

2025 COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
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HIGH IMPACT COACHING
IN AN ERA OF HYBRID INTELLIGENCE

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Robots in the Room: Ethics, AI, and the Coach

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Abstract

In this interactive session, participants engage in real-time to explore ethical dilemmas across the coaching lifecycle, including AI algorithmic bias in hybrid coaching and the application of AI in organizational coaching at scale. Industry expert facilitators lead peer table discussion and polling on high-stakes ethical scenarios, using Socratic, Buddhist, Utilitarian, ICF, and normative business ethics to test assumptions. Outcomes include expanded perspective and co-created solutions to address impact, fairness, confidentiality, and trust in AI-partnered coaching.

Key Words

Ethics, Decision-Making, AI in Coaching, Algorithmic Bias, AI in Coaching

Session Overview

Artificial intelligence (AI) functions both as a tool and as context to workplace and personal choice-making. Norms for ethical use of AI and hybrid intelligence (i.e., integration of human and AI problem solving) are evolving alongside the technology at an unprecedented pace. Meanwhile, AI could expose coaching professionals to issues of trust and data protection that were already concerning before AI, because coaching arose as an interdisciplinary field without the strong rulesets or legal privileges of law or medicine. So how can we bring timely and trustworthy ethical insight to the nexus of hybrid intelligence and coaching?

Answers, today as in Aristotle's or Buddha's time, emerge from ethical dialogue and reflection engaging multiple parties and perspectives. Our experiential session catalyzes collective inquiry by confronting ethically complex real-world cases in hybrid coaching; exposing the philosophical, moral, relational, and spiritual/religious underpinnings of our responses to ethical dilemmas; and encouraging lively debate around action steps. The facilitators begin with a warm welcome honoring each individual's presence and gifts, cultivating a climate of curiosity and psychological safety. We introduce three provocative coaching ethics scenarios involving AI for

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small group discussion. We test assumptions and invite multiple points of view. Anonymized flash polls provide insight into the group's mindsets and ethical decisions in real time. In dialogue we explore, how do we feel about those decisions? What are the unexpected second, third, and later order effects of our choices in the moment? The session concludes with a shift towards action as participants co-create new ethical guidelines to bring back to their organizations and coaching communities. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation guides a fast-moving design that engages head, heart, and hands.

Conference Theme Relevance

The session invites participants both to experience hybrid intelligence directly, and to reflect on the meaning of that experience, within the adaptive leadership frames of the dance floor and the balcony (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009). By engaging participants in dialogue leveraging AI within the session, the facilitators test assumptions of how coaches derive ethical stances (Smith et al., 2023), and the impact of those ethical stances on the practice of coaching, the development of technology, and the culture of leadership in a hybrid intelligence world. The facilitators use 3CP principles of powerful questioning and co-creation of the agenda, as well as theatrical and literary principles of "show, don't tell," to structure a journey in which participants shape ethical perspectives by learning from each other and from AI instances designed for the session. In its design, the session invites participants to apply 3CP and ICF ethical norms and also to question how these norms may over- or under-serve coaches and clients working with hybrid intelligence.

The potential for AI to flatter, please, and/or reinforce mindsets of human subjects has provoked ethical concern in the mental health arena, notably where subjects used AI to contemplate self-harm and AI failed to notify anyone of the subject's intentions (Hill, 2025). Given coaching's adjacency to counseling and its use in the well-being space, similar concerns should be debated openly in coaching. For example, in the pursuit of high impact coaching, might a coach, client, or organization give AI overzealous direction to pursue client behavior modification in ways that may create undue stress for the client? Could clients leverage an AI or hybrid coaching modality to advocate for termination of a direct report, and if so, what legal liabilities ensue? In team coaching, would AI tell each team member what they wanted to hear, and/or would it encourage members to communicate with each other? And what responsibilities do human coaches bear to code the agreements used in hybrid settings?

Learning Objectives

1. **Examine and debate** ethical dilemmas in hybrid coaching by engaging multiple human and AI perspectives.

2. **Synthesize** key insights to **formulate** core ethical principles for hybrid coaching.

3. **Create** measurable guidelines to encourage practical, ethical, high-impact coaching in context of AI.

Session Outline

Time	Activity	Description
10 min	Welcome & Framing	Presenters lead a brief discussion introducing the session overview, format, and objectives, while setting the context of hybrid intelligence. Presenters introduce a framework for recognizing ethical dilemmas in the hybrid coaching lifecycle. The framework highlights considerations arising when technology intersects with human decision-making. Presenters link the topic with Columbia Coaching Certification Program (3CP) principles. Setting agreements, presenters invite participants to approach discussion with curiosity and critical thinking. Presenters indicate transition to interactive experience focused on three specific ethical scenarios.
45 min	Guided Ethical Inquiry of Three Scenarios	In trios, participants review **Scenario 1: The Confidentiality Crisis**, generate a response and input into Mentimeter. Presenters debrief responses as they scroll onscreen.

