



EMCC Global Quality ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN COACHING TODAY

Coaching professional
dilemmas survey



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Executive Summary

There is a lot of documentation about dilemmas in coaching. Dilemmas could be ethical or professional – they are the proof that we can still question the world around us, our work and capabilities, and our own thinking. The ways in which we address them can be the basis of our evolution as professionals, citizens, and human beings.

A dilemma is - Greek: δίλημμα 'double proposition' - 'a problem offering two possibilities, neither of which is unambiguously acceptable or preferable' (definition in Wikipedia from Garners modern American Usage, Britannica, and others).

An ethical dilemma is a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two courses of action, either of which entails transgressing a moral principle. A professional dilemma is a difficult situation or problem with a client that one can face in their professional practice.

A dilemma requires a choice that is made according to a personal set of values and therefore any dilemma may be examined as an ethical issue. The need for a choice, decision, or action creates the dilemma.

Dilemmas may change over time. In order to further evolve it is essential to know what these dilemmas are for practitioners around the globe today. This survey was designed to investigate the subject and explore current dilemmas of coaches.

All EMCC members have access to the Global Code of Ethics that provides guidance in matters related to ethics and the subsequent dilemmas that may arise in practice.

In this survey we asked about:

- Real ethical dilemmas that coaching professionals have had in the last 12 months related to their competence to handle specific cases, financial impact, or implications posed by the dilemma, their own ethics, and values compared to the client's ethics and values in managing the client's dilemma and others.
- How often coaches have dilemmas and what they recognise as a dilemma.
- What categories of dilemmas coaches have and how they deal with them.

The survey ran in two phases: a. semi-structured interviews, b. online questionnaire.

The results presented in this report refer to the quantitative phase (b).

Key survey results

Profile of respondents

- 343 coaches (of 353 total) respondents fully completed the survey
- Mainly EMCC members (87.6% including membership of EMCC and other organisations) from 46 countries participated in the online survey.
- 87% were over 45 years old, of which 34.3% men and 64.9% women
- 71% of respondents had a Masters or PhD

Key results

- 41.1% agreed with the first definition or a dilemma: 'A situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two courses of action, either of which entails transgressing a moral principle'
- 36.7% preferred the second definition: 'A difficult situation or problem with a client that I face in my professional practice'
- 7.3% never had a dilemma in their coaching practice
- 28% had a dilemma in the last month
- 31.5% had a dilemma in the last six months
- 72% had 1-4 dilemmas in the last 12 months
- 15.7% didn't have any dilemmas in the last 12 months

The respondents were asked to choose up to three of their most recent dilemmas:

- Managing own weaknesses (39.6%)
- Conflicting interests between sponsor and coachee (33.2%)



Executive Summary

- ➲ Working with a client who diverts from the goals that have been agreed with their sponsoring organisation (30%)
- ➲ Confidentiality issues in the organisational environment (26.8%)
- ➲ Managing boundaries of the coaching profession (25.9%)
- ➲ Managing relations in an organisation (24.7%)

The main root cause of dilemmas they declared is 'Clash between my value system and the value system of my client' (42%)

The biggest risks of a wrong decision in handling a dilemma are:

- ➲ Losing trust with the coachee or the sponsor (47.8%)
- ➲ Doing harm to the clients development (42.2%)
- ➲ Damage of my credibility as a professional (40.2%)

Respondents' solution to handle dilemmas are:

- ➲ Supervision (72.3%)
- ➲ Reflection on the issue (62.9%)
- ➲ Discussing/recontracting with the client (45.4%)
- ➲ Discussion with trusted colleagues (42.2%).

If they faced a dilemma again, they would discuss it at supervision (79.5%).

Conclusions

Coaches have dilemmas about their own weaknesses, conflicting interests, their clients' changing goals, confidentiality, and others which they prefer to manage with the support of supervision.

Dilemmas slightly differ between the genders and experience and it seems that there is an almost steady percentage of people who never have dilemmas.

Coaches who deliver more than 120 hours coaching per year declare more dilemmas than coaches with less hours. In that category 3.4% had zero dilemmas.

Experience seems not to affect frequency of dilemmas. Coaches with more than 10 years' experience still have a similar percentage of dilemmas.

The type of dilemmas changes significantly over time. Experienced coaches have different dilemmas from novices. Also, there are differences between the genders in the predominant dilemmas.

A clash of values between the coach and the coachee is the most common source of a dilemma.

Supervision is the first choice of coaches to deal with dilemmas while reflection and discussion with trusted colleagues are the next preferred options.

The Global Code of Ethics is a source of information for a number of coaches but still not their first choice when they face an ethical dilemma.



Background and Objectives

The objective of the survey was to find the ethical dilemmas of coaches today. As the world of coaching evolves and the context changes continuously, ethical dilemmas may change. Different types of ethical dilemmas may prevail in different conditions depending on parameters such as experience, age, sex, educational background, origin, area, and maturity of the coach. Even the definition of an 'ethical dilemma' can vary among coaches.

The survey was addressed to professional coaches, internal or external, members, and non-members of EMCC with the aim of discovering the ethical dilemmas of coaches today and their ways to solve them.

In this survey the respondents had to choose which categories of ethical dilemmas are the most common in their practice. At the same time, the survey explored which cases of dilemmas are perceived as such by coaches or are ignored or omitted.

There were various categories of dilemmas described in theory and we intended to discover which of them appear in the everyday practice of the coaches and which of them are not common or not considered by coaches as possible ethical dilemmas.

The results of the survey indicate the real ethical dilemmas of professional coaches and their understanding of ethical dilemmas. They can be used in enriching educational programmes and training for coaches in order to better prepare them for their practice. They can also be a useful resource for further explanation of a practical application of the Global Code of Ethics.



Methodology

The survey was planned and implemented in two phases: a. semi-structured interviews (qualitative) and b. online questionnaire (quantitative).

The interviews preceded the online questionnaire in order to confirm the contents and structure of the questionnaire. The invitation for the interview was sent to all EMCC members who volunteered to participate in an online one to one interview.

The process was confidential and information and examples provided by interviewees were registered in an excel file in order to analyse them in a following document.

All respondents in the online survey provided information about country of residence, age, gender, professional status, years of experience in coaching and in other professions, current professional status, education, and income range. The process was confidential and no names or personal data that could lead to person identification were registered in any way.

The survey was announced by EMCC to all its members globally and all respondents participated voluntarily. No other criteria for selection were applied since the invitation was addressed to the members' list of EMCC.

➲ 343 people participated in the online survey

➲ 26 people participated in the semi structured interviews

In this report we present the results of the online survey. The cases and types of ethical dilemmas as explained by the respondents in the interviews will be analysed in a separate document.

The online questionnaire consisted of a set of questions about the participant's background and experience and 11 questions related to:

- a. Ethical dilemmas of the respondent in the last 12 months in various fields, such as confidentiality, financial issues, personal values and other categories
- b. Frequency of ethical dilemmas in everyday practice
- c. Chosen way to solve recent dilemmas
- d. Suggested way to solve ethical issues.

The main focus was on the actual dilemmas of the respondents in the last 12 months of practice. Both the online questionnaire and the 1 to 1 interview asked the same question and presented the same list of potential dilemmas, potential way of managing, and potential suggestion for solving ethical dilemmas.

Results of the survey

The results presented in this report refer to the online survey.

- 343 professionals responded in the online survey
- 26 respondents in the one-one interviews
- 46 countries.

The majority of respondents were members of EMCC and/or members of other coaching bodies. Only 4.7% were not members of any coaching body.

Demographics of respondents

Gender: The majority of respondents were women.

