

## MANAGING THE ALPHA MALE IN CONFLICT BY DAVID BECK.

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Much has been said and written about the “clear the air” meeting during England’s 2007 Rugby World Cup campaign, credited at the time with turning fortunes around. One day we may actually be told the full story of what happened, but until then we can only speculate. If accounts are correct, then there will have been a testosterone-laden atmosphere in the meeting room, capable of inflicting much damage to the ozone layer. For ours is the team game which, perhaps more than any other, attracts and indeed demands an Alpha Male approach to all it does. It is a confrontational sport in which, individually and collectively, players seek to physically and psychologically dominate their opponents. This is relatively easy to manage when things are going well, but is a recipe for conflict and crisis when they don’t. As with all things, understanding the human responses underpinning behaviour can give some guidance as to how to manage these situations.

### **Effective Listening.**

Effective listening skills lie at the very core of interpersonal communication. I like to refer to them as the compost from which everything else springs, and without which you cannot grow as a coach. In a previous article a few years back (before the Journal became an electronic resource!), I looked at these in more depth so won’t go into detail again, though the sources can be found in the references at the end of this article. They are, however, worth summarising at this point.

- Emotion Labelling: “You sound...”, “I sense...”
- Summarising: “So what you’re telling me is...”
- Paraphrasing: restating what is said using different words.
- Echoing: identify the power word in the sentence, and repeat it.
- Pauses: knowing when to keep quiet encourages others to say more.
- Minimal encouragers: “Uh-huh”, “So...”, “And...”
- Open questions: “How/why/who?” etc. “Tell me more about that.”
- ‘I’ messages: “I’m as frustrated as you are”.

These skills help you to properly understand where your player is coming from. By encouraging him to talk, he opens up and you can begin to problem-solve from his perspective, not yours. These skills are perishable, however. Use them or lose them.

### **Emotional Intelligence.**

This concept has been around management circles for some time now, having first been espoused in 1995 (See references at end). Briefly, when seeking to make a positive impact on others, all change must start with self-awareness and self-management. We coaches are only human too and our moods fluctuate as much as those of our players. This is not a problem in the good times, but when we are a bit down, the ability to recognise and manage ourselves so as not to let it affect our impact on the players is vital.

Having managed ourselves, we must then take account of how our players are feeling and manage them appropriately, individually and collectively. Knowing what makes an individual tick, and how the various groups function within our squads, will enable us to get the best out of them. Effective Listening contributes massively to this process, of course.

### **Causes of conflict.**

My previous article entitled, “Getting the amateur official onside”, now in the Technical Journal archive, looked in detail at the five causes of confrontation. To briefly recap; Appreciation (we all like our deeds to be valued by others), Affiliation (we are social animals and like to feel part of a group), Autonomy (we like to be in control of our destiny), Status (we all a status in society, and like it to be recognised) and, finally, Role (we have many roles in life, and like them to be meaningful).

When any one or more of these concerns is attacked or undermined, we are apt to respond aggressively and assertively to restore the self-esteem which has been compromised. Understanding and identifying which of the five causes is applicable helps the negotiator – in our case the coach – to begin the reconstruction process.

For the coach, of course, it is important to understand that you yourself will face having your Status and Role attacked by our angry Alpha Male. The instinctive response will be to react aggressively in turn, but to do that, of course, won't solve anything!

### **Personality.**

This is an area that gets psychologists very excited – quite rightly so, as they are the experts in the field. We are not, but it does no harm to have a toolkit of single-syllable concepts to help us deal with day-to-day issues. Negotiators are very familiar with the basic types of Antisocial, Inadequate, Depressive and Psychotic. For our purposes, we will only look at the one most likely to engage us as coaches – namely the Antisocial type, or what in rugby terms I call the Alpha Male.

Don't get confused by the word antisocial. This doesn't mean a snarling, grumpy, miserable person sitting on his own in the corner of a room. Far from it – these people are often the life and soul of the party. They are, however, self-centred and lacking in empathy or remorse. All things in life, including people, are seen as a means to further their own position, and are discarded without a second's thought once their purpose is served. They are thrill seekers and often sexually predatory. Nothing is ever their fault, there's always someone or something else to blame when things go wrong. To get to the top of the tree, you can't afford any sleepless nights worrying about who you tread on to get there!

Now I don't know if any study has been done into the profiles of rugby players at the top of their trees, but my guess is that a good many of them will fall within this category. Again, it doesn't make them bad people; we just need to know how best to deal with them in times of crisis.

The negotiator will seek to approach the Alpha Male in crisis with the following game plan. Play to his ego, identify ways to save face or carve out 'deals', involve him in the problem-solving process, stressing the value of his contribution and getting him to see beyond the immediate and project what is in it for him in the long term. The following phrases will help:

"I really value the way you..."

"I respect the pride you have in..."

"How do you see this turning out?"

If making suggestions yourself, always end with a phrase such as, "How does that sound to you?"

### **Putting it all together.**

So you've got an angry Alpha! Let's say, for sake of argument, that it's because he's been dropped after a run of poor performances. Here's one template for managing the interaction.

- Sit down with him and encourage him to speak by utilising all your Active Listening techniques.
- Expect him to be critical of you and avoid the instinct to bristle yourself.
- Under these circumstances, the most likely cause of his anger will be loss of Status, so you will need to acknowledge his attributes uncritically and talk with him about his area of expertise.
- As an Alpha Male, he will need plenty of ego-massage along the lines mentioned above.
- Help him save face – possibly by getting him to identify areas he feels comfortable with as being 'not his fault'.
- Finally, work with him to come up with an agreed plan as to how he's going to get his place back.

At the end of the day, he won't have got his place back, but this defusing process will make him feel better about it. The only words you really want to hear as he walks out

of the door are a sincere, “Thanks for listening.” When that happens, you’ve done your job!

References.

- “*Emotional Intelligence*”, Goleman, D. 1995, ISBN 0-553-8371-X.  
“*Beyond Reason*”, Fisher, R & Shapiro, D. 2005, ISBN 0-670-03450-9.  
“*It’s good to listen*,” RFU Technical Journal, 2001, Winter edition.  
“*Getting the amateur official onside*,” RFU Technical Journal Archive, 2007, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter.