Beyond Neutrality:
Reimagining the Coach's Role as Influencer and Co-Creator

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Abstract

Neutrality remains central to coaching, yet it is increasingly untenable as an ethical and practical stance. This article responds to a growing need for the coaching profession to move beyond the ideal of neutrality. Coaches cannot and should not be neutral. Drawing on systemic positioning theory, reflexive ethics, and sociocultural perspectives, it critiques neutrality as epistemologically flawed and relationally limiting. Coaching is always situated, shaped by identity, context, and power; influence is not a risk to avoid but a responsibility to reflect upon. Reframing the coach as an ethical co-creator, the article advocates reflexivity, supervision, relational and systemic awareness and transparency over static ideals of neutrality.

Keywords: coaching, neutrality, reflexivity, relational ethics, systemic thinking

Introduction

Coaching is often framed as a neutral practice. Professional standards and training programmes frequently position the coach as a non-directive, agenda-free facilitator: someone who holds space, listens without judgment, and enables client-led insight. This ideal, embedded in competencies promoted by bodies such as the ICF and EMCC, casts the coach as a kind of mirror: present but not active, engaged but impartial. The appeal of neutrality is understandable. For novice coaches, it offers a reassuring framework to manage uncertainty and avoid overstepping. For organisations, it provides a sense of ethical safety and alignment with HR objectives. And for training providers, neutrality presents a teachable stance that simplifies the complexity of ethics and presence into behavioural markers.

This article challenges the neutrality ideal, arguing that it is both epistemologically flawed and relationally limiting. Drawing on ideas and critiques from philosophy, systemic therapy, and relational ethics, this article outlines an approach to coaching and coaching practice: a reflexive awareness of one's influence, an ethical engagement with power, and an active commitment to co-creation.

While neutrality may serve as a developmental scaffold, helping new practitioners learn to listen deeply and suspend judgment, mature coaching practice demands more. After briefly exploring the historical context and examining the philosophical critiques, the article reimagines a coaching stance which embraces reflexivity and ethical positioning. It draws a contrast between the neutral and the reflexive coach and shows how the latter offers something more congruent, courageous, connected and ethically grounded.

My own positioning with regard to this article

As an executive coach, supervisor, and systemic practitioner, I approach this topic not from a place of detachment but from within the field. I write this article as someone who once found comfort in the ideal of neutrality, who was trained to "hold the space," "stay out of content," and let the client lead. For a time, this helped me feel safe and competent. But as my practice deepened, and especially as I started to supervise and mentor other coaches, I began to notice how my presence, language, identity, and values always shaped the coaching conversation. It was obvious that I influenced my clients and supervisees. I trained and qualified as a systemic psychotherapist after I had been coaching for more than 12 years. My enquiry became not whether I influenced, but how to do so ethically, transparently, and reflexively. This article is born of that inquiry. It is as much a conceptual argument as a reflective stance. It is a call to coaching practitioners and educators to move beyond myth and into more honest, relational, and responsive ways of being with clients. In keeping with the argument of this article, I acknowledge that I am not writing from a neutral stance. My perspective is shaped by my practice as a supervisor, coach and systemic psychotherapist.

Clarifying core concepts

This article proposes alternative stances such as reflexivity, ethical influence, and co-creation. Several terms, often used interchangeably in coaching literature, have distinct meanings within this theoretical framing. Defining the concepts used within this article aims to avoid ambiguity and foregrounds the shift from static presence to dynamic participation.

Reflection refers to the act of thinking back on one's experiences, often privately and retrospectively. It is generally individualistic and inward-facing, intending to learn from the past (Finlay, 2008).

Reflexivity, by contrast, is a dialogical and systemic process. It involves *thinking about one's thinking and relating*, with an awareness of context, power, and positioning (Burnham, 1993; Cunliffe, 2003). Reflexivity is a present-moment stance that helps the coach remain aware of how their beliefs, identity, and language shape the coaching relationship as it unfolds.

Relational reflexivity, as outlined by Burnham (1993, 2005), deepens this further by focusing on *reflexivity in and through relationships*. It calls attention to how a coach's ideas and actions are co-created within a particular relational context. It is about mutual influence, how coach and client create meaning together.