- 65.3% women
- 33.8% men
- <1% other

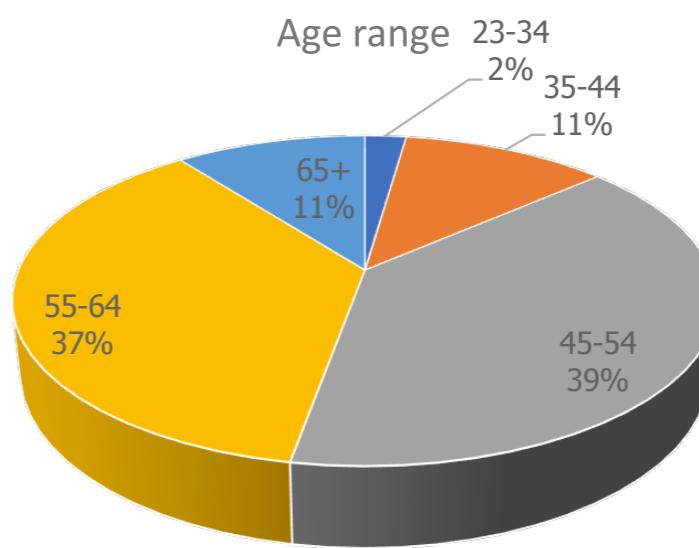
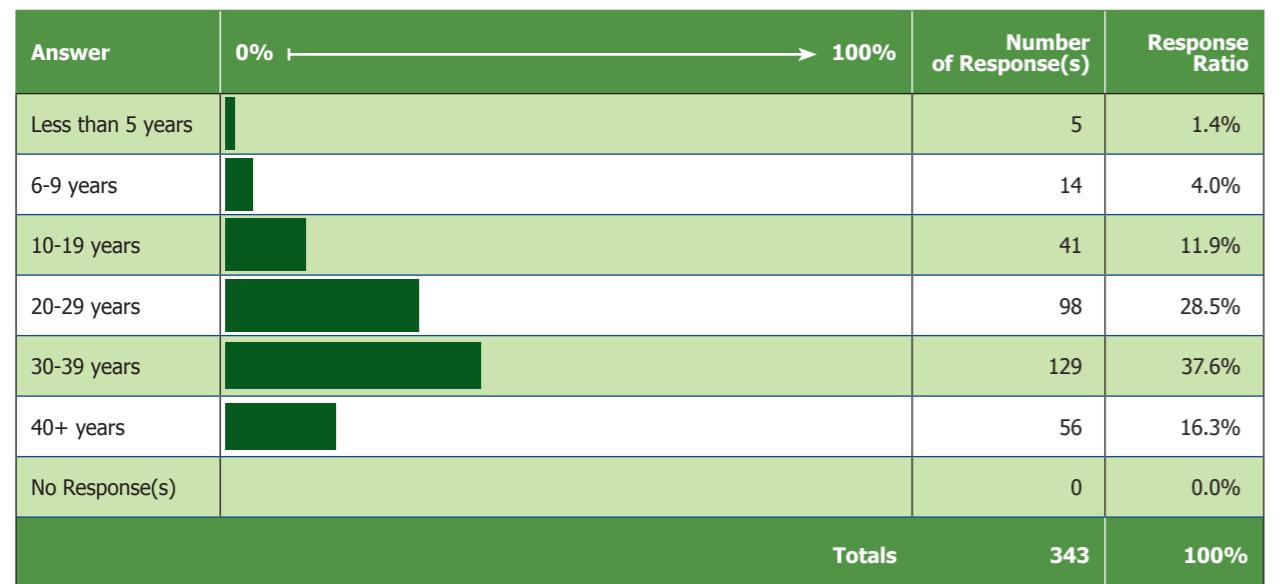
Age: 76% of the respondents were middle aged between 45 and 65 years old and 11% were over 65.

Years of professional experience: As most respondents were middle aged, they have working experience in coaching and other jobs of more than 20 years.

66.1% of the respondents have a total working experience in previous jobs and coaching of between 20-39 years.

The vast majority of coaches practice were coaching as a 'second career' coming from other professions and positions in the business environment.

What is the total number of years of your professional working experience (including all your previous working experience)?

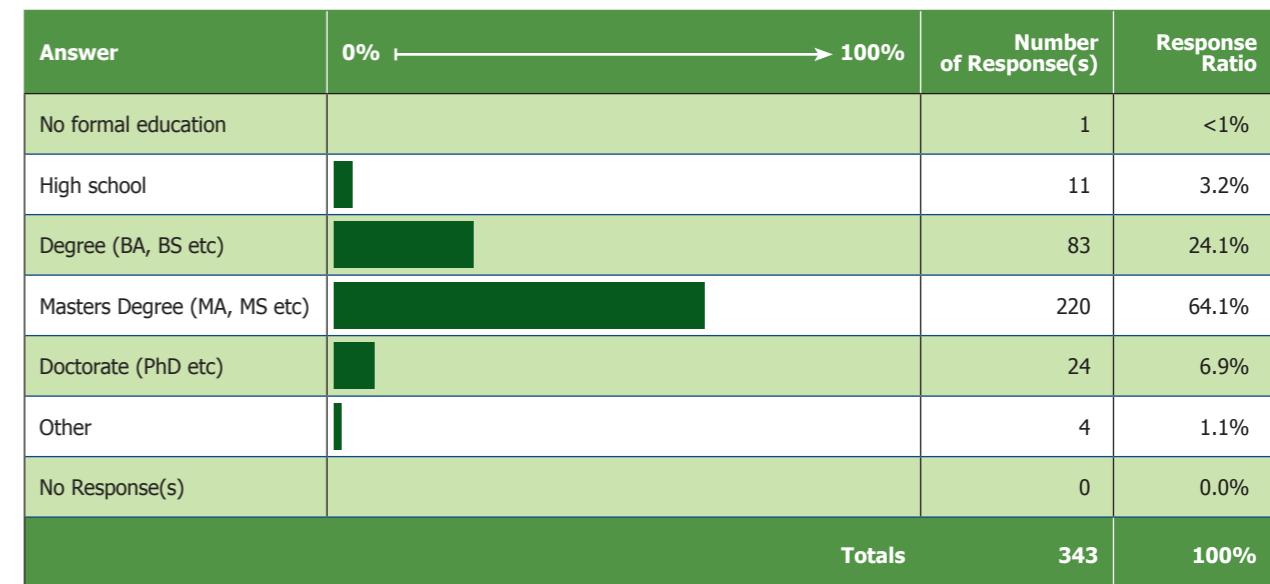


- 23-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

Education level and accreditation: Most of the respondents had a high level of education with at least a degree and the majority of them have master's degrees.

- 64.1% have a master's degree
- 6.9% have a PhD
- 4.3% finished high school and don't hold a degree or don't have formal education
- 71.3% accredited
- 25.8% accredited by EMCC
- 35.5% accredited by another body
- 28.7% not accredited

What is your highest level of formal education?



Annual income and Number of Clients: The annual income of coaches seems to be lower than other professional categories with equal years of experience.

The number of individual clients respondents had in the last 12 months was as follows:

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 0 <1% 1-3 clients for 6.1% | 9-15 clients for 27.6% |
| 15-29 clients for 23% | |
| 4-8 clients for 24.4% | more than 30 clients for 18.3% |

This is an almost balanced distribution between the categories which doesn't match precisely the categories of annual income.

We might assume that respondents annual income could possibly come from other sources or professional activities other than coaching, such as training and consulting, as they declare in the relevant question.

What is your current annual income?

| Answer | 0% ← → 100% | Number of Response(s) | Response Ratio |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Less than €20,000 per annum | | 48 | 13.9% |
| €21,000 – €39,000 per Annum | | 69 | 20.1% |
| €40,000 – €59,000 per Annum | | 74 | 21.5% |
| €60,000 – €79,000 per Annum | | 49 | 14.2% |
| €80,000 – €99,000 per Annum | | 41 | 11.9% |
| €100,000 + per annum | | 62 | 18% |
| No Response(s) | | 0 | 0.0% |
| Totals | | 343 | 100% |

Current role and Type of Coaching: 93.2% of the respondents' current role is as a coach and almost half of them declare themselves also as trainers and consultants.

➲ 17.6% internal coaches mainly as part of their role

➲ 70.2% external coaches

The type of Coaching they practice is predominantly:

➲ 80.7% executive coaching

➲ 55.6% career coaching

➲ 43.1% business/small business coaching

➲ 36.1% life coaching

Years in Coaching: 30.9% of the respondents were novice coaches with less than 3 years' experience while 28.5% are experienced coaches with more than 10 years' experience

How many years have you been working as a coach where coaching was more than 50% of your activity?

| Answer | 0% ← → 100% | Number of Response(s) | Response Ratio |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| <3 years | | 106 | 30.9% |
| 3-6 years | | 78 | 22.7% |
| 7-10 years | | 61 | 17.7% |
| >10 years | | 98 | 28.5% |
| No Response(s) | | 0 | 0.0% |
| Totals | | 343 | 100% |

