit greatly from the experiences of other professional associations and the lessons they have learned along the path of self-regulation. From this workshop, we gained two important insights that we think are relevant to coaching: the first relates to disclosure and transparency, and the second to discipline.

On the issue of disclosure, we heard a very compelling presentation by a criminal lawyer who also, as part of her practice, prosecuted on behalf of professional colleges. She strongly advocated a policy of full and complete disclosure in all circumstances involving professional discipline. In her view, the advantages of complete disclosure—ensuring that the individual being disciplined has been fully informed of the case against him or her—will always outweigh the disadvantages. As well, we learned that in the area of professional regulation, the courts are pushing for wider disclosure, and for disclosure earlier in the disciplinary process.

This presentation on disclosure struck a chord with us because we have long advocated that “transparency” in procedures and decision-making is a worthwhile objective. Those affected by a decision might not like the ultimate outcome, but transparency helps them to at least understand how the decision was reached, and to see that the decision was principled, not arbitrary. There is a strong trend among all regulated professions towards greater transparency of decision-making procedures—an approach that we encourage all sport organizations to likewise adopt.

The second insight we gained is that the public, the profession of coaching, and the individual coach are very rarely best served by discipline that takes the form of punishment. Yet this type of discipline is the most common because it is the most convenient to administer. Regulators (including sport administrators and executives) must be always mindful of the purposes and objectives of sanctioning. Sometimes the most appropriate response to professional misconduct is to provide guidance to the professional so that he or she can improve professional practice. Certainly, such a rehabilitative approach offers the greatest benefit to the sport community, to the profession, and to the coach.

All professions, including coaching, have a three-part mandate. First and foremost, they exist to protect the public. Second, they exist to set standards of practice. Third, they exist to enforce competent practice by disciplining those who do not achieve minimum standards. Discipline within a profession must always be carried out with these purposes in mind—and discipline in the form of punishment rarely helps those who are being disciplined to learn from mistakes and become more competent.

In a landmark Ontario discipline case involving a nurse,¹ the court noted that a professional licence should only be revoked when there is clear risk to the public, that the standard of professional practice is not perfection, and that “one mistake does not an incompetent nurse [or in our case, coach] make.” These are valuable lessons for those involved in reviewing the conduct of coaches. Not every misdeed merits a sanction, and the ultimate sanction of suspending, expelling, or terminating a coach should be reserved for those cases involving the worst offender and the worst offence.

In the vast majority of cases involving discipline of coaches, the most appropriate sanction might very well involve steps to help the coach improve his or her knowledge and skills, so that competency is increased and standards are not breached in the future. Regulation of coaches and coaching should not be about punishment, but should be about helping people to be better coaches.