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COMMUNICATION AND SPORTS OFFICIALS

Peter Simmons and Ian Cunningham

As noted by the Football Federation of Australia:

There have been many referees who made good decisions but did not have the confidence of the players. Likewise there have been referees, who comparatively speaking made a large number of errors, but were considered by players to be good referees.

(Football Federation Australia, 2012, p. 8)

Studies of sports officiating suggest that skilled communication is as important as most officials believe it is, and that it may be most important when it is most difficult (Mascarenhas, Collins, and Mortimer, 2005). Furthermore, organizational research indicates that managers often “make bad times worse” for staff by distancing themselves when they should be explaining and showing respect (Patient and Skarlicki, 2010, p. 556). Sport officiating investigations have focused on the elite levels of competition, with experienced officials who tend to be highly skilled communicators. But most officiating is done at the grassroots level, where only a rope might separate the official from an angry crowd (Simmons, 2006). Officials at all levels of competition make rapid calls on incidents that are frequently ambiguous, in environments renowned for heightened emotions. In grassroots sport there is no replay technology to prove calls right or wrong, and much depends on the officials’ ability to align their interpretations with the rules, and otherwise persuade compliance and cooperation from those who wish the decisions were different.

This chapter focuses on understanding communication dimensions that are integral to good officiating, such as the display of strong character, adapting to the nuances of different contexts and rivalries, and behaving with sensitivity and assertion when communication is most challenging. It reflects on contributions from previous research on sport officiating, and a mismatch between prevailing *skills* and *decision* conceptualizations of officiating communication, and requirements to be reflexive and adaptable when communication is most challenging. It draws on sport officiating research and work from other professional fields, where communication has been more extensively researched and theorized, to suggest more holistic approaches to conceptualizing and improving communication.

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Officiating research

Sports officiating research has focused on the elite or professional level, and has been dominated by studies from the disciplines of sport and exercise sciences, medicine, and psychology. Sport official researchers have noted that officials are under-researched compared with players, coaches, spectators, and other aspects of sport (MacMahon and Plessner, 2008; Mascarenhas, *et al.*, 2005). Mellick, Bull, Laugharne, and Fleming (2005) said that academic and scholarly discourses relating to officials are “few in number and narrow in scope” (p. 43).

Research since 2000 has focused on physical and mental demands of officials, influences on decision making, and the training of elite officials (MacMahon and Plessner, 2008). Searches of scholarly journals conducted for this chapter showed that this remains the case, but the greatest interest is in influences on decision making. Studies have examined many contextual, psychological, and perceptual factors that may influence or bias officials' decisions. Thus, research into sport officiating has more often focused on the official as receiver of decision information, than the official as the sender of decision information. Similarly, training for sports officials often focuses on rules and their interpretation – making decisions – without clear programs to help officials become more skilled in communication and game management.

The research focus on decision processes at the elite level is understandable, considering the extremely high stakes that are played for in popular sports, and the emergence of microscopic slow motion replays scrutinized by mass TV audiences. The pressure on elite sport officials to make the right decisions has never been greater, but making the decision is often just the beginning of an official's work.

Communication in sports officiating research

Studies of officiating communication and game management have tended to use the opinions of elite officials and concentrate on techniques in the skillful communication of decisions. Cunningham, Mellick, Mascarenhas, and Fleming (2012) focus on self-presentation strategies during decision communication episodes by rugby union referees. Mellick, *et al.* (2005) asked elite soccer and rugby officials to scrutinize recordings of skillful and unskillful referee decision communication. They explain skilled use of the whistle, hand signals, gaze and other body language, and verbally linking incidents to the rules, thus justifying decisions as a consequence of a player's behavior. They articulate techniques for purposeful impression management and message transmission that officials can aspire to and practice, and highlight three characteristics of best practice in decision communication: “to engage the offender's attention and instigate a decision interaction episode; to project confidence in the decision made; and finally to promote perception of the decision as fair and just” (Mellick, *et al.*, 2005, p. 42). According to these scholars, most sport officials acquire their communication training from what has been described as a “hidden curriculum” (p. 45), developing their approach with experience and advice from peers. Although there is a great deal of wisdom in the experience of the sport community, officials can be poorly advised and may develop unhelpful habits. A lack of formal communication training for officials results from a lack of evidence about what strategies and techniques may or may not work, a lack of structured practice exercises designed to improve communication, and belief that communication and player management skills are difficult to teach compared to rules, fitness and positioning (Mascarenhas, *et al.*, 2005).