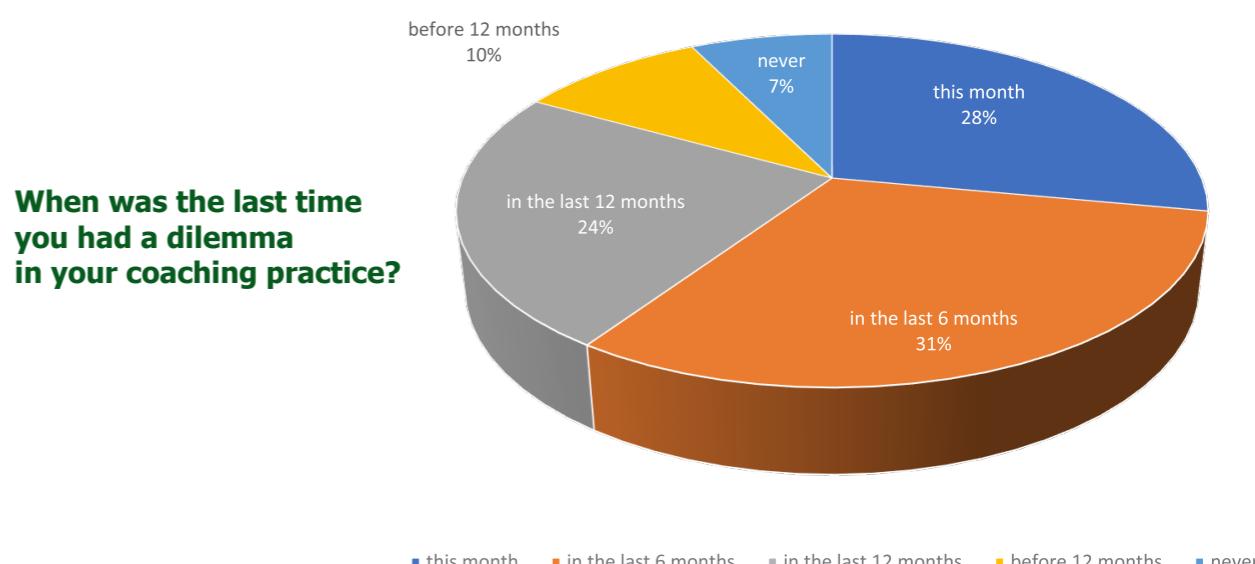
What is an ethical dilemma?

41.1% of coaches agree with definition 1 'A situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two courses of action, either of which entails transgressing a moral principle'

- ➲ 36.7% chose definition 2 'A difficult situation or problem with a client that I face in my professional practice'
- ➲ 1.5% agreed with both definitions
- ➲ 20.7% provided one of the above definitions in their own words or reworded the existing definitions or gave examples of dilemmas they have faced in their practice.

How many dilemmas in a year?

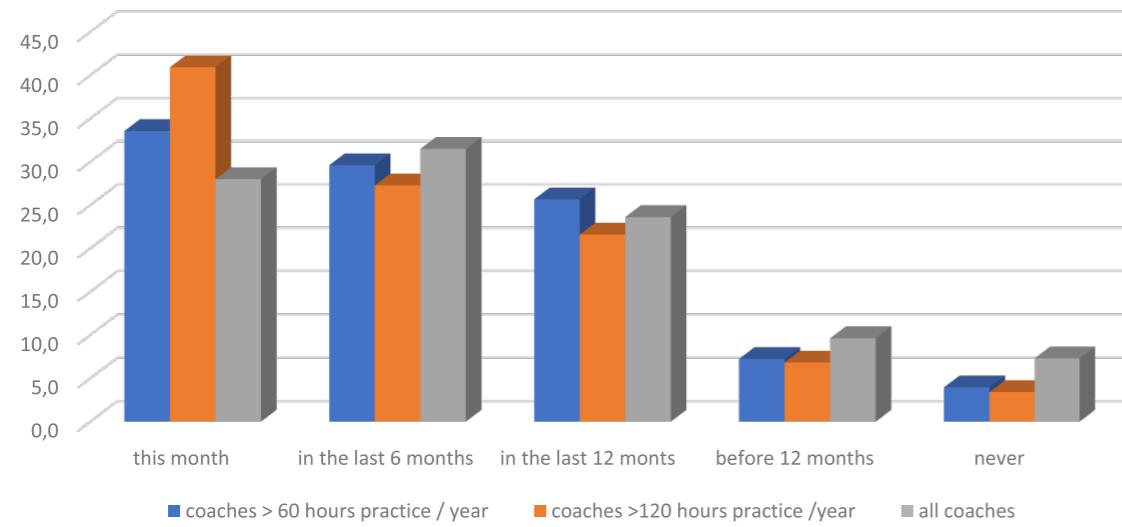
- ➲ 28% had a dilemma in the current month (of taking the survey)
- ➲ 31.4% had a dilemma in the last six months
- ➲ 7.2% (a significant percentage) declared that they have never had a dilemma in their practice.



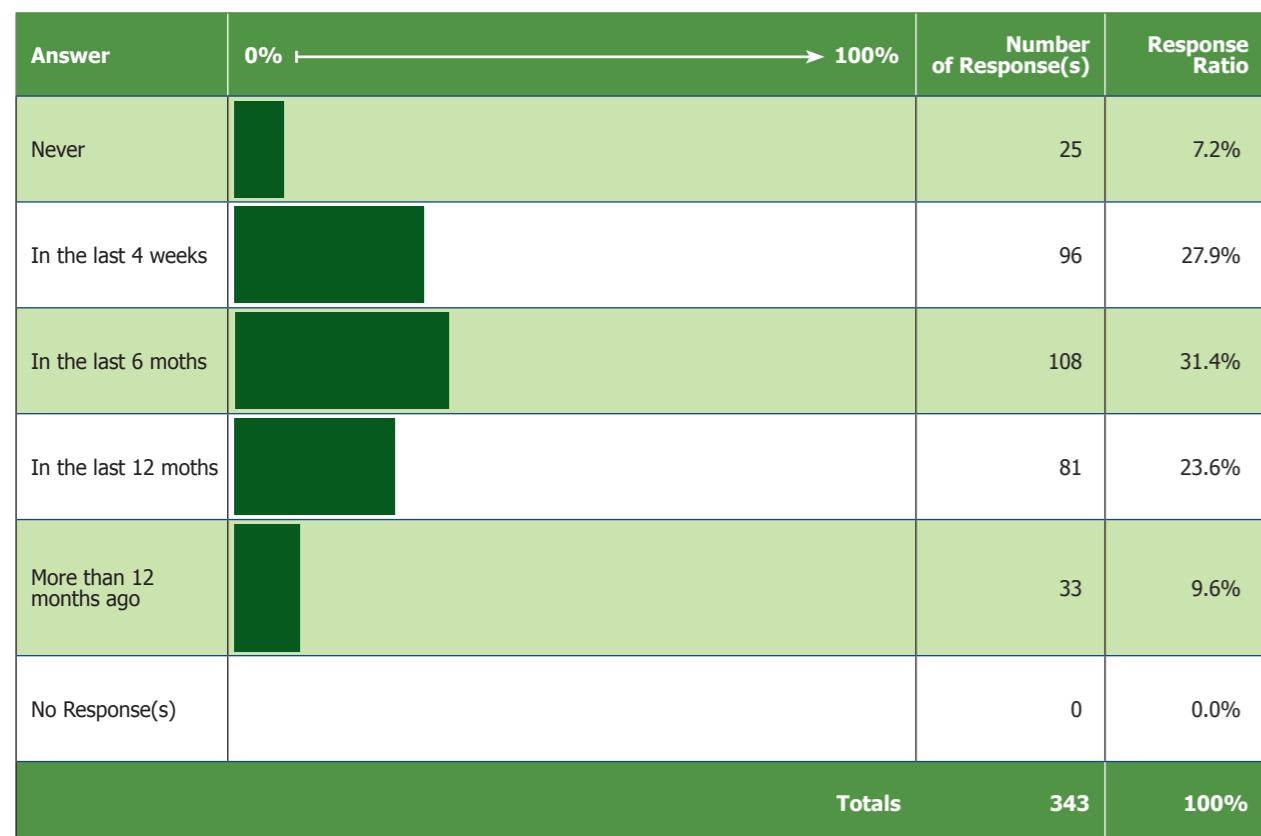
Most coaches (72%) faced 1-4 dilemmas per year while 7.2% of them never faced a dilemma.

The analysis of the answers by category of number of sessions confirms that coaches with more activity face dilemmas more often. There is still a percentage of those very active coaches who replied that they never had a dilemma (3.4%).

