

Communication Power

(By Paul “Jacky” Loube, Executive Director, IAABO)

With an evergrowing emphasis being placed on communication between officials and coaches, it may be wise to revisit key elements of effective communication. The new NCAA mechanic requiring the foul calling official to move to a tableside position after reporting a foul, was introduced to generate “more meaningful dialog” between coach and official. This practice will challenge even the most experienced official. Officials today, more than any other time, will be put to the test in demonstrating rules knowledge and the ability to diffuse random conduct, as paramount components in their effective game management techniques.

10 Critical Communication Skills

Therefore, we better know what we are doing when we walk out onto the court during those first few minutes. You don’t get a second chance to make a first impression. Barbara Braunstein, nationally acclaimed motivational speaker and trainer, is convinced there are 10 critical communication skills which can make or break you in your drive to become the most successful official possible. Here are some do’s and don’ts.

1. Eye contact—In our business of officiating, direct and relaxed eye contact is essential. We must continually establish positive eye contact with our partner(s), scorer’s table, players, and coaches. Look them all in the eye, occasionally looking away to break the intensity. Positive eye contact enhances your image and floor presence, but don’t stare, you may give off the wrong signals and create unnecessary confrontations.

2. Posture—Stand tall, shoulders back, with your weight evenly distributed on both feet. Don’t slouch on one hip, or get locked into a habit of standing with your arms folded, or putting your hands in your pants pockets, or leaning against the wall or sitting down during a timeout. It can easily come across as sloppy, unprofessional, or even arrogant.

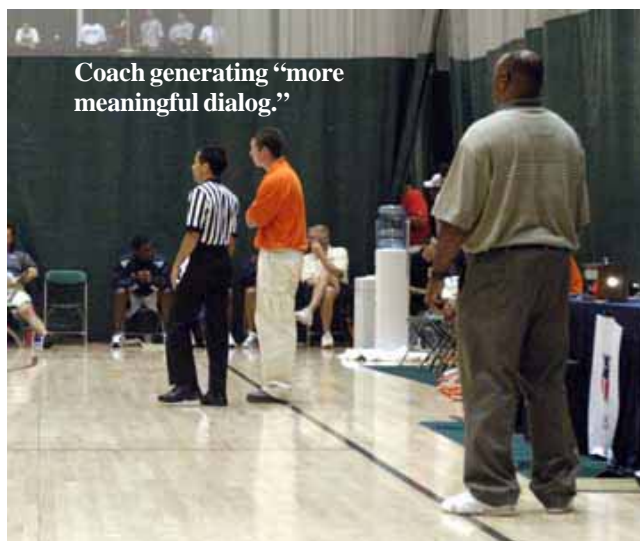
3. Facial Expressions—In general, a facial expression needs to be pleasant, neutral, and relaxed. Coaches always complain about officials’ facials. “Look at his expression, he had it in for me from the beginning,” or “If looks could kill you,” or even “I don’t care to have that official as he/she always referees angry.” “That official is unapproachable.” We have all experienced game situations where our facial expressions have led others to think we were irritated or happy when, in fact, we were not.

4. Obscure Gestures/Homegrown Mechanics—Avoid wild, sharp, jerky movements, unaccepted mechanics, or lack of mechanics, such as flinging hands into the air, failing to stop the clock, going down on one knee, or NBA mechanics. The new wave of successful officials will be mechanically sound and will adhere to the manual or will have tremendous difficulty advancing.

5. Voice—Your normal voice tones (speaking voice) are usually pleasant, neutral, and relaxed. Your “game voice,” however, has to be more absolute, confident, and in control. A referee must be a good finisher when delivering a call to the scorer’s table. An outstanding call is a great start, but the package is not complete until reported to the table. No matter how uptight, hurried, exasperated or nervous you are, the voice that will keep coaches and players open to what we are saying is the calm, self-assured, undoubted game voice of a finisher.

6. Excess Verbiage/Verbal Garbage—Avoid “padders,” like “like,” “OK, OK,” “like um,” or “ya know.” “I got No. 22 on the hold,” or “with the hold,” or “Falzon (fouls on).” Avoid apologizing for what you are going to say before you say, “I’m sorry coach but . . .”

7. Listening—An official must be a good listener. Sound familiar! The last time you heard that was probably elemen-



tary school. Listening, an indispensable tool for efficient game management, is the most unemphasized, underutilized communication power skill we possess. Has a coach ever said to you, “You’re not listening to me”? If so, the coach is probably correct. You are not listening, at least by his or her definition of the word. Lack of eye contact, inappropriate facial expressions or gestures all signal nonlistening. Be approachable!!!

8. Content—Be clear, concise, and direct. This does not mean being blunt or rude. Don’t quote rulebook sections. It is frequently counterproductive, creating a wall when your intent was to construct a bridge. It means pausing to collect your thoughts before responding to a coach’s questions or outbursts. Choose your words carefully, using short, simple words and sentences. Make no more than one or two points at a time; don’t give a clinic. Get the ball back in play. Spectators came to see the players play, not an address.

9. Timing—To exhibit confidence and control, your rate of speaking should be moderate, not too fast or too slow. Officials who speak too quickly or too slowly lose their listener, create unwanted and unnecessary problems because the listener becomes bored or exhausted. Your composure and style when reporting to the table or confronting a coach is paramount to effective game management.

10. Distance and Comfort—Get a grip! When you cross that floor to shake the coach’s hand or introduce yourself to the scorer’s table, give it a full, firm handshake. That is the only handshake. No fingertips. You may have sweaty palms syndrome because of nervousness, anxiety, or both. Wipe those hands off on a piece of towel or handkerchief you placed in your pants pocket. Resort to imagery; picture yourself officiating a flawless game, the sweaty palms will dissipate. Look the “shakee” directly in the eyes; that subtlety stakes out your territory as monitor of the game.

Two Ways To Change—How can you find out whether you need to sharpen these skills? How can you improve? There are two ways to change.

The first is to become more self-aware. Consciously think about these 10 things, get more information, bring them to your own attention and make some changes. This way is the most difficult as most officials have healthy egos and resist any technique modification.

Second, ask several fellow officials and observers for assistance—people who know you well, know your “irritating” communication habits, but overlook them because they know and like you. Discuss these 10 skills with them, and ask for their open and honest feedback. You’ll be surprised to find that you may come across differently to different people. It is better to hear it from your friends and fellow officials than to always question why you didn’t progress, don’t work a great varsity schedule, or ever get the opportunity to work the big game.