

IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO ENHANCE YOUR OFFICIATING SKILLS

Effective communication skills are critical to successful officiating. To reach your maximum potential as an official it is imperative that you enhance your communication skills with coaches and players. A successful official knows how to listen to the action going on in a game and how to respond appropriately to the various situations that occur.

Officials who master communication skills are able to communicate in a calm, straight-forward manner, even in tense conditions or when being verbally attacked. Acquiring this skill is not easy. The natural tendency of most people who are verbally attacked is to defend, explain or attack in return. This can be very dangerous for officials. Officials must work very hard to acquire the skills it takes to respond sensibly when under pressure, to weigh their words and actions carefully and to develop various communication skills such as expressions, gestures and posture to convey a calming and confident message that solves problems rather than escalates them.

Let's look at some of the different aspects of communication that you are likely to experience in your officiating career.

Listening is a key first step to effective communication.

Prior to the game, there will be opportunities to communicate with the coaches and captains. In these situations be friendly, but also business like. Answer legitimate questions and respond to concerns. Keep pre-game conversations professional and brief. Avoid spending an extraordinary amount of time with a coach you have known for a lengthy period of time. In pre-game meetings with captains, keep the conversation short and avoid comments like "I am going to call all the slashing today". If you then miss a call, your credibility is in question.

During the course of a game, there will be many verbal clues that an official can use to read the game. However, listening is more than hearing the sounds of the game, but also being aware of the emotions and expressions (facial contortions, grimaces, smiles, frowns, gestures of dismay, puzzlement, anger, resignation) of the participants. Good listening skills will help you understand why challenges are made to your calls, and to perhaps empathize with those who are doing the challenging.

Using your voice to communicate with players during play and at stoppages can be very effective. When talking to players, respond to any player, not just the captain, if they are addressing you in a respectful manner.

Stoppages can be an excellent time to practice preventative officiating with short, quick conversations with a player or players. However, keep these sessions short, inconspicuous and avoid a rules clinic or being too animated. For example, a player may consistently be using the stick in a manner that is borderline as far as a penalty goes, but is a source of constant aggravation to the opposition players and a concern to the official. At a stoppage casually skating up to the player and noting that they are getting a little too fancy with their stick will make the player aware that their actions are being noted and you will continue to watch closely. Ideally they will alter their actions accordingly.

Alternatively you can also use the Captain or Assistant Captain to send the message to the player. At a stoppage say something like "Captain, #24 is getting his elbows too high a little too often. Can you remind him to keep them down?" A good leader will deal with the problem and save you some aggravation in the process.

Ensure you are enjoying the game as well as officiating it. If something amusing happens, a smile can show you are having fun without upsetting the continuity of the game. Officiating need not be entirely impersonal – show you are enjoying the moment.

A key to good communication is active listening. When in discussion with a coach or player, give them your full attention by planting your feet, keeping your hands still (behind your back is ideal) and look the speaker squarely in the eye. Listen to the entire concern (within reason) before responding rather than preparing a response before the message has been heard.

Often these types of conversations are emotionally charged and it is imperative that you listen fully to the concern, and then when you respond, ensure the complainant now does not interrupt you, and you provide a full response that addresses their concern.

It takes a lot of practice to focus on the speaker and determine the message, and then respond rationally. Practice making deliberate responses rather than impulsive ones, and you will find the situations do not escalate out of control.

Here are some possible responses you may want to consider.

"If ... continues, I will deal with it, but you may not like how I deal with it".

When addressing actions of a certain player. "Coach, I have a problem with ... so I am asking you to look after it. If you choose not to, I will."

When a coach claims you missed a call, try this approach. "I didn't see that one, but I will be looking very hard to ensure I get the next one"

To a coach who claims there are two teams out there – “Coach, you are right, there are two teams out there, but one team is playing a totally different game than the other. I need to ensure the game is fair and safe, and that is why one team is getting more penalties.”

Ensure that in all your conversations that you address people in respectful terms and keep explanations brief and to the point.

Non-verbal communication can be just as important in sending a message as the spoken word. Facial expression, the eyes, and body language can make a big difference in either sending an effective message or inflaming a tense situation.

Some times a non-response is the best response, as a coach may be venting and isn't expecting a response. When this happens ask yourself if a response will do more harm than good? Coaches want to know you are working with them, not against them, and that an official is willing to listen.

For example, an official who crosses their arms on their chest or stands with hands on the hips when being spoken to is giving off the impression that they are not receptive to what is being said. Hands behind the back show you are more receptive. Waving a coach away shows disrespect and is sure to enflame a situation. Pointing a finger at a player or coach is also a very intimidating gesture. Use the full hand when signaling a penalty or needing to indicate a direction or location. Sometimes a glare alone can silence a critic.

Warnings can be an effective communication skill, but they must be used appropriately. Warnings must be clear and have credibility to be effective. Warnings that can not be carried out or followed through on bring the officials honesty and credibility into question. The tone of your voice plays a big role in delivering the message.

Barry Mano, Editor of “Referee” magazine gives an excellent example of the importance of using good judgment in the handling of a game with the “pour no gasoline” philosophy. The basic concept of this idea is that during the course of a game, many little incidents can occur that can be compared to small piles of kindling all over the ice that are ready to start on fire. As an official it is our role to ensure that when the fires start, we remain calm and make every effort to extinguish the flame, rather than adding fuel to the fire. If there is a contentious issue that arises, and as officials we “pour gasoline” on the situation with a flippant verbal remark, a non-verbal gesture that inflames or an incorrect call, we are not doing our part to keep the game under control. Proper communication techniques can put out a lot of fires.

In summary, communication for officials is extremely important to game management. The way an official communicates is extremely important to their success. Officials must show they are receptive to messages, and can then deal with them in an appropriate manner. Developing your communication skills will enhance your abilities as an official.

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