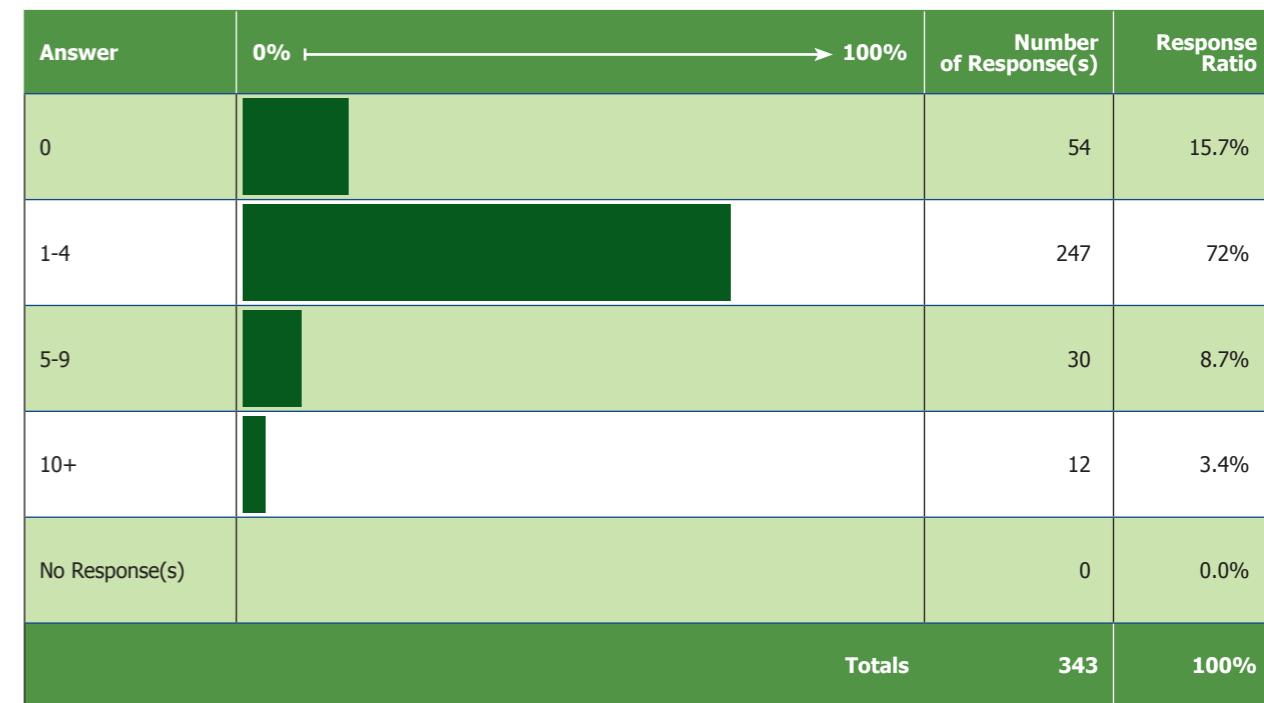
When was the last time you had a dilemma in your coaching practice?



What is your highest level of formal education?

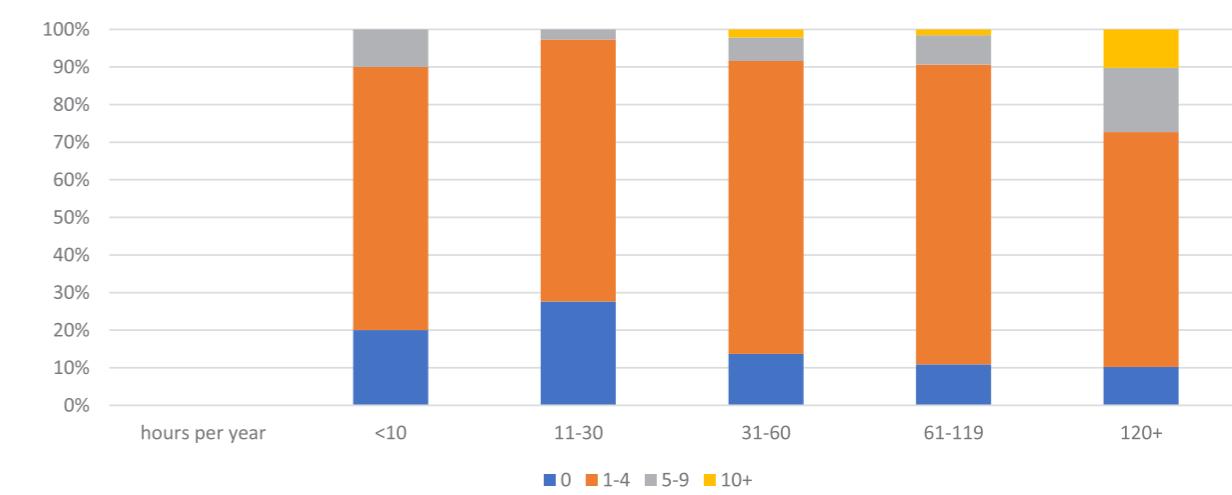


How many dilemmas have you had in the last 12 months?



The majority of coaches replied that they have 1-4 dilemmas per year and it seems a steady trend for all categories of activity (number of hours per year) of coaching practice. Coaches delivering more hours of coaching face dilemmas more often than less busy coaches as we can see below in the chart but there is still a number of them that claim that they never have any dilemmas.

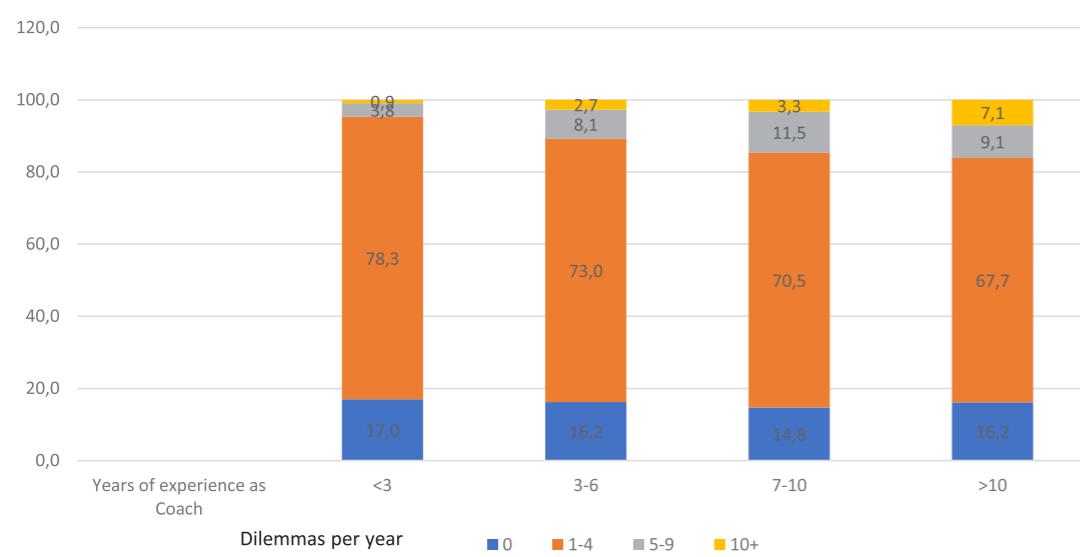
How many dilemmas per number of sessions??



The number of dilemmas seem to increase with the years of experience in a relative proportion. More experienced coaches working for more than 7 or more than 10 years replied that they have more dilemmas than novice coaches. That might be explained by the number of hours of coaching they deliver.

Still the proportion of those claiming that they have zero dilemmas remains at similar levels for all coaches independently of experience in years of practice.

Dilemmas per years of experience as Coach

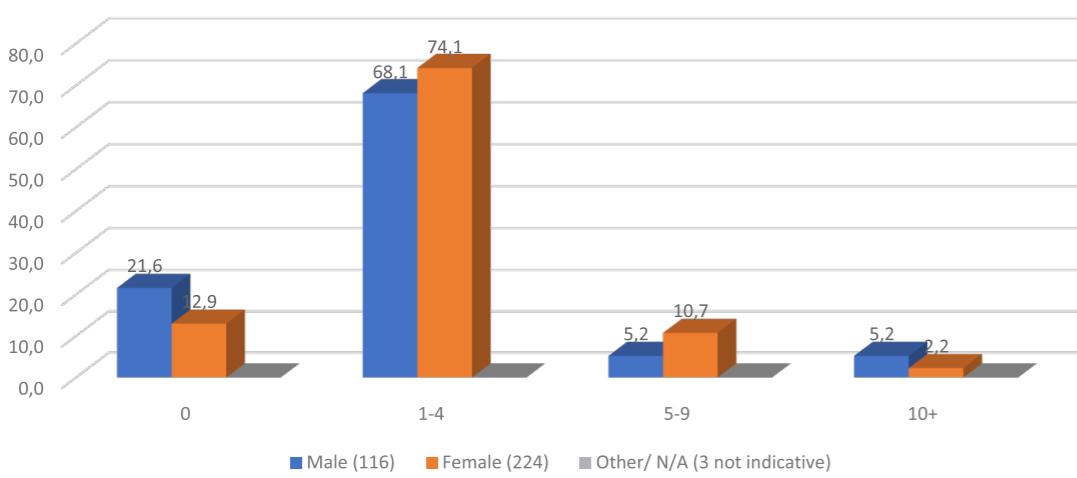


Dilemmas per gender

In the survey male and female are represented whilst other was not statistically valid.