Some studies have gathered players' perspectives, and highlighted links between officials' communication styles and various emotional and perceptual outcomes for players. Bar-Eli, Levy-Kolker, Pie, and Tenenbaum (1995) studied the influence of referee behaviors on professional basketball, handball, soccer, and water-polo players. They reported that unnecessary words and actions in referee calls amplified negative performance consequences for players, and drew player hostility on themselves. They said that referees should be better informed about the impact that they have on players' psychological states, and should be encouraged to improve their verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Simmons (2010) measured the influence of different officiating communication styles on player perceptions of the fairness of a referee decision awarded against them. He used an experimental vignette method with a large sample of amateur, semi-professional, and professional players from Spain, Australia, and England. He found that when a referee calmly communicated the decision, players rated the fairness of the referee significantly higher than when the referee communicated the same decision angrily. When a referee gave a short explanation for the decision (for example, six words), players rated the fairness of the referee significantly higher than when there was no explanation. Importantly, Simmons noted that players also rated the decision as more *correct* when it was explained. The study provided rare empirical support for what Bar-Eli and colleagues as well as sports officials have long believed, that it is not just the decision that is important, it is the way it is called. Simmons said the findings were consistent with fairness heuristic theory and uncertainty management (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002). People find uncertainty uncomfortable, and consciously and unconsciously use whatever information is available (heuristics or communicative displays) to lessen uncertainty about decision makers and their decisions. As noted by Simmons, "Footballers appear to use certainty about procedure and interactional style (communicative behaviours) to mitigate uncertainty about fairness and correctness in decisions" (Simmons, 2010, p. 90).

Studies to date indicate that whistle, posture, short explanation, and other verbal and non-verbal techniques provide officials with an important toolbox of skills for situation control, message transmission, and impression management. These skills are the focus of much advice and communication training for officials. But decision communication occurs within broader contexts, and a complex set of interpersonal interactions and relationships. Officials need to interpret people and situations very quickly and respond appropriately. Some techniques may achieve order in some situations, but be highly inflammatory in others.

Parallels are sometimes limited by contextual differences, but theory from other fields can be instructive. Communication has been more extensively researched and theorized in the context of doctor and patient interactions, and the emphasis on discreet skills as a main framework for conceptualizing and training for communication is being challenged. It has been argued that good communication is not developed purely through learning skills at the surface level. Salmon and Young (2011) explained that a more holistic conceptualization of communication and training should aim to help professionals become skilled communicators who adapt appropriately to the requirements of each context.

Conceptualizing the skilled communicator

Sport officiating researchers have discussed an aspect of game management that seems to be associated with charisma, communication, or presence, but has to date defied label. As noted by MacMahon and Plessner (2008), "The best officials seem to possess intangible personal

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judgment and the ability to manage contests without dominating them” (p. 174). In their study of elite rugby referees, Mascarenhas, *et al.* (2005) referred to an X-factor, an ability that combines reading of the nuances of situations and controlling the game with interpersonal ease.

In communication studies generally, research focusing on discreet skills has examined aspects of communication behavior that are “relatively simple, noninteractive tasks” (Greene, 2003, p. 70). Salmon and Young (2011) argue that conceptualization of communication as skills reduces a very complex, interactive phenomenon to a set of discreet, and somewhat rigid, component behaviors that distort the development of skilled communication practice. They say that qualitative research into communication reveals phenomena that do not correspond to skills defined in quantitative research, and that practitioners reflecting on their communication frequently emphasize the importance of intuition and departure from the “rules” over “expert application of previously defined skills” (Salmon and Young, 2011, p. 218).

Burleson’s constructivist approach to understanding communication skills argues that skilled communicators adapt their communication to achieve personal or social goals, such as persuasion that secures acceptance, or sensitivity that brings comfort. Central to his argument is that communicators with a more complex perception of social situations and audiences process a more nuanced range of “interpersonal constructs,” and produce “person-centred” communication that is more effective because it is tailored more precisely for the audience (Burleson, 2007, p. 112). More sophisticated communicators are able to adapt for the goals of different interactants, and anticipate hidden features of situations. For example, a coach may protest a decision, even after the official has explained the violation, to save face over a tactical blunder, to protect a player, or to intimidate and make the official think twice about making future, similar calls (Rooff-Steffen, 2011).