Positioning refers to the discursive and relational roles we are continually taking and being assigned in interaction (Davies & Harré, 1990). In coaching, this includes how the coach positions themself (consciously and unconsciously), as well as how they are being positioned by the client, the organisations and wider systems involved.

Influence is understood here as inevitable and multi-layered. It encompasses not only the coach's interventions but also their presence, body language, tone, social identity, and values. Influence is to be used consciously, ethically, and in the service of the client.

Co-creation recognises that insight, action, and meaning in coaching emerge not from one party but through the interplay of both. A co-creative stance calls for reflexive awareness of how shared narratives are constructed.

By clarifying these concepts, this article aims to move beyond simplistic notions of neutrality to offer a more nuanced, systemic, and ethically grounded view of the coach's role in contemporary practice. These concepts will be returned to throughout the article, not to redefine them, but to show how they unfold in practice.

The Historical Roots of Neutrality in Helping Professions

The idea of the practitioner as a neutral figure has deep roots in the helping professions. In psychoanalysis, Freud's model positioned the analyst as a "blank screen" onto which the patient could project unconscious material (Freud, 1912/1958). The analyst's neutrality was framed as a disciplined non-intrusion; a way to maintain analytic distance and avoid contaminating the therapeutic process with personal bias or emotional entanglement.

Later, Carl Rogers' humanistic approach offered a different, but still non-directive, version of practitioner stance. Rogers emphasised unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence, but held fast to the principle that the client is the expert in their own life. The role of the therapist was to provide a facilitative, accepting presence, without advising, steering, or interpreting (Rogers, 1961).

In the early days of Organisation Development (OD), consultants such as Chris Argyris and Edgar Schein promoted the idea of the consultant as a "helper" who enabled the client system to diagnose and address its issues (Schein, 1987). Neutrality was framed as a way to avoid imposing external solutions and to protect the integrity of the system's own learning and agency.

Coaching inherits a selective and diluted version of these traditions. Neutrality has become a taken-for-granted professional norm; an ethical placeholder that resists scrutiny. Coaches may be taught to "stay out of the content," "trust the client's process," or "hold the space," without clear engagement with the philosophical or relational implications of doing so.

This historical inheritance also reveals the conceptual tensions in the coaching field: between being a partner and being an observer; between believing in client agency and recognising co-created meaning; between ethical non-imposition and the inescapable influence of power, language, and identity. As coaching has grown into a global industry, neutrality has remained a comfortable, if unexamined, touchstone; one that may offer reassurance but little relational or ethical clarity.

Despite these complex roots of neutrality in therapeutic and organisational practice, coaching often inherits the concept in a simplified and decontextualised form. Modern coaching education and professional standards tend to foreground behavioural competencies, what coaches should *do*, without sufficient attention to the *being* and *relating* that underpin these behaviours. As such, neutrality is often implied rather than explicitly taught, living in the language of presence, curiosity, and non-directivity, and reinforced through the competency-based

assessments of major bodies such as the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

For instance, the ICF Core Competencies emphasise the coach's ability to "remain curious" and "evoke awareness" without steering the client, while simultaneously calling for coaches to manage their own presence, identity, and biases (ICF, 2019). This creates a quiet contradiction: coaches are asked to be both fully present and invisible, fully engaged and entirely non-influential. Similarly, EMCC guidelines promote the idea of "non-judgmental space" and "client-led direction," while offering little on the ethics of power, positionality, or the coach's inevitable influence on the coaching process.

Coach training programmes often reinforce this by encouraging practitioners to "stay neutral," "leave their opinions at the door," or "trust the client's wisdom." While such advice may support early-stage development, it can also promote a form of ethical detachment, where the coach's self, values, and social context are bracketed out in pursuit of a kind of sterile professionalism. This can leave coaches unprepared to navigate the messiness of real human relationships, especially in contexts of cultural difference, systemic inequality, or organisational complexity.

Coaches are not blank slates. They bring language, perspective, power, and history into the room. And when neutrality becomes a shield against these realities, it risks undermining the very ethical foundation it seeks to uphold.