Male coaches declare zero dilemmas almost twice as much than women coaches. Women coaches admit more often that they face ethical dilemmas in their practice.

Number of dilemma per gender



What kind of ethical dilemmas have we faced recently?

'Conflicting interests between sponsor and coachee' and 'working with a client who diverts from the goals that have been agreed with their sponsoring organization' are the most common ethical dilemmas that coaches faced in their practice recently. These were the most recent ethical dilemmas for almost one out of three coaches.

'Confidentiality issues', 'managing boundaries of the coaching profession', and 'managing relations in the organisation' still appear in the first placed in the list of recent dilemmas and represent one out of four cases.

It seems that although precise contracting, tri-partite agreements, and consistent goal setting are suggested and recommended as standard practice by the coaching bodies, dilemmas still appear in those areas in everyday coaching practice.

Think of your most recent professional dilemmas and choose which of the following the dilemmas were related to? (You can choose all that apply).

| Answer | 0% 100% | Number of Response(s) | Response Ratio |
|--|----------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Your own knowledge/ability/experience in the subject (not the right professional to handle the coaching issue) | | 71 | 20.6% |
| Your knowledge as a coach was not to the professional level required to handle the coaching issue | | 18 | 5.2% |
| Your potential revenue fluctuations (e.g. duration/costing of a coaching programme, early finish/loss of revenue, sell a more expensive contract than needed) | | 46 | 13.4% |
| Working with a client who diverts from the goals that have been agreed with their sponsoring organisation | | 103 | 30% |
| Managing relations in an organisation (e.g. asked to be the coach of both the manager and the subordinate) | | 85 | 24.7% |
| Managing relations in a family business (the sponsor being at the same time the owner of the business and the relative of the coachee) | | 35 | 10.2% |
| Managing relations in a client-family e.g. asked to work in parallel with a person closely related (parent, spouse, child etc) to a current client | | 32 | 9.3% |
| Deciding how you act in a coaching relation where you are aware of the intention of the client to proceed to illegal behaviour according to law or regulation | | 15 | 4.3% |
| Deciding how you act in a coaching relationship if you are aware of the intention of a client to proceed to unethical action/behavior as per your professional or the sponsoring organisation's code of ethics | | 10 | 2.9% |
| Deciding how you act in a coaching relationship if you are aware of the intention of a client to proceed to unethical action/behavior as you evaluated according to your personal value system | | 26 | 7.5% |
| Conflicting interests between sponsor and coachee of which you (the coach) are cognizant | | 44 | 12.8% |
| Confidentiality issues in the organisational environment | | 114 | 33.2% |
| Client's attempts to establish an intimate relationship with you (the coach) | | 92 | 26.8% |
| You (the coach) desire to establish an intimate relationship with the client | | 27 | 7.8% |
| Managing boundaries of the coaching profession | | 3 | <1% |
| Managing your own weaknesses (e.g. being directive, get frustrated in the process etc) | | 89 | 25.9% |
| Managing your own weaknesses (e.g. being directive, get frustrated in the process etc) | | 136 | 39.6% |
| Other | | 43 | 12.5% |
| Totals | | 343 | 100% |

How do our dilemmas change with experience in years of practice?

'As coaches evolve with practice throughout the years the same happens to their dilemmas that change over time as professionals acquire more experience.'

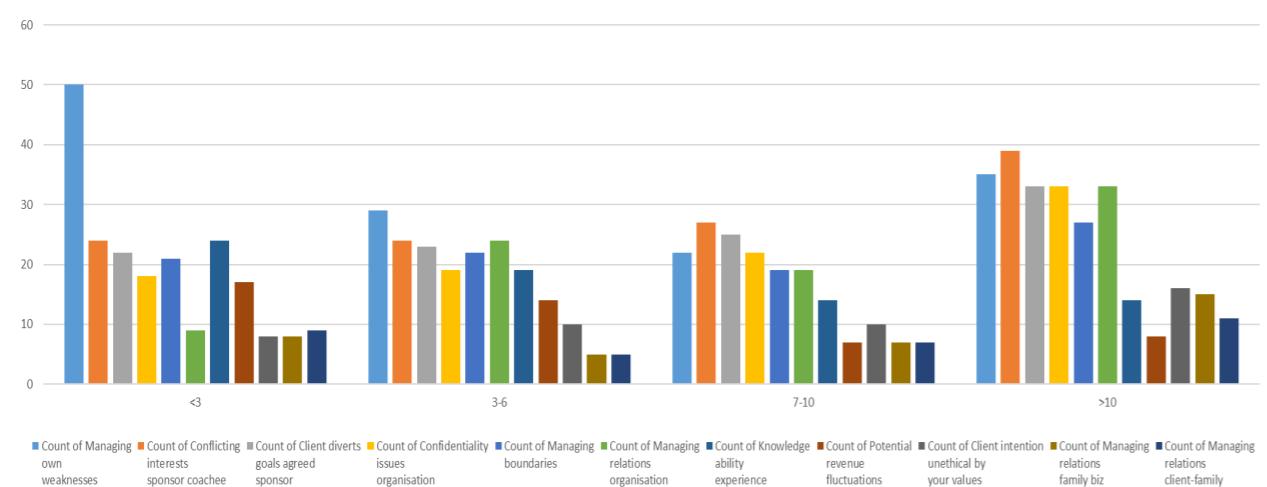
Novice coaches with less than 3 years practice had one main dilemma which was 'how to manage their own weaknesses' and second to that with a big difference, but still relevant, was 'their own knowledge and ability or not right professional for the case'.

Coaches in the stage of becoming experienced with 3-6 years' experience still faced the dilemma of 'managing own weaknesses' but the 'managing relations' dilemma came second with a small difference from the first.

Experienced coaches with 7-10 years' experience faced the dilemma of 'managing relations in the organisation' and secondly 'client diverts goals agreed', 'managing own weaknesses', and 'confidentiality issues'.

The most experienced coaches with >10 years' experience faced the dilemma of 'conflicting interests of sponsor and coachee' followed by 'managing own weaknesses' and close to that 'managing relations', 'confidentiality issues', and 'client diverts goals agreed'. This category of most experienced coaches declared more dilemmas proportionally in most categories. One reason for this which is evident from the other data gathered is that they deliver more hours of coaching per year and naturally they face more dilemmas. Following the evolution of type of dilemmas with time we could assume that another reason for increasing dilemmas is that they become more mature intellectually which leads to more ethical dilemmas.