Clearly there are patterns in the situations that sport officials manage – similar rule transgressions, score lines, personalities, and so on – but it is also important that officials develop the capacity for sensitivity and adaptation to the novel and the inflammatory. Adaptability is sometimes considered a skill in itself. Simmons examined the strategies that elite soccer referees use to prevent and manage player abuse and aggression. He reported that top referees “differentiate their approaches according to the requirements of the situation, and their perceptions of players,” and “select from numerous verbal and non-verbal techniques to restore order to the game and player conduct” (Simmons, 2006, p. 8). Hargie (2011) argued that communication skills are identifiable units of behavior, but are interrelated, responsive, and include the ability to communicate appropriately for the situation. Lefroy and McKinley (2011) contended the value of teaching communication skills to doctors as if they were a toolkit, where what matters most is learning how to use the tools appropriately to the requirements of different situations. They assert the centrality of communication as a clinical skill in itself, rather than seeing communication as an adjunct to clinical training.

The same can be said of sports officiating. Communication is often considered separately when it is clearly integral to effective officiating. The chapter authors recently participated in a mentoring program for soccer referees at the grassroots level. In one group exercise, the participants watched DVDs of infractions in small groups. For each infraction there were two questions. First, they judged the level of infraction and the appropriate sanction according to the rules. Second, they wrote down what they would say to the player they were sanctioning. Curiously, in every group the participants’ focus was on the first question, the judgment. The chapter authors had to remind the groups to complete the second question. The decision is crucial, but forming the judgment is just the first part of the official’s task in a match situation.

A training model that better integrates communication would perhaps ask just one question: How would you communicate your decision to the players?

Salmon and Young noted that there are no specific skills that are effective in all situations; rather, the researcher said that people are likely to be “more concerned with the whole picture – their impression of the practitioner’s character and caring – than with specific communication skills” (Salmon and Young, 2011, p. 221). In sports officiating, players are similarly more influenced by characteristics such as integrity and resilience, than they are by specific communication skills. Some sport officiating communication research draws on the extensive body of organizational justice theory to argue that it is important for officials to communicate qualities related to fairness (Simmons, 2010; 2011).

Fairness as a theoretical frame for officiating communication

Fairness is important because it is integral to expectations of sports officials (Pawlenka, 2005), and because people generally react more positively when they perceive fair treatment, and negatively when they perceive unfair treatment (Van den Bos, *et al.*, 2005). Importantly, there is increasing evidence that decision makers can be trained to communicate sensitively and influence perception of fairness (Patient and Skarlicki, 2010). Skarlicki and Latham (2005) noted that training that aims to increase perceptions of fairness should be designed to increase leaders’ “understanding of how perceptions are formed” (p. 506).

If players feel that the official is fair, they are more likely to feel that decisions are fair, and to respond cooperatively. The perception of fairness is assumed to be influenced by players’ more general impressions of officials, not simply what occurs during decision communication episodes. Because officials frequently interpret and adjudicate on ambiguity, the communication of qualities associated with fairness is desirable. Thus Simmons (2010) said that referees would benefit from understanding the way players form perceptions of fairness.

Simmons (2011) interviewed Australian grassroots and professional soccer players for insights into the ways that they form perceptions of officials and their decisions. He found that players associate visible displays – behaviors, attitudes, interactions, and appearance – with more abstract qualities such as accountability, resilience, and intelligence. Principles of procedural and interactional fairness were used to interpret associations players made between displays and more general qualities. For example, players positively associate an official’s athletic physique with competence to keep up with play, and being close to incidents when decisions need to be made. This in turn is consistent with one of Leventhal’s (1980) procedural fairness principles, the requirement that information used as the basis for decisions is accurate. Officials enhance perceptions of interactional fairness (Bies and Moag, 1986) with displays of respect for players such as explaining decisions, a personable demeanor, and encouraging play to flow.

