

CONSTRUCTIVE ON-FIELD DIALOGUE

BY

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“Talk to me during the game,” is a common phrase used during most referees’ pre-match chats with teams – at least in my experience. Sounds fine, but seldom have I witnessed any real constructive dialogue thereafter. I use the word ‘dialogue’ advisedly, for what usually takes place is more a debate - which is when both sides to an argument seek acceptance for their point of view. In other words, what takes place is a confrontation rather than an attempt to arrive at a mutual understanding. What I have done is to take certain principles from the field of crisis negotiation and offer them as ideas to (hopefully) make on-field exchanges between player and official a more productive process.

Did you say ‘Crisis’?

Yes, crisis. Rugby is a fast-moving contact sport in which players seek to physically and psychologically dominate their opponent and, in turn, seek to avoid being so dominated themselves – in negotiating terms, we find ourselves in crisis by functioning in an environment of constant threat. In these circumstances, the ability of all involved to receive and process information is compromised. We become very superficial processors, to the extent that we can only respond to short, sharp instructions. So the first message is: ***keep what you have to say short and to the point.***

Foster cooperation.

It is an accepted principle of negotiation that people are generally more willing to comply with someone who can demonstrate one or more of the key attributes of being:

- Willing to listen.
- Understanding.
- Worthy of respect.
- Non threatening.

Players and officials can easily foster that spirit of cooperation by using inclusive language. “Work with me on this” will be more effective than “Don’t let it happen again”, and “Help me understand” is better than “I didn’t do anything wrong.” Try to

incorporate “we” and “us” into the exchanges, rather than “you.” Also, avoid starting any query of the official with the word “Why...?”, as it sets an immediate judgemental tone to the exchange. Soften it up by including it later in the sentence, such as, “Help me understand why I’m getting penalised all the time.”

For those players who are constantly ‘on the case’ of the official and who need to be told about it, then try the “I...when...because...” approach, as in: “*I’m* getting very frustrated **when** you continually shout at me **because** it’s distracting all of us from the game we’re playing.”

‘Echoing’ is a recognised empathy-builder and something I encourage all my players to use it. During the referee’s pre-match talk to the team, listen for what we refer to as the Power Word. The ref may say, for example, “At the tackle I want the tackled player to release immediately.” The Power Word here is ‘release’ – others might say “roll away,” “let go” or “move away.” At the tackle area, players are encouraged to shout “release”, thus echoing the Power Word and registering with the official, if only at a subconscious level, that the players are working with him.

Finally, never underestimate the power of three very simple things to say, namely “Please,” “Sorry” and “Thank you.”

[Respect the Core Concerns.](#)

Those of you who read the earlier article, ‘Getting the Amateur Official Onside’ (Technical Journal archive, 2007, 1st Quarter), will understand why people become confrontational if one or more of five Core Concerns are threatened. Rather than regurgitate the whole article here, you are invited to visit the Archive via the RFU website and read it.

‘Respect’ comes from the Latin words *Re* and *Spectare* – literally ‘to see again.’ For our purposes, this means trying to see the world from the perspective of the person we are communicating with. The key thing to remember is that Respect, particularly for the Core Concerns, isn’t a one-way process. To my mind, referees are most likely to react adversely if players querying their decisions attack their Appreciation Concern. A few simple phrases such as “I can see where you’re coming from, sir,” or “Thanks for explaining that,” will help players to avoid the problem.

Officials, by the same token, should recognise that players are most likely to be antagonised by having their Autonomy Concern infringed – as it is every time they are penalised! Make the player feel part of the decision-making process. Useful phrases here may be along the lines of, “It would help me to help you if you...” when giving direction and, “How does that sound?” when offering advice.

One useful thing not to say at this point is, “Calm down.” For some reason, it always has the opposite effect to that intended, as anybody with teenage children who can’t get their own way will know! “Let’s take a step back/deep breath,” will work much better.

Maximise the 93%.

A year or two back, a well-known car manufacturer ran an advertising campaign based on the slogan “93% of communication is non-verbal.” And it’s true. Studies regularly show that the words you use only account for 7% of the impact you make. Tone of voice comes in at around 38% and Non Verbal Communication (body language to you and me) at a massive 55%.

What’s more, if there is any disparity between what a person says and how it is said, the receiver will automatically believe the tone used, and if words and tone are in key but the NVCs are saying something different, that receiver will believe what the body is saying rather than the words. All the fine phrases in the world are thus rendered utterly useless if the body doesn’t match the words coming out of the mouth. So what tips can we get from reading the plethora of literature available on the subject of body language?

Firstly, let’s consider possible ‘enhancers’. Touching the other person’s elbow lightly for no more than three seconds has been proven to create a temporary bond. A smile, even when you don’t feel like it, is universally helpful – but you must smile with the eyes as well! Tilting the head a few degrees from the vertical shows interest and concern, and when accompanied by nods and eye contact, can produce positive results. An open stance with arms out and palms visible, at the same time tilting the jaw downwards, will send reassuring messages.

Next, some definite ‘antagonisers’. Standing with feet wide apart, hands on hips and with jaw tilted upwards will do nothing to facilitate mutual understanding. Likewise scowls, pointing fingers, clenched fists, lack of eye contact, body turned away from the other person, tightly-drawn mouth and headshakes. All this sounds very obvious to say, but count how many times you see any of these on display during the next game you watch!

Summary.

The words and phrases I have used above are my own examples of illustrating the various principles. You will no doubt have different ways of saying the same thing, but remember always the general guidance, which has to be:

- Keep it short,
- Use inclusive language,
- Respect the Core Concerns, and
- Make sure the body matches the words.