Dilemmas per category of experience in years of practice

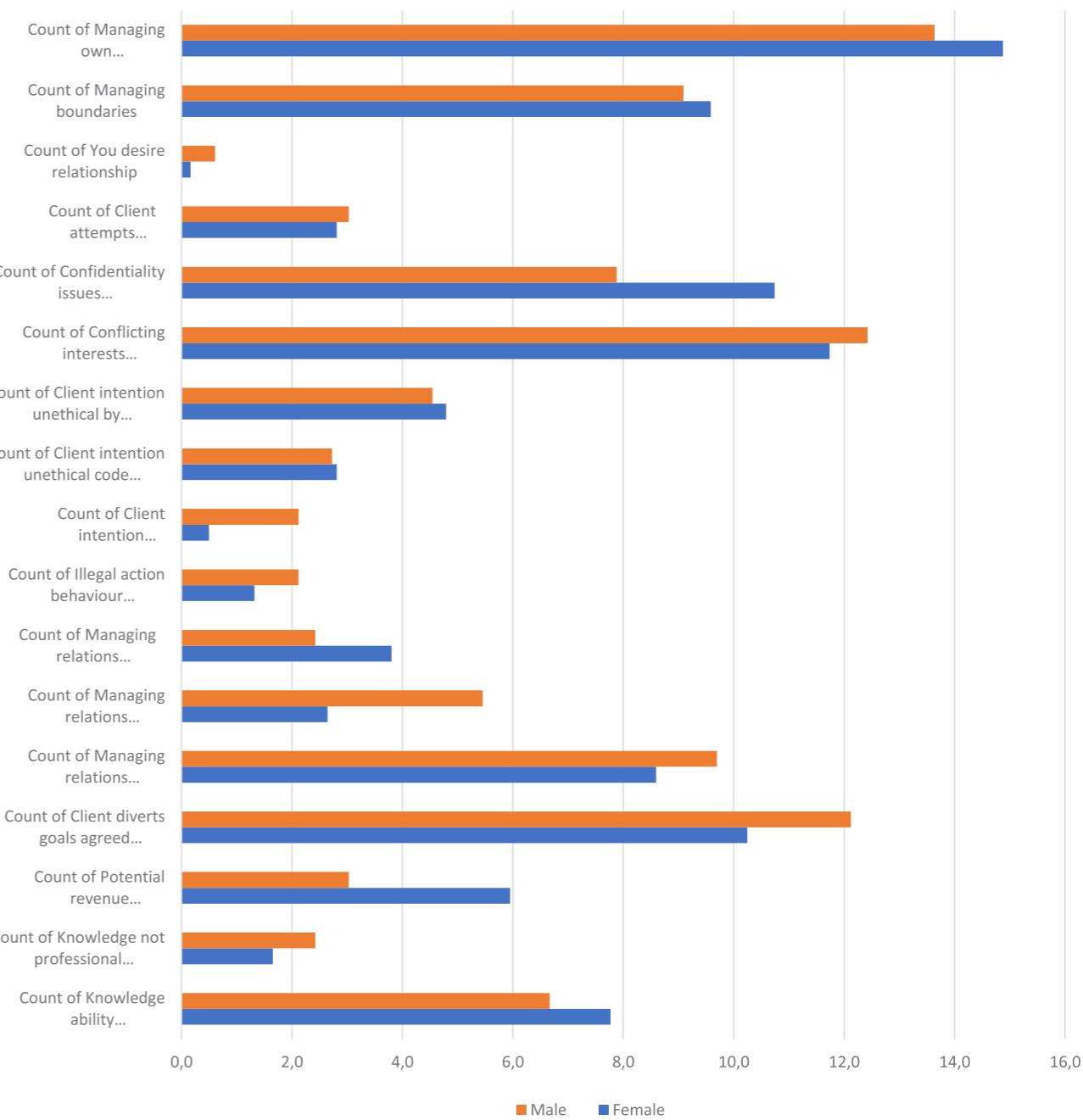


Dilemmas per gender

Male and female coaches ranked their ethical dilemmas with small differences. The main dilemmas were the same for both genders. Female coaches considered 'confidentiality issues' as a more common dilemma in their experience while male coaches had to more often handle the dilemma of 'client diverts from agreed goal'.

Female coaches have slightly more dilemmas about 'managing own weaknesses' and 'own knowledge and ability' which correlates with their low percentage of zero dilemmas in comparison with the percentage of male coaches who replied that they had zero dilemmas.

Comparison of dilemmas in genders

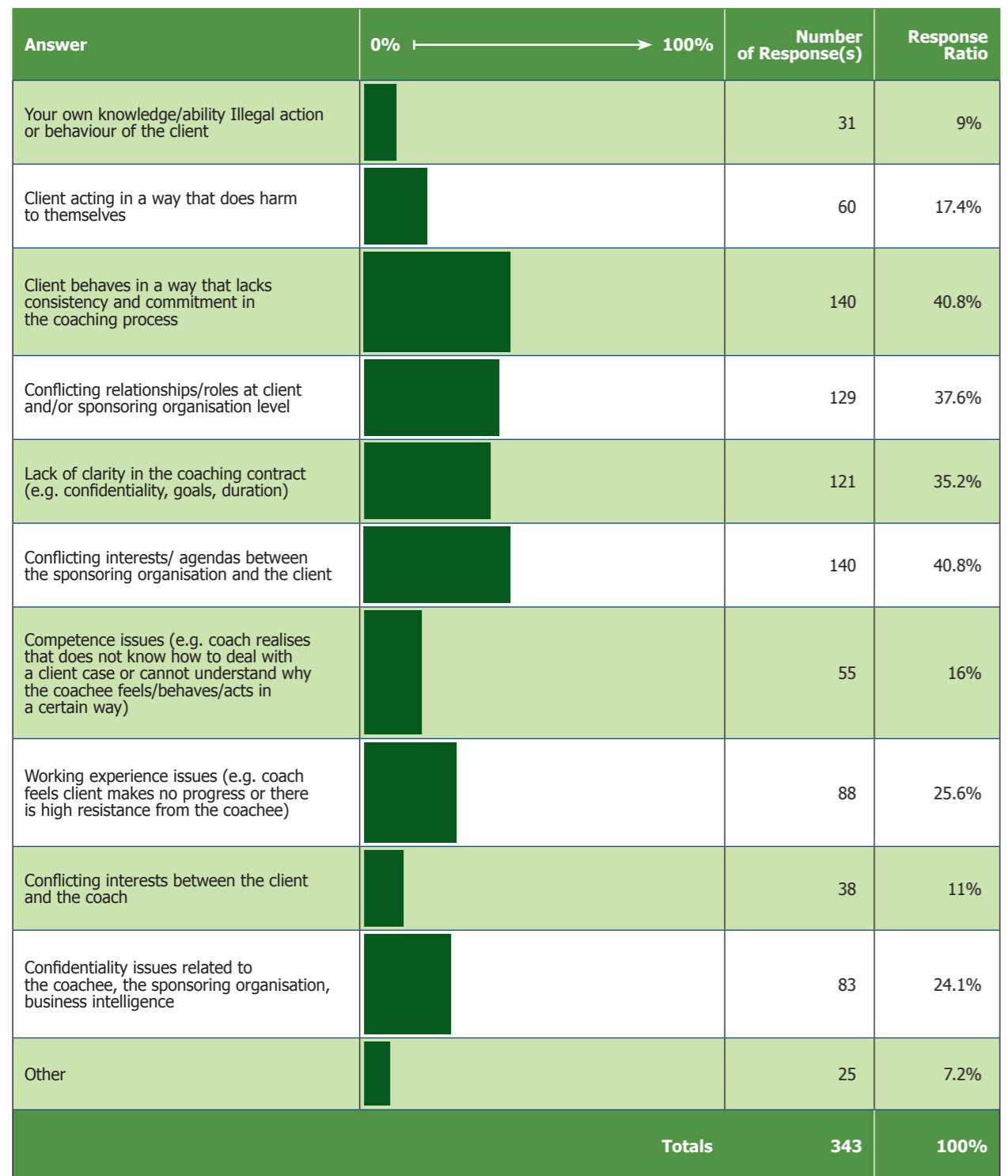


What causes dilemmas to surface?

The most frequent cause of a dilemma, according to the respondents, is equally an inconsistent behaviour of the client and conflicting interests between sponsor and client. A second cause is the conflicting relationships or roles at any level and a third cause is lack of clarity in the contract.

All of those indicate that when some element in the situation, either the relationship or the objective causes some sort of confusion, a dilemma arises.

Think of your most recent professional dilemmas and choose which of the following the dilemmas were related to? (You can choose all that apply).



What has caused your dilemmas in the last 12 months?

This question examined not all types of dilemmas as in previous questions but only specific types that had been identified during the interviews.