Hundreds of players’ comments were used to extrapolate competence, dependability, and respectfulness as players’ ideal of a fair referee (Simmons, 2011). Players attend to displays that indicate the official is physically competent to keep up with play, and mentally competent to judge and decide well. It’s important to players that officials are dependable, that they will make consistent decisions throughout the game and for both teams, and are resilient to pressures on their decisions. Third, players feel that games are mainly for the benefit of players. It is important that officials are respectful to players, that they are personable (without being over friendly), and accountable to players for their decisions.

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Individual referees have different styles, skills, and backgrounds. Competent, dependable, and respectful provide a frame intended to be flexible to officials matching their individual officiating personalities with the qualities players expect in officials.

Experience, practice and a 'feel for the game'

In officiating, the ability to judge context and communicate effectively is generally assumed to improve with experience (Mascarenhas, *et al.*, 2005). But can the development that appears to occur with experience be accelerated? One way to understand the contribution of practice and experience to the development of skilled communication involves procedural memories. "Procedural memories are recollections about how to do something; they are the building blocks of complex actions, like messages," noted Burleson (2007). "Each procedural memory connects recollections about an action, outcomes of that action, and situations in which that action has been used in the past" (p. 116).

The idea behind this conceptualization of communication practice is that when a situation arises requiring a response, we scan our procedural memories for a situation that involved similar goals, constraints or other features. We then use the memories that are available to us in formulating our message or response. According to Burleson, "people who get lots of practice with a particular communicative goal," such as teaching or selling, are likely to develop a larger bank, containing memories that are closely aligned to the demands of each new situation (Burleson, 2007, p. 116). Burleson noted that much human communication is routine and unpressured, and that we can communicate largely without purposeful fine tuning for audience. With a larger bank of memories of strategies and consequences to activate, we can speculate that experienced sport officials are better able to review different communicative options for achieving a range of goals, and to accommodate various perspectives and features of novel situations. For example, the famous Italian soccer referee Pierluigi Collina described a very rare situation where he felt compelled to reverse his own incorrect decision to award a goal. With decades of accumulated memories as an official, and a knowledge of personalities involved with the teams, his first step was to go across to the coaching staff of the team who had been awarded the goal, and explain what he was about to do. In front of many thousands of volatile spectators, his memories helped him to create an effective strategy for a unique situation (Collina, 2003).

The sports arena is known to be a forum for volatility and heightened physical and emotional stressors (Folkesson, Nyberg, Archer, and Norlander, 2002). The notions of cognitive complexity in the perception of situations and the development of person-centered messages may be particularly valuable for understanding sports official communication. Burleson (2007) lamented the paucity of proven strategies to help train adults to become more skilled communicators. But based on evidence from experimental and childhood studies of complexity in communication, he posited several suggestions that hold promise for the development of sports official communication. In particular, he argued for training that openly engages with the internal feelings, thoughts, and motives of other parties. According to Burleson, discussion of situations, emotions, and reactions, will help people to become more familiar with aspects of interactions that are not visible. Such discussions may help sports officials to develop more complex perceptions of interactions, and to produce messages that address different perspectives.

In contemplating the development in communication that occurs with experience of sport officiating, it may be instructive to reflect on the development of sport players. Noble and

Watkins (2003) remind us that sport players take time and practice to develop mastery and a “feel for the game” (p. 527). Masterful players spend much more time in practice than in playing their sport, and the “feel for the game” involves a feel for all aspects of the game including the equipment, the clothing, the pitch, the spectators and the occasion of play. They describe “training” as a “pedagogy in which recalibration of the body occurs through the presentation of good technique and the ‘correction’ of poor technique” (p. 527), and argue that the development of mastery involves both “doing-practice and theoretical practice” (p. 528). The mind–body process they describe involves the unconscious bodily development that occurs with familiarity and repetition, leading to automatic performance, such as that which occurs in driving a car or balancing on a bicycle. Importantly, they insist that the development of performance leading to effective, “automatic reactions in the environment in which they are to be executed” (p. 535) is not just bodily and unconscious, but is necessarily consciously calibrated and adjusted during repeated actions.

