

Managing Conflict

The officiating environment can be challenging and potentially hostile. Dealing with conflict can be tough for a confident official, let alone an inexperienced one. Good officiating relies on dealing with conflict professionally and positively.

Conflict is likely to arise in a number of situations. These include:

- Disagreement from participants over a penalty/infringement
- Perceived bias shown by the official in the eyes of participants/coaches
- Frustration shown by participants as a result of their level of performance or the competition result
- Misunderstanding of instructions or rulings from an official
- Sledging between participants

Minimising conflict

There are occasions when conflict in the sporting environment is inevitable, however developing strategies to minimise conflict from arising is vital. The following tips may assist officials in carrying out their job with as little hassle as possible.

Tips for preventing conflict

- Prevention is always better than cure! If action is taken early in the game, conflict is less likely to occur
- Make competitors aware of your presence by reacting immediately to rule infringements (when appropriate)
- Remain objective, no matter what prior knowledge of participants/teams an official has
- Be definite and firm with decisions and communication
- Look sharp and act sharp - this will gain respect as an official
- Don't take criticisms personally. Remember that coaches and participants are seeing the game from a different perspective to the officials
- At the beginning of the competition, provide structure and guidance, but also start a dialogue with the participants. Acknowledge the participant's abilities and experience, and invite constructive viewpoints from some participants
- Speak clearly and firmly in heated situations. This will indicate confidence in managing the situation
- Keep cool - *if it starts to get a bit hot ...*

Resolving conflict

The official is often called upon to manage conflict situations and attempt to resolve them. It is virtually impossible for sports officials to avoid dealing with conflict, even when they have implemented prevention strategies.

Tips for resolving conflict

1. **Be professional:** Speak clearly and stay composed in heated situations. This demonstrates confidence in managing the situation. Avoid argument or debate, and don't try to bluff through with unjustified rulings.
2. **Remain calm:** Don't over-react. Stay relaxed and adopt a low-key posture/body language. Use objective, neutral language.

3. **Address the problem - not the emotions:** Try to put aside the emotions of all parties. Emotions inevitably inflame the situation. By dealing with the facts and the available evidence, the official is more likely to be seen as making a fair and appropriate decision.
4. **Focus on the person:** People are not objects, and they don't like being treated as such. Acknowledge a participant with eye contact and use their name if possible. Recognise that they have something to say, and don't just dismiss them.
5. **Be fair:** Avoid team or individual bias at all costs. Demonstrating integrity is one of the greatest assets of an official.
6. **Be confident and open:** Don't be defensive or try to justify actions. Clarify decisions when appropriate, based on the facts and the evidence presented.
7. **Be firm:** Deal with unacceptable behaviour firmly and quickly. Set boundaries in a polite, professional and assertive manner.

Remember that 90% of conflict occurs not because of what was said, but the tone in which it was said!