Philosophical Critiques of Neutrality

The notion of neutrality, particularly in relational practices like coaching, has been extensively critiqued within philosophy, psychology, and critical theory. At its core, neutrality assumes that a practitioner can occupy a detached, objective position outside of the relational field. Yet for the client, this assumption can feel hollow: coaching conversations are experienced as deeply relational, and the coach's presence, values, and choices inevitably shape what unfolds. Thinkers from diverse traditions have likewise argued that all knowledge, perception, and communication are inherently situated.

From an epistemological perspective, the egocentric predicament, a term used in philosophy to describe the impossibility of perceiving the world without the mediation of one's own subjectivity, undermines the idea of a truly neutral stance (Russell, 1912). As constructivist theorists have long asserted, we do not observe reality as passive witnesses but co-construct it through our language, frameworks, and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the coaching relationship, this means that the coach is not simply observing the client's process but is always participating in the shaping of meaning.

Ethically, the pursuit of neutrality can mask power. As feminist and postcolonial thinkers have pointed out, claims to neutrality often obscure the social, cultural, and institutional positions from which they are made (Haraway, 1988; Said, 1978). This echoes Humphreys' (2023) call for coaches to embrace 'grounded uncertainty' over objectivity, drawing on Rorty's (1989) neo-pragmatism to propose a more authentic and participatory stance. While neo-pragmatism aims to disrupt rigid truths, it can paradoxically entrench a new form of coach neutrality; one that hides

behind linguistic indeterminacy rather than engaging with systemic power. A coach claiming to 'hold space' in grounded uncertainty may still be privileging particular worldviews, especially when they do not interrogate the cultural, ideological, or economic systems that shape what counts as viable self-description. In this light, neutrality does not disappear; it simply rebrands itself as complexity. A systemic lens asks: who benefits when responsibility for transformation is framed as individual self-creation, rather than as collective action or systemic repair?

Relational ethics further challenge the possibility of a neutral stance by emphasising the co-constructed nature of meaning and the ethical responsibility that emerges from being in relationship. Authors such as Weingarten (2000) argue that witnessing is always situated and never neutral; what we attend to, how we interpret it, and what we choose to reflect back are always shaped by our own histories, values, and intentions. Similarly, social constructionist coaching models (Cunliffe, 2009; Stelter, 2007) emphasise that coaching conversations are not neutral containers but sites of joint meaning-making and ethical action.

To coach, then, is to influence. Even silence, body language, or the framing of a question carries weight. Denying this influence does not negate it; it merely pushes it into the unexamined. The more ethical stance is not to claim neutrality, but to own one's position, reflect on its impact, and remain open to dialogue. In this light, neutrality is less a protective ethical stance than a fragile illusion. While it may comfort those seeking certainty or simplicity, it risks flattening the depth, responsibility, and relational richness that coaching can offer. It is time for the coaching profession to move beyond the illusion of neutrality and embrace reflexivity as its ethical foundation.

Systemic and Therapeutic Reframings of Neutrality

While the philosophical critiques of neutrality expose its theoretical fragility, systemic thinkers have gone further by offering alternative ways of being in relational practice. They invite a stance of *positioned participation*, in which influence is acknowledged, reflected upon, and used with intention. This reframing is particularly resonant for coaching, where the practitioner's presence and relational engagement are central to the work.

Karl Tomm's influential framework of questioning (1987) encouraged practitioners to become reflexive questioners, aware of how their language, assumptions, and interventions shaped the co-created reality of the conversation. His emphasis on ethical posture, intention, and systemic humility foregrounds the idea that neutrality is neither possible nor desirable.

Lynn Hoffman (2002) traces how the myth of neutrality persisted in family therapy's early years, even as the field moved from cybernetic systems theory toward constructivist and postmodern orientations. Hoffman critiques neutrality as an artefact of modernist thinking, a "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1986), that fails to account for the relational embeddedness of all human interaction.

Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner (1986) offered the concept of multi-directional partiality. Rather than striving to be impartial, the practitioner acknowledges and actively attends to the perspectives of all parties, present or absent, in the system. This stance recognises that fairness and trust are relationally negotiated, not achieved through detachment.