If this mind–body process approximates the development of a feel for sports officiating – and concomitant attitudes and qualities, including Salmon and Young’s (2011) notion of skilled communication – there are implications for designing sports officiating training. Borrowing from Noble and Watkins (2003), we adapt their ideas for players to speculate officials’ development of a feel for the game. Officials develop a feel for the various dimensions of the game, and become more fluent in their execution, both consciously and unconsciously, through the experience of practice. Along the developmental way, they benefit from theoretical input and conscious reflection. Early on they receive instruction in techniques and discreet skills. Techniques are consciously dissected and performed repeatedly to develop mastery. Performance of skills is integrated or synthesized with other actions. With practice, and reflection on practice, the skills become more rhythmic and automatic, the conscious becomes more unconscious, and they can “concentrate on the result of the action rather than the action itself” (Noble and Watkins, 2003, p. 535). The importance of conscious reflection and habituated technique is emphasized. As competence is developed in the different aspects of performance, officials can reflect on strategies for greater success, and refinement of techniques for efficiency.

For many important aspects of officiating, practice is more difficult to simulate outside real match experience than it is for playing. And a mastery model may demand greater time than many amateur officials are willing or able to commit. However, the principles for developing a feel for the game provide a framework for understanding and supporting a feel in officiating that will be accompanied by skilled communication.

Discussion

We support a conceptualization of officiating that makes communication more integral, and a conceptualization of officiating communication that is more holistic than is implied by an emphasis on skills and techniques. Officials at all levels of competition constantly interpret ambiguous situations in environments of heightened emotion, read and defuse conflict, and align interpretations and judgments with the rules. Although communication is integral to sport officiating, it has largely been sidelined in officiating research and training.

Research on sports officials’ communication and game management has focused on the process of communicating decisions, especially techniques for promoting acceptance of decisions by players. It has been argued here that it is very important for officials to learn

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consistent, purposeful techniques that help to clarify messages, avoid unintended reactions, and manage impressions. Officials need to practice a toolbox of skills that they can learn to draw on with ease. But the most challenging communication is essentially adaptive, reflexive, and dynamic. The ability to read people and respond to the nuances of context is not acquired through rote learning of techniques for delivering decisions. And players' general conduct and reactions to specific incidents are likely to be more profoundly influenced by players' feelings about their perceptions of qualities such as fairness and integrity.

The rulebook is essential, but it is not enough on its own. And we cannot hope to provide a specific set of instructions for interactive human communication. We should aim to support and prepare officials for both the routine and the unexpected in their work. Drawing from the preceding review of sports officiating and approaches to communication development, we suggest the following:

Authorities should continue to help officials to develop a toolbox of techniques and skills that they call on for decision communication and rule implementation, for the many predictable tasks of officiating. Repetition in training and practice helps to smooth the performance of techniques, and eventually make the selection and execution automatic.

Training should help officials aspire to qualities and characteristics most appropriate to officiating. Awareness and understanding build capacity and a sense of control and purpose. Simmons' (2011) tripartite – *competence*, *dependability*, and *respectfulness* – provide a framework within which officials can develop their own officiating personality, and develop strategies for impression management.

Authorities should prioritize opportunities for purposeful reflection through mentoring, group work, and other forums for discussion. This is particularly important and requires innovation and constant renewal in the design of training. To develop a feel for the game and their role, officials benefit from immersion in the environment, feedback, and engaging with the experienced. Reflection helps to build a confidence that comes with insight, understanding, and purpose. Officials can consciously recalibrate techniques to align with rule implementation and other goals (such as safety, order, fairness, prevention, proportion), and review aspects of context and interpersonal interactions that complicate or support the attainment of these goals. Reflection should help to familiarize officials with subtleties of context, and should deliberately make explicit what is often hidden in exchanges with players and coaches, including motives, deception, and feelings.

At all levels of sport, there are increasing expectations of accountability and sophistication in communication and game management. We propose that future researchers could adapt the model above – prioritizing and integrating a toolbox of skills, impression management, and strategies for developing a feel for the game – to design programs of training for sports officials in grassroots programs. With the collaboration of sporting bodies and officials, such an approach could be developed as a case study or as action research, informed by ideas and constructs from constructivist communication and reflection in practice literature. Evaluation of the programs would focus on the notion of the skilled communicator, from a range of stakeholder perspectives.

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