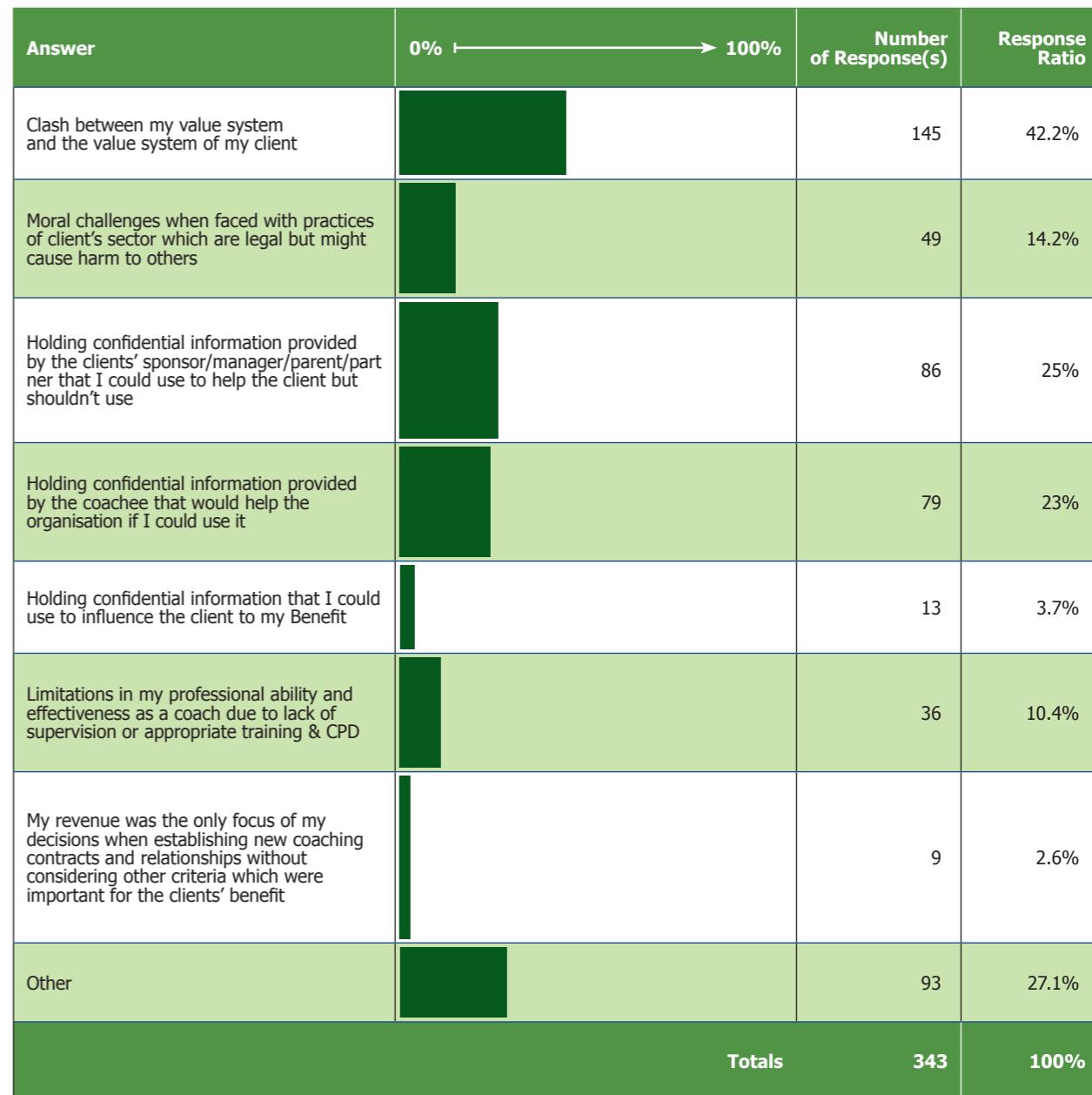
Most coaches (42.2%) recognised that their ethical dilemma was caused by the clash between their own values and the values of their client. Dilemmas related to confidentiality limitations with 25% and 23% are also significant causes of dilemmas.

27% replied 'other' indicating that their issue does not fit in one of the provided categories. Examination of the examples provided indicated that approximately:

- ➲ 40% of the cases could be included in the category of 'limitations in the professional abilities'
- ➲ 40% required another mental health professional such as psychiatrist or psychotherapist
- ➲ 10% was in the category of 'clash between my own values and the client's values'
- ➲ 10% various other cases.

All dilemmas mentioned in this category as 'other' were explored in previous questions.

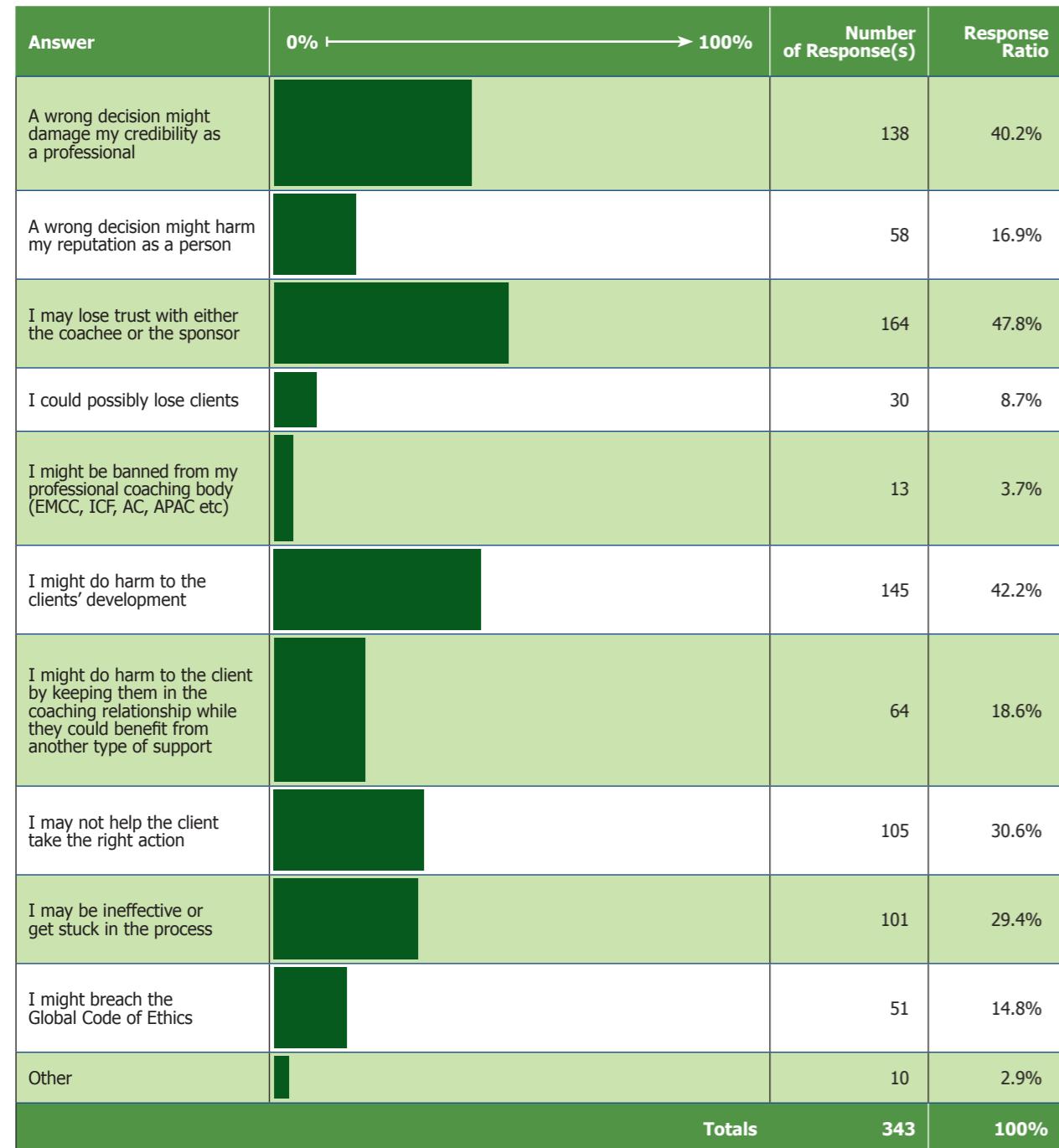
Think of your most recent professional dilemmas and choose which of the following the dilemmas were related to? (You can choose all that apply).



A dilemma involves risk. What do coaches consider to be the biggest risk in handling an ethical dilemma?

- 47.8% 'lose trust with their coachee or the sponsor'
- 42.2% 'I might do harm to the client's development' which shows their deep consideration and care for the coachees
- 40.2% 'possible damage to their professional credibility'
- 30.6% 'not help the client take the right action' which demonstrates their interest in their coachees