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the *zone of proximal development* argues that learning occurs not in isolation but in relationship, through dialogue, scaffolding (the practitioner participating in and offering structure for learning), and shared meaning-making. In coaching terms, this means that growth happens not because the coach is a neutral observer, but because they are a relational participant in the learning. The coach is not outside the process, but inside it, influencing and being influenced.

Together, these thinkers point toward a systemic and relational model of coaching practice. A practice that replaces neutrality with *reflexivity, positioning, and co-creation*. The ethical coach is not invisible but intentional; not neutral but aware. They are not absent from the relational field but actively shaping it, with curiosity, humility, and a commitment to shared meaning.

While systemic thinkers have provided a compelling reframing, many coaching standards and practices have yet to catch up with these shifts.

Revisiting Neutrality in Coaching Practice

Despite the robust critiques from philosophy and systemic practice, the idea of neutrality remains surprisingly persistent in coaching literature and professional standards. Authors such as Louis and Fatien Diochon (2019) have begun to challenge these assumptions more directly. They describe coaching as inherently political and relational, an activity where neutrality is not only impossible but potentially unethical. As Fatien, Louis, and Islam (2022) demonstrate through a qualitative study, neutrality in coaching is less a fixed position than a series of negotiated tensions: moral, relational, and emotional.

Similarly, Cunliffe (2009) and Stelter (2007) propose dialogic and narrative approaches that position the coach as a co-creator of meaning rather than a detached observer. These models reject neutrality in favour of mutual exploration, where the coach's questions, reflections, and even silences contribute to the unfolding of insight.

Some coaching modalities deliberately foster an atmosphere of neutrality, not as an avoidance of influence, but as a technique to slow down inquiry and allow unconscious dynamics to emerge (Lee, 2010). However, neutrality is better understood as a stance rather than a static state, one that requires significant reflexive awareness and containment capacity.

Gestalt coaching explicitly rejects the notion of the neutral, independent practitioner. Rooted in field theory, it posits that coaches are unavoidably part of the field and therefore exert influence simply by being present (Bluckert, 2010). As Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) assert, 'the whole determines the parts'; if you are in the field, you shape it, and are shaped by it.

Yet many coaching texts and trainings still promote neutrality as a form of professional containment. This stance may be particularly appealing to novice coaches, offering a sense of safety and legitimacy as they develop their craft. The idea of neutrality may serve as a transitional stance, by encouraging new practitioners to suspend judgment and attend more deeply to the client. However, critical reflection is essential; otherwise, it obscures the coach's influence and limits the relational depth of the work.

There is a growing need, then, to move beyond neutrality towards reflexivity. This does not mean abandoning client autonomy or becoming directive, but acknowledging that all coaching is situated, relational, and co-constructed.

Beyond Neutrality – Embracing Reflexivity and Ethical Positioning

Acknowledging the impossibility of true neutrality raises an important question: *So, what should coaches do now?* Recognising that influence is inevitable, the ethical coach's task is to become reflexively aware of their positionality, the assumptions they bring, and how these shape the coaching relationship (Burnham, 1993; Cunliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2008). As discussed earlier, reflexivity calls coaches to examine not only what they do but why and how they do it, and to remain open to feedback and new perspectives. Here, the emphasis is on applying reflexivity directly in dialogue with clients. By naming what they notice, sharing aspects of their experience, and inviting the client's response, the coach turns reflexivity into a collaborative act.

Supervision and peer reflection are essential supports in this journey, but reflexivity must also be lived transparently with clients in the moment.

As previously outlined, positionality highlights the roles and identities coaches inhabit. This awareness enables coaches to navigate influence flexibly. The client's response to these positions, and indeed their participation, through collaborative questions such as, 'What sort of coach do you need me to be today?' invites the client's feedback to reshape the coaching stance.

Importantly, embracing reflexivity does not mean abandoning client-centredness or becoming directive. Rather, it enhances the coach's capacity to hold space ethically and intentionally, balancing influence with respect for the client's autonomy.

In practice, this means:

- Naming and exploring one's values and assumptions with clients when appropriate
- Remaining curious about how one's presence affects the coaching process
- Seeking ongoing feedback and engaging in ethical dialogue
- Using supervision as a reflective and developmental tool

Ultimately, moving beyond neutrality invites coaches to embrace complexity, uncertainty, and relationality. It calls for courage to own one's influence and responsibility to engage ethically, fostering richer, more authentic, and transformative coaching relationships.