Time	Activity	Description
		Group discussion of themes and outliers summarized by AI within Mentimeter. Inquire with group about reflections, surprises, rationales for decisions. Repeat for **Scenario 2: The Bias Blindspot** and **Scenario 3: The Robocoach Rebellion.**
10 min	Synthesis and Reflection	Reflect on which voices participants questioned or trusted, and why. Reflect on the ethical and spiritual sources of different perspectives: Utilitarian, Buddhist, Socratic, ICF, normative business ethics.
20 min	Co-Design Ethical Guidelines	Participants collaborate to draft practical ethical guidelines for hybrid coaching, in groups: *Data, Privacy, and Confidentiality* • How should **coaching insights be protected** within and across organizations in an era of algorithmic systems, agentic AI, big data strategies and data warehousing? • Where do we draw lines between **confidentiality** and organizational access?

Time	Activity	Description
		Algorithmic Bias and Fairness • How can we ensure AI-generated coaching insights are **fair and unbiased**? • Who is accountable when AI-based recommendations lead to unintended consequences? *AI's Role in Workforce Decisions* • What are risks of using coaching data for **performance management, investigations, employee sentiment monitoring, or mental health concerns?** • How to balance AI insights with **human judgment** in employment decisions? *Trust, Transparency, and AI's Role in Coaching* • How transparent should coaches be about **AI** in coaching engagements? • How can AI's use as a **coaching tool** be reconciled with its use as **a surveillance mechanism**?

Time	Activity	Description
5 min	Wrap-Up & Takeaways	Close with final reflections. Provide digital copy of co-created ethical guidelines.

Conceptual/Theory Input

This session combines hybrid intelligence theory (Maltbia, 2024), addressing the integration of human expertise and artificial intelligence to achieve superior outcomes, with both coaching-specific ethical cases (ICF, 2021; Passmore et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023) and foundational ethics from different cultures, such as Anglo-American utilitarianism (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1863; Tusseau, 2024) and Buddhist ethics (Harvey, 2012; Nichtern & Trongpa, 2016).

The three ethical scenarios created for the session draw on Ethics of Care (Gilligan, 1982), emphasizing relational sensitivity and empathy in ethical decision-making; The AI-Trust Paradox, showing challenges of detecting AI gaps (Kreps et al., 2023; Lee & See, 2024); digital ethics (Floridi et al., 2018; Luppicini, 2010); and experiments assessing hybrid coaching (Terblanche et al., 2024). As the scenarios take place in organizational contexts, the session considers deployment of AI within broader questions about the purpose of organizational coaching (Bachkirova, 2024), the postulate that AI could think or act ethically in a manner approaching consciousness (Chiang, 2020), and corporate governance in context of surveillance techniques applied by business actors (Zuboff, 2019).

Design of the session integrates experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), using a cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), creating an environment where participants feel safe to voice different perspectives.

Implications For Practice

As AI transforms the coaching landscape, ethical integrity becomes complex and consequential. Beyond the coaching conversation itself, workplaces use AI for scheduling, feedback analysis, goal tracking, progress monitoring, and employee sentiment analysis. These tools enhance efficiency and insight while introducing ethical considerations related to data privacy, consent, algorithmic bias, and the accuracy of generated insights.

The ethical questions around AI and coaching therefore should be framed more broadly than whether in a given setting, AI can coach as well as a human coach and even if it can, whether it is ethical to deploy an AI coach. Hybrid intelligence contemplates active and iterated cycles of influence among AI systems and human actors, not only coaches but also organizational leaders. Given the broad potential for hybrid intelligence deployment across workplaces beyond the frame

of one-to-one developmental coaching relationships, ethical discussion of AI in leadership is truly a human capital issue as well as a coaching issue and should include business leaders as well as human resource practitioners.

Practitioners updating coach competencies in ethics should assume AI permeates most, if not all, of the work settings in which coaches are engaged. For this reason, competencies could apply the language of coaching, such as courage, presence, and curiosity, to include proactive discussion of AI during contracting. As examples, AI coaching competencies for study could include: 1) courage to ask what ethical ground rules underpin a given AI solution before applying it, and to raise field distinctions contrasting AI used in coaching with AI used in other learning or mental health applications; 2) presence to ask the client or sponsor how AI trained on historical data might perpetuate existing social, cultural, and organizational biases; and 3) curiosity to identify AI solutions, such as 360 degree tools or assessments, that address client needs while using client resources efficiently. In a hybrid intelligence mindset, coaches would leverage AI to improve client outcomes while actively interrogating AI-generated recommendations.

This session equips practitioners with strategies to balance innovation with ethical rigor, emphasizing the human connection at the heart of coaching and asking practitioners how they relate to the ethics of care. Through experiential analysis of AI-driven ethical scenarios, participants will strengthen capacity to assess risk, ensure fairness, and implement their ethical stance in hybrid contexts. This session invites the creation of new ethical guidelines and decision frameworks to anticipate and adapt to hybrid intelligence.

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1. ***Formatting responsibility** – The manuscript fully complies with all conference formatting guidelines. I (we) understand that any document not meeting these specifications may be returned for correction.*

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