

Opening the Doors to Discussion, is it Losing or Saving Face?

Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada

No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible - Voltaire Few of us ever like to see our decisions challenged. When this occurs, the natural reaction is to defend tooth and nail that we are right, that we have made the correct decision, and that we do not have to justify ourselves. Sport coaches, who are constantly in a decision-making mode, face this every day. Athletes, parents, other coaches, officials or administrators often line up to convey their disagreement with the coach's decisions. As an authority figure, coaches may feel that opening the dialogue, to better understand the other person's point of view, will undermine their credibility or authority. Regardless of the obvious benefits of resolving conflicts through better communication, coaches have expressed concerns to the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) on several occasions that accepting to entertain a discussion of their decisions will cause them to "lose face". Their preference appears to be to walk away from the disagreement rather than discuss it with their athlete, by fear that such a discussion would chip away at their authority. With this in mind, this article will try to alleviate these fears by exploring some of the positive achievements and advantages of holding discussions in an informal or formal setting when faced with a disgruntled athlete.

Working together to explore and generate solutions for increased mutual understanding will ensure that interpersonal relationships remain strong and vibrant. This is especially important in a sport context where, because of the relatively small size of the sport community, relationships cannot be dismissed easily. Respect and trust are key to healthy relationships among coaches, athletes, and administrators, so that the chances of developing competitive athletes and producing results at national and international level competitions are maximized. The SDRCC feels so strongly that such an open dialogue is an important and necessary aspect in both resolving disputes

as much as they wish in an attempt to reach a common understanding about the issue at hand. The mediator or resolution facilitator has no decision-making authority and is only there to facilitate the discussions. Participants to a mediation or resolution facilitation cannot be compelled to divulge any information that they are not comfortable sharing nor can they be forced into a settlement, so they remain in full control of the outcome at all times.

Mediation however is not a panacea for dispute resolution; there can be some barriers. Fisher, Ury and Patton (1991), founders of the Harvard Negotiation Project at Harvard University point out that one of the barriers to mediation is arguing over positions, which can lead to frustration and ill-advised agreements: "the more you clarify your position and defend it against attack, the more committed you become to it"² and "your ego becomes identified with your position. You now have a new interest in 'saving face' – in reconciling future action with past positions"³. The authors are clearly warning parties that there is a danger in strictly defending a position instead of dealing with the substantive issues of the matter. How can this feeling relate to the fears advanced by coaches to the SDRCC? It would seem as though, in part, the tendency for coaches to feel this way could be related to their concerns about having to provide arguments to defend their final decision – their position, rather than to address the process which led to that decision. Most often when a person understands the process by which a decision was rendered, it is easier to accept that it was made through a sound and reasonable decision-making process, even though the person may still disagree with it. Indeed, the motives behind the decision are usually not generated by the coach, but are rather brought about by a series of observable actions or inactions that have caused the decision to be taken. So the fact that your decision as a coach is questioned should not be interpreted as an attack of your ego. In fact, pointing to these observations that led to your decision could allow a space for dialogue and explanation, and may very well lead to significant

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and maintaining positive relationships, that it has actually built a dialogue process into its tribunal system through mediation and resolution facilitation. As Christopher Moore (2003), an internationally known mediator and dispute systems designer states, "in addition to addressing substantive issues, mediation may also establish or strengthen relationships of trust and respect between the parties or terminate relationships in a manner that minimizes emotional costs and psychological harm"¹.

One of the major advantages of avoiding a formal dispute before an arbitrator by opening up the communication channels is that it allows parties to work out solutions themselves and decide where they want to go and how they want to overcome that hurdle. For example, during a resolution facilitation or mediation at the SDRCC, participants are free to present and explore ideas

improvements altogether.