To move beyond neutrality, we must examine not only the coach but the institutions that define what coaching is. The professional bodies of coaching act as meaning-making systems, reifying behavioural norms that encode assumptions about what a good life, a competent person, or a worthwhile goal looks like. These assumptions often reflect dominant cultural values more than universal truths. To move beyond neutrality, we must examine not only the coach but the institutions that define what coaching is and whether these frameworks genuinely reflect what clients value and need in coaching relationships.

Client Perspectives on Neutrality and Influence in Coaching

While much of the coaching literature and theory debates the merits and limitations of neutrality, it is equally vital to consider how clients themselves experience this dynamic. The coaching relationship is, after all, co-constructed; the client's perceptions and needs around neutrality and influence provide essential insights into ethical and effective practice. Notions of neutrality, influence, and ethics are not culturally neutral themselves. What is read as 'non-directive' in one context may be seen as evasive or disengaged in another.

Research on client expectations and experiences suggests that many seek from coaching a safe, non-judgmental space where they feel heard and respected (Passmore & Gibbes, 2007; Boysen, 2018). Neutrality, if defined as the sense of freedom from judgment, often emerges as a valued attribute. Clients want to explore ideas and emotions without fear of criticism or imposition of an agenda. This aligns with the humanistic roots of coaching and therapeutic traditions.

However, the concept of neutrality as detachment or absence of influence is seldom endorsed by clients. Many report appreciating when coaches offer authenticity, presence, and challenge, when the coach's perspective helps them see blind spots, reconsider assumptions, or expand their thinking (de Haan, Culpin & Curd, 2011; Boysen, 2018). This suggests that clients value intentional influence rather than disengaged neutrality.

Studies also highlight the importance of trust and relational safety as prerequisites for clients to tolerate or even seek out such influence (Stabler & James, 2023). When the coach is transparent about their role and reflexive about their influence, clients often feel empowered rather than constrained.

In Ole Michael Spaten's (2020) book, which presents a large number of scientific articles, empirical research, and their contributions on the coaching relationship and its complexity, there is no mention of neutrality as a factor. What is suggested is that coaches need to adapt to the coachee. This variability underscores the importance of flexibility and responsiveness to client preferences and contexts. This responsiveness is at the heart of a collaborative style of coaching, where the coach and client shape the process together rather than the coach holding to a fixed stance of neutrality (Henderson [O'Broin], 2013, as cited in Spaten, 2020). While collaboration may include moments of non-directivity, it is distinguished from neutrality in that the coach acknowledges their active presence and invites the client into co-creating the direction and meaning of the work.

Emerging qualitative research invites coaches to explore clients' expectations about neutrality explicitly, making space for dialogue about the coach's role as influencer and co-creator. This dialogic approach helps align coaching practice with client needs and enhances the ethical co-construction of the coaching process.

In sum, client perspectives complicate simplistic notions of neutrality. Rather than an absolute ideal, neutrality appears as a relational quality that clients value primarily insofar as it supports safety, trust, and the capacity for influence.

Coaching Thinkers on Neutrality, Influence, and Reflexivity

Several prominent coaching scholars and practitioners have challenged the myth of coach neutrality, highlighting the relational and co-creative nature of coaching.

Mary Beth O'Neill (2000) emphasises that coaches are not neutral observers but active participants who must navigate power dynamics and take ethical stances. Similarly, David Clutterbuck (2010) stresses coaching as a co-created journey, centred on partnership and dialogue, which challenges any detached or neutral model.

Jennifer J. Britton (2013) and Berger and Fitzgerald (2015) foreground coaching as relational and systemic, where neutrality is impossible. They advocate for coaches to develop relational intelligence, work alongside clients and become co-explorers and have the capacity to hold multiple perspectives ethically, with dynamic, engaged participation.

The authors of the Co-Active Coaching model (Kimsey-House et al., 2011) explicitly position coaches as authentic, emotionally present partners rather than neutral facilitators, emphasising connection and presence.

