



## **Ethics Case Study: Caught in a Trap**

**Julie K. Norris, Associate Certified Coach**

### **Challenge**

One morning a client with whom I'd been working for almost a year ran in to the conference room for our coaching meeting late. He looked deadly serious and very stressed. At first he was tight lipped, sharing only that he was extremely busy and under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines. Suddenly he divulged that he was in trouble. There had been a significant error in quoting a price to a customer. He knew it would take hours of his time to get to the bottom of exactly how and why the error had occurred. Since he felt too time pressured to figure out why the mistake had occurred, he had simply assured the customer they would not be financially penalized in any way and that his company would absorb the financial costs of the error. The next day in a meeting with the executive leadership team, the highest level managers decided that the company would refuse to absorb any of the costs of the error and that the customer would be forced to absorb the loss. The executives did not know about the promise that my client had made to the customer.

My client was now feeling trapped and wanted my help in deciding on a course of action. He immediately settled on his solution. "I'm going to lie. I'm going to hide the numbers and somehow cover this thing up. It's my only way out."

### **Action**

Suddenly the word 'ethics' began flashing in red before my eyes. The ICF Code of Ethics, Standard #22 states that, "I will respect the confidentiality of my client's information except as otherwise authorized by my client, or as required by law." Standard #25 states, "I will seek to avoid conflicts between my interests and the interests of my clients." What were my responsibilities here? Should I try to talk him out of it? Should I report it to his manager? Should I report it to Human Resources? Should I say nothing, return to my office and go about my business?

I looked long and hard at him. And I started asking questions. What would the cover-up look like? What would your lie sound like? How would this affect your ability to do your daily work? How would this affect your daily life? What would be the likely consequences of those actions? What is the best that could happen? What is the worst that could happen? And finally, what do you plan to do?

**Result**

He relaxed and smiled faintly. He said, "I can now understand how good people make bad decisions at work and end up in serious trouble, ethically and legally. I'm going to need to put in some extra hours tonight to dig in and discover how the original error occurred. When I know that, I'll be clearer about what the honest solution will be." He stood, gave me a little wave and said, "Thanks, see you next time."

Contact Julie at 734-332-7871.