

GETTING THE AMATEUR OFFICIAL ONSIDE BY DAVID BECK.

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Guess what. Referees are human too. Like all of us, they have emotions. They get out of bed the wrong way, get grumpy and stressed out during the journey to the ground, and are just as anxious to give a good performance as any player. I know, because I was a referee once and, I thought, a pretty damn good one. That is, until the point came where the demands of progressing upward along the parallel career paths of coaching and refereeing started to cause too much disruption. Something had to give and the whistle was consigned to the bin.

I wasn't too disappointed because, to be frank, it was also getting to the point where the constant abuse from the touchlines at every decision that failed to find favour with a team's followers was starting to take its toll. And I do mean abuse. There is a fine line between good-natured banter, which is acceptable, and foul-mouthed bellowing, which isn't. Every Saturday afternoon, the more printable versions include such standards as, "You're a disgrace, ref" and, "Get a grip, ref, you're shocking."

Having observed the effects such apoplectic abuse can have on officials over the last few seasons, I began to notice a number of things happening with sufficient regularity for it not to be pure coincidence. Sides, whose players and followers gave officials the full benefit of their feelings, were more likely to have players yellow-carded and less likely to have penalty tries awarded in given situations. The converse tended to happen to sides whose players and followers behaved with relative decorum. I even recently witnessed a referee award my team a penalty for something an opposition spectator had shouted. I don't know where that offence appears in the Law book, but it happened.

Yet there cannot be an official in the country who would admit to doing anything other than applying the law without fear or favour. So why does this happen? To understand why, we need to appreciate the psychology of human nature. In particular, what some authorities call the "core concerns" of life. (*A good and easy to read book on the subject is "Beyond Reason": Fisher, R and Shapiro, D: 2005.*)

Put briefly, there are *five Core Concerns*, which are as follows:

1. Autonomy. We all like to being in control of what happens to us and don't react well to things being imposed without our consent. Remember the last time you decided to take your partner out for a meal, only to find out he/she had in mind a trip to the cinema that night? Or your teenaged children's reaction to being told the family is going on a walking holiday in the Alps when what they want to do is go to a beach somewhere hot? That's what happens when Autonomy is threatened.
2. Affiliation. We are social animals at heart and all like to be part of a group. You may recognise the feeling, having gone home after the game on Saturday, to turn up to the next training session to hear all the talk about what a great time they all had when they went into town. Why did nobody tell you that's what was going to happen? Makes you pretty angry, doesn't it?
3. Appreciation. We all like to receive praise and recognition for our work and behaviour. Medals are bestowed to the brave. Prizes are given to great works of art and literature. It's even nice when the Coach tells you what a good game you had – especially if it's in front of the peer group. Yes, even those who feign modesty are secretly beaming with inward joy. That's how much we like to be appreciated.
4. Status. Whatever we do in life, a degree of status will be attached to us. This is especially true in hierarchical organisation such as the military and police. Schools have Heads and Deputy Heads. There are grades of doctors and nurses. Basically, when we have acquired a certain status we react adversely to anybody who tries to undermine it. In nature, look what happens when the Alpha Male is challenged – it all gets a bit bloody. We're no different.
5. Role. This is linked into Status. We all have a number of roles in life and we fluctuate between them every day. When we wake up, we are, for example, parent or partner. At work, we become colleague or supervisor. In the evening, we could be teammate or coach. In the pub later, we become friend. And so on. Each role has its own significance and importance to us. Suggest to any coach that the game plan is wrong and see what reaction you get.

As we have seen by now, these Core Concerns are at the centre of our existence. Watch any two people arguing heatedly and you can guarantee that one or more of these Concerns is being attacked.

So how does this link into managing your official effectively? Well, for this afternoon's game he is in the Role of Referee. Our Laws give him sole discretion over right and wrong. That's a powerful role in anybody's language. He will also have a certain Status, according to his experience, performance and grading. Like all of us, he has a love for the game and will see himself very much part of the rugby family – that's Affiliation. As the sole arbiter of fact, he has been given full Autonomy in deciding how the game is policed. Finally, of course, he believes he will be interpreting our massively subjective Laws impartially and will expect to find Appreciation for doing so.

In other words, one single bellow of, “You’re a disgrace, ref” is attacking all five Core Concerns! Multiply this over eighty minutes by the number of foghorns around the ground, all giving full volume to their ignorance and prejudice, and you can see how even the most tolerant of individuals is likely to react adversely at some point. That’s when penalty tries are unlikely to be awarded that could have been and yellow cards given that would not otherwise have been. It also explains why my team was awarded a penalty for something an opposition spectator had shouted.

Me? I encourage opposition followers to get as vocal as they want. It can only be to my team’s advantage. I can’t, of course, speak for professional officials, but I wouldn’t bet against the same principles applying. Human nature is human nature.