As Fatien et al. (2022) demonstrate through an extensive qualitative study, neutrality in coaching is less a fixed position than a series of negotiated tensions: moral, relational, and emotional. Their work substantiates the need to move beyond neutrality as an ethical ideal and toward a more reflexive, situated stance that acknowledges the coach as a co-actor in systems of meaning and power.

Building on the insights of these coaching scholars, who challenge neutrality primarily through their emphasis on authenticity and relational engagement, it becomes clear that a deliberate, ongoing, reflexive practice is essential for coaches. These critiques set the stage for a deeper exploration of how coaches themselves experience and respond to the challenges of neutrality.

This article proposes that reflexive, systemic practice requires not only awareness but active co-creation. This involves not only surfacing power and values but actively participating in the reframing of meaning and possibility within systems. This requires more ethical clarity, relational reflexivity, and a willingness to take a stand when systems obscure, exclude, or harm.

Coach Perspectives and Scaffolding for Learning: Towards a New Language of Reflexivity

As outlined earlier, reflection often refers to an individual, retrospective process, whereas reflexivity is more dynamic, dialogical, and systemic (Burnham, 2005). Building on the earlier definition, Burnham's concept of relational reflexivity highlights the interplay between self and others, power dynamics, and cultural influences, and how these shape the coaching interaction moment by moment. This section starts to map out what coaches require to develop relational reflexivity.

Fox (2025) develops a related theme in the context of team coaching, advocating for the use of critical reflexivity to help coaches recognise how their assumptions and presence shape the team dynamic. However, Fox's article draws heavily on vertical development frameworks;

approaches criticised by feminist writers such as Gilligan (1982/1985) and Hayward (1996) from a social constructionist perspective. In doing so, it risks narrowing reflexivity to an intellectual exercise, overlooking the relational and emotional dimensions that are vital to coaching practice.

To fully embrace the coach's role as an active participant and influencer, the coaching field needs a new language, as suggested by Rorty's pragmatism (1989), that helps practitioners map this complex territory of positionality, influence, and co-creation without defaulting to outdated ideals of neutrality. This language must make explicit the ethical and relational nature of coaching and provide tools to engage with ambiguity and power responsibly.

Supporting coaches to develop relational reflexivity requires:

- Training frameworks that incorporate systemic and dialogical approaches, helping coaches to track their impact not only on the client but on the wider relational system (Cunliffe, 2003; Burnham, 2012).

- Supervision models that foreground exploration of relational patterns, positionality, and ethical difficulties, providing a scaffold for ongoing learning and adaptation (Burnham, 1993).

- Reflective practices that encourage coaches to inquire into how they think and act within relational contexts, rather than simply *what* they think or feel. Journaling, peer dialogue, and mindfulness-based approaches can support this deeper reflexivity (Finlay, 2008).

- Creative approaches such as those proposed by McManus and Waters (2024) to cultivate what they call 'reflethical practice', a blending of ethical and reflexive awareness that supports deeper engagement. In the spirit of Rorty's encouragement to create a new language, reflethical practice is an encouraging step in exploring this new territory.

By adopting this expanded understanding of reflexivity, coaches move beyond the limiting assumption of neutrality and toward a more authentic, responsive, and ethically grounded practice. This shift opens space for coaches to fully engage their presence, voice, and influence, not as threats to client autonomy, but as essential ingredients in the co-creation of meaningful coaching outcomes.

This reorientation invites a shift from a static model of coach neutrality to a dynamic, relational model of reflexivity. Table 1 summarises key distinctions between the neutral and the reflexive coach, contrasting assumptions of detachment and control with those of transparency, responsiveness, and ethical participation.