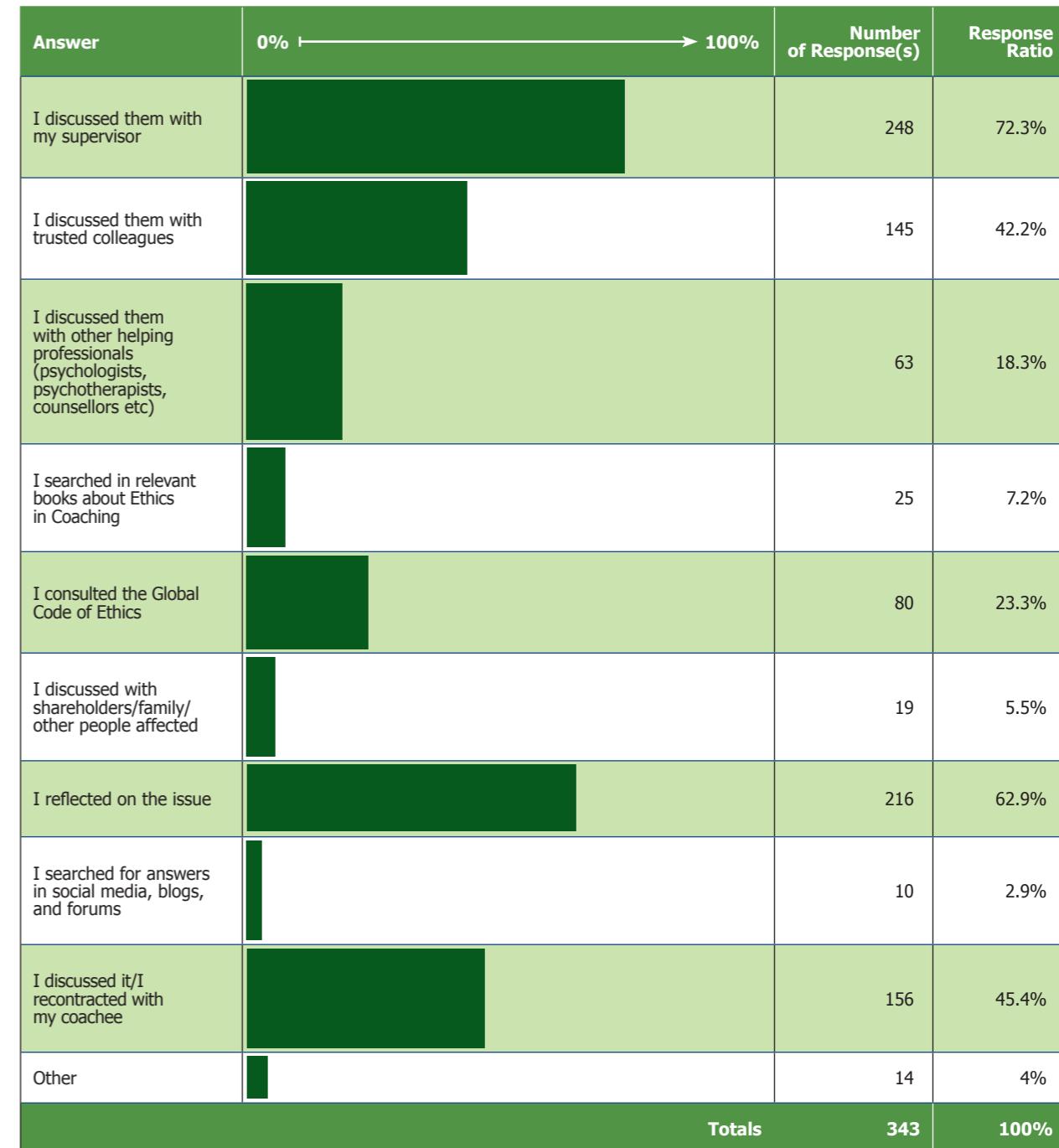
What do you consider as the biggest risk of a wrong decision in handling a dilemma in your coaching practice? (Choose a maximum of three from the following list).



We have dilemmas. How do we handle them?

- 72.3% supervision
- 62.9% reflection
- 45.4% discussing with the coachee
- 42.2% discussing with trusted colleagues
- 23.3% consult Global Code of Ethics

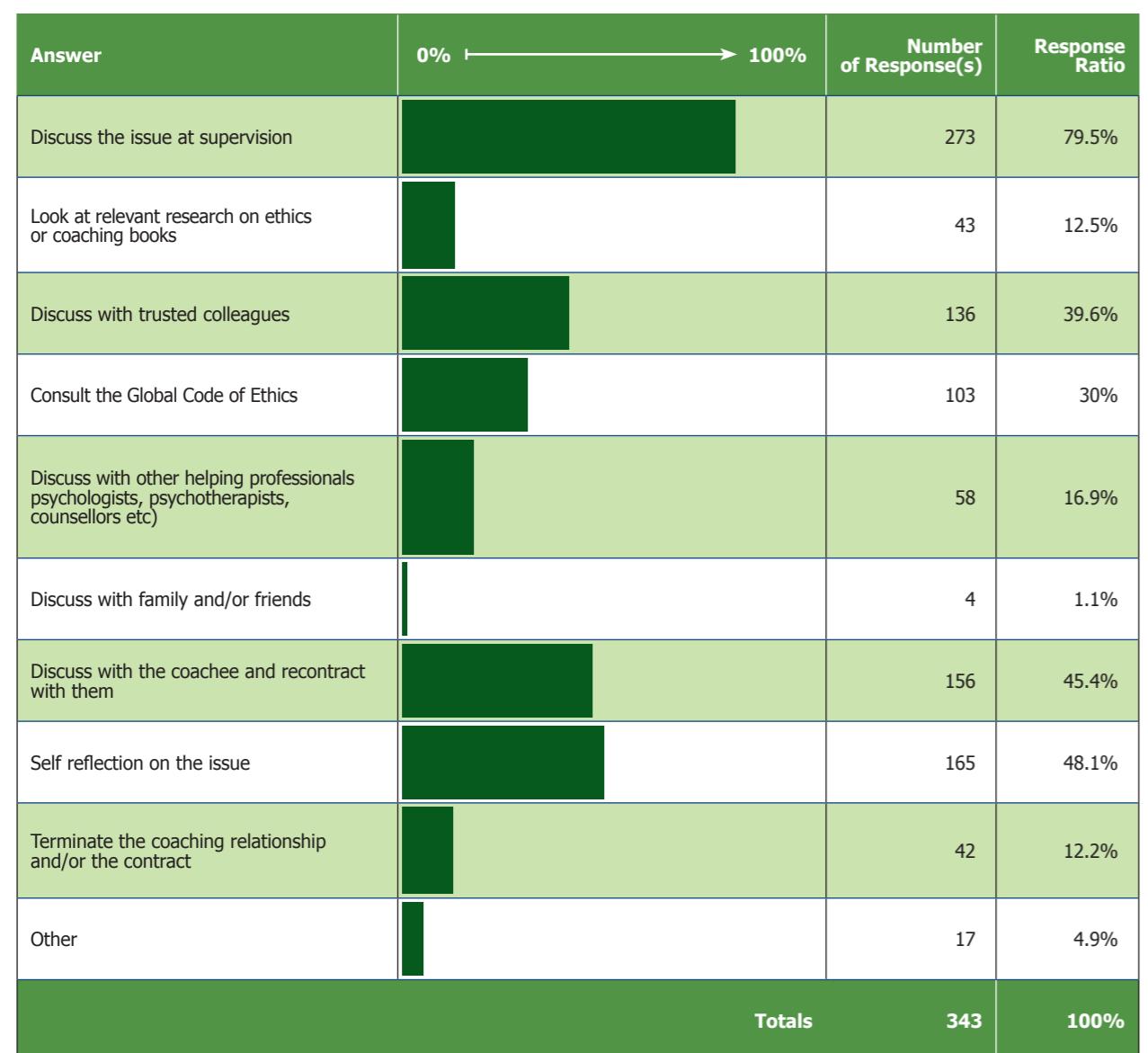
How have you handled the dilemmas in your coaching practice? (Choose a maximum of three from the following list).



We have dilemmas. How do we handle them?

- ➲ 72.3% supervision
- ➲ 62.9% reflection
- ➲ 45.4% discussing with the coachee
- ➲ 42.2% discussing with trusted colleagues
- ➲ 23.3% consult Global Code of Ethics

How have you handled the dilemmas in your coaching practice? (Choose a maximum of three from the following list).



Conclusion and Recommendations

Most coaches have ethical dilemmas independently of their professional experience and years of practice. Very few of them declare that they have zero dilemmas.

The more hours of practice the more ethical dilemmas arise about in various areas and more often about managing own weaknesses, managing relations in the organization, clients changing agreed goals and conflicting interests in the organization.

Dilemmas may change ranking with time and experience. There are slight differences in dilemmas per gender and bigger differences in dilemmas between coaches with different length of experience.

Contracting, managing own weaknesses, managing boundaries, clients changing goals, managing relations, conflicting interests, and clash of values are the situations where ethical dilemmas may arise although there is a lot of information together with Competences framework and the Global Code of Ethics that provide a framework for coaching.

For the majority of coaches the risk of a dilemma is the loss of trust and the potential harm to their client which indicates an 'ethical' approach to their work with their clients.

Supervision is the preferred way of coaches to deal with their ethical dilemmas. It is clear that supervision is the first choice of coaches to discuss their dilemmas and handle them and it is the way that they choose for future cases with big difference from other options.

The respondents recognise that the Global Code of Ethics is a source of information about handling their dilemmas.

As a result of this survey and especially of the work with individual interviews (for which there will be a separate report) we realise that there are specific categories of dilemmas.

The Global Code of Ethics is a valid source of information which is recognised by the coaches as such. It could probably become more detailed and specific about some categories of dilemmas in order to provide clear instructions on specific issues.

A set of clear instructions about certain issues i.e. contracting, relationships in the organisation, mental health issues etc could prove to be very useful for coaches and free them from dilemmas. Also standard forms of detailed contracts to use with their clients would support them sufficiently.

'Even simple decisions may be deep ethical dilemmas when they put at risk a person's development.'

'Even an insignificant question may lead to an ethical dilemma when it is asked instead of the right question for the circumstances.'

'We don't have the answers. We look for the right questions and we are full of dilemmas.'

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