Dimension	Neutral Coach	Reflexive Coach
Self-Positioning	Strives to remain detached, objective, "invisible"	Acknowledges their presence, values, and social positioning
View of Influence	Seeks to minimise influence; sees influence as a risk	Accepts influence as inevitable; uses it ethically and intentionally
Relational Stance	Holds back; aims to be non-directive	Engages relationally; co-creates the process with the client

Language & Dialogue	Uses "clean" or "neutral" questioning to avoid leading	Attends to how language shapes meaning; explores jointly
Ethical Frame	Assumes neutrality is the most ethical position	Embraces relational ethics and shared responsibility
Power Awareness	Avoids naming power; assumes equality through detachment	Actively inquires into power, privilege, and systemic dynamics
Learning Lens	Focuses on individual insight and goal achievement	Views growth as relational and situated in systems and contexts
Supervision Focus	Reviews methods and techniques	Explores positioning, emotional responses, and systemic echoes
Cultural Engagement	Assumes cultural neutrality or universality	Practices cultural humility and seeks to uncover dominant narratives
Client Relationship	Aims to create space by staying out of the way	Creates space through authentic presence and mutual exploration

Table 1 - Comparison of Neutral versus Reflexive Coach

From Neutrality to Ethical Engagement

Moving beyond the assumption of neutrality does not mean adopting a new fixed stance. Rather, it rests on several guiding principles that orient coaching practice toward authenticity, responsiveness, and ethical engagement. This involves cultivating reflexive awareness throughout the coaching process; recognising that coaching always unfolds within wider organisational, cultural, and power dynamics; and taking responsibility for how these shape possibilities.

Coaches inevitably influence the coaching journey through their questions, interpretations, presence, and the power dynamics they navigate (O'Neill, 2007; Berger & Fitzgerald, 2015). Influence is not a failing to be suppressed but a relational reality to be acknowledged and used thoughtfully. A reflexive coach notices the assumptions and values they bring, engages transparently with clients about how these may shape the conversation, and invites the client's perspective on the coaching relationship.

Ethical engagement requires balancing authenticity with responsibility. This includes recognising and negotiating power imbalances (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2014), cultivating epistemic humility; an awareness of the limits of one's own knowledge and openness to others' perspectives (Cunliffe, 2003) and maintaining a commitment to client autonomy, ensuring that influence is offered as an invitation rather than imposition. Coaches should flexibly adopt different ethical postures: collaborating, challenging, supporting, and strategically influencing, depending on context and client need (Tomm, 1987). Supervision provides the reflective space in which to explore how values, assumptions, and positioning shape practice.

In moving beyond neutrality, the coaching relationship becomes a space of co-created meaning, where both coach and client engage as ethical participants in mutual influence and transformation (Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Britton, 2013).

Co-Creation and Ethical Partnership

Recognising the relational and contextual nature of coaching reframes it as a collaborative partnership rather than detached facilitation. Both coach and client bring histories, assumptions, and influences to the process. While sometimes a client needs a neutral, non-directive presence, at other times they value a coach who actively contributes insight, challenge, and perspective (Boysen, 2018). Understanding this spectrum helps coaches tailor their stance to client needs and preferences.

Ethical partnership involves:

- Mutual transparency about roles, influence, and boundaries to foster trust and respect.

- Dialogue about power dynamics, inviting clients to reflect on their agency and the coach's impact.

- Shared responsibility for process and outcomes of the coaching, positioning both as active participants.

This approach aligns with systemic and social constructionist perspectives, emphasising that meaning and change arise in interaction rather than being transmitted from coach to client (Vygotsky, 1978; Burnham, 2005). By integrating client perspectives into ongoing dialogue about influence and neutrality, coaches can navigate complexity, honour autonomy, and enhance the transformative potential of their work.

Reflexivity as the Ethical Core

Reflexivity is the ethical and practical centre of coaching beyond neutrality. It moves beyond reflection on experience to an active inquiry into how we participate in systems of meaning and power. The reflexive coach is not a detached facilitator but an ethical co-participant, aware that their position, values, and presence inevitably shape the coaching process.

Reflexivity invites difficult ethical questioning: when does adaptability become evasiveness? When does a celebration of multiplicity turn into a refusal to name harm, history, or complicity? Without structure and accountability, reflexivity can slide into aesthetic detachment, a coach's version of the emperor's new clothes.

Practically, reflexivity means acknowledging the tensions inherent in complex systems. Coaches often work with multiple organisational stakeholders whose needs may conflict. Rather than retreating into neutrality, a reflexive coach surfaces these tensions transparently, inviting the client to explore their implications.

Several practices can embed reflexivity in everyday coaching.

- **Journaling** to surface assumptions and blind spots (Finlay, 2008).

- **Supervision and peer consultation** to explore relational and ethical dynamics (Burnham, 1993).

- **Mindfulness and somatic awareness** to notice subtle shifts in stance or bias (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

- **Dialogic inquiry** – explicitly inviting client feedback to co-create the process.

- **Systemic frameworks** such as Burnham's GRRACCES (2012), which remind coaches that inequalities are lived and relational, supporting dialogue around privilege and power dynamics.

Reflexivity also cultivates epistemic humility: the capacity to hold value clashes or cultural differences with curiosity rather than premature resolution. This involves recognising how one's own cultural lens shapes interpretation and adapting approaches to honour the client's worldview.

Table 2 summarises the implications of this reflexive stance for professional practice, linking reflexivity to supervision, ethical decision-making, and the development of systemic literacy. It positions reflexivity not as an abstract virtue but as a lived discipline, sustained through critical dialogue, supervision, and a commitment to social and relational awareness.

Table 2: Implications for practice.

The following implications for practice are framed as challenges and opportunities, highlighting where the profession risks getting stuck in neutrality, and how it can move forward through reflexive, relational approaches.

1. Encourage Early Reflection on Positionality in Coach Training

The Challenge: New coaches often enter training programmes with the implicit assumption that their job is to "stay out of the way" of the client's process. While well-intentioned, this framing can obscure the inevitable influence of the coach's identity, values, and social positioning.

The Opportunity: Early training should normalise critical reflection on who the coach is in the room: how their lived experiences, biases, and ways of making meaning shape the relationship. Incorporating positionality statements, reflective writing, and facilitated dialogue can help future coaches develop ethical self-awareness from the outset.

2. Replace Neutrality with Relational Reflexivity in Competency Models

The Challenge: Professional frameworks such as the ICF or EMCC often reward neutrality as a proxy for ethical detachment. Yet neutrality is not ethically inert; it can be relationally distancing or complicit with dominant norms.

The Opportunity: Competency models should evolve to centre relational reflexivity: the coach's ongoing awareness of how they participate in, shape, and are shaped by the coaching conversation. This includes tracking power dynamics, cultural narratives, and emotional tone, not as disruptions to neutrality but as signals for ethical responsiveness.

3. Prioritise Ethics of Influence in Supervision

The Challenge: Supervision often emphasises compliance-based reflection, focusing on what was done in a session. This can miss the deeper ethical question of how a coach's presence, language, and assumptions influence the process.

The Opportunity: Supervisors can support coaches to engage in ethical inquiry: What narratives are being reinforced? Whose voices are privileged? What systemic forces are left unnamed? By reframing influence as an ethical capacity rather than a liability, supervision becomes a site for developing responsible and reflexive practice.

4. Support Systemic Literacy and Cultural Humility

The Challenge: Coaching does not occur in a vacuum; social, organisational, and cultural systems shape both client and coach. Without systemic literacy, coaches risk reproducing unexamined biases and reinforcing dominant narratives.

The Opportunity: Developing systemic literacy and cultural humility means recognising the limits of one's worldview and staying curious about difference, power, and identity. The responsibility for this lies with multiple actors: training providers, supervisors, accrediting bodies, and coaches themselves, who must ensure systemic perspectives are embedded, modelled, and assessed. Tools from systemic therapy, narrative practice, and dialogical coaching can support this shift toward contextual sensitivity and shared meaning-making.

Without institutional accountability, systemic awareness risks being treated as optional rather than integral to ethical practice.

In this way, reflexivity grounds ethical practice not in certainty, but in relational responsiveness and systemic awareness.

Conclusion

The longstanding ideal of coach neutrality, originally adopted to create a safe, non-judgmental space, has become both impractical and limiting. By acknowledging our influence and positionality, and by accepting that learning and development arise through co-creation, coaches can better navigate complexity, empower clients, and co-create transformative learning experiences. This shift calls for new language, new frameworks, and a cultural change within coaching: one that values reflexivity, ethical presence, and mutual influence as defining features of professional maturity.

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language development, conceptual clarification, and refinement of argument structure. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content independently and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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