Another barrier to successful mediation is the emotional factor. It is fair to say that the relationship between a coach and an athlete would be considered a close relationship, and we can begin to appreciate the apprehension coaches would feel in dealing with conflicts and disagreements with their athletes. Roger Fisher and Scott Brown (1989) stress that "the emotional involvement in a working relationship is thus two sided: the ability to deal with differences will be damaged to the extent that strong emotions overwhelm reason. That ability will be enhanced if reason is informed, enlightened, and supported by a positive emotional commitment to joint problem-solving"⁴. The authors


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caution the readers that too much emotion, or a complete lack of emotion, is unhealthy in attempting to deal with a problem. Striking the right emotional balance along with rationality is what is needed to succeed in these dialogues.

In other words, if you as a coach are confident that the decision you have rendered is correct and justifiable, then you should not be afraid of having to explain it and defend it. On the contrary, in accepting to “talk it out” you will demonstrate empathy and a willingness to listen to the other person’s concerns. In no way should this be construed as an admission that your decision was incorrect, but rather should provide an excellent opportunity to educate the other persons on aspects of the decision-making process that they may not see or understand from their perspective. In fact, doing so may only raise your credibility

and the level of respect that people have for you as an expert in your field.

In essence, when confronted with disagreements and resistance, coaches are encouraged to openly discuss their decisions in a manner that is respectful and strive, by the same token, to protect their relationships with others. When called upon to do so, one must remember not to stifle the discussion and maintain good emotional balance. If the situation becomes too complex to handle it on your own, or if the intensity of emotions interferes with good communication, remember the benefits of the mediation process, as discussed above: it brings participants to cooperate to find a solution to their dispute; participants retain control of the outcome; and at the very least, one of the objectives of the mediation process is to maintain relationships intact. Such help is available at the SDRCC (www.sdrcc.ca). Its professional mediators

and resolution facilitators, with specialized training in the realities of the Canadian sport system, can guide your discussions in a setting that fosters mutual respect and that will allow you to maintain a positive coaching environment for your athletes and their entourage. 

1. Moore, Christopher, W. (2003). *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict 3rd Edition Revised*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

2. Fisher, Roger, Ury, William, & Patton, Bruce (1991). *Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In (2nd ed.)*. New York: Penguin Books.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Fisher, Roger & Brown, Scott (1989). *Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate*. New York: Penguin Books.

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Peter Judge calls it “getting caught up in the line code. You get sucked into it and, before you know it, you’ve lost sight of the big picture.”

The risk is “hyper-focus,” according to Canada Snowboard’s Christian Hrab. “It can lead to what I call ‘hyper-isolation.’ We can sometimes get so preoccupied with our own tasks that we forget to communicate with others and that’s when stuff falls through the cracks.”

There is general consensus that the Commonwealth Games in Delhi this October will pose unique challenges for athletes and coaches. In spite of unprecedented investments in world-class facilities and infrastructure, there are concerns about everything from transportation to air quality, food, and security.

For Cathy Haines, who will serve as Team Leader for Gymnastics Canada at the Delhi Games, it’s critically important to get accurate information out to the athletes before they leave for India. “After that, it’s too late,” she says. “Team Leaders, athletes and coaches need to be comfortable asking questions so that we get the right information to our athletes when they need it.”

“The biggest issue for the Para-Athletics team in Delhi is going to be isolation and seclusion,” says Ozzie Sawicki. “My guess is that a lot of athletes are likely to spend the vast majority of their time either at the venues or within the safe confines of the Athletes Village, and minimizing the length of stay at the Games as a whole.”

“We’re concerned about the potential for boredom,” adds Diving Canada’s Scott Cranham. “So we’re talking with CGC to make sure the Mission Staff line up lots of activities for those athletes who are really focused on peak performances and don’t want to venture too far from the Village.”


Striking the right balance between detailed planning and “hyper-focus” also means being able to take advantage of opportunities to innovate. For Derrick Campbell, ChPC, who coached the Men’s Short Track Team to a gold medal in the 5000 metre relay in Vancouver, the key to victory was trying something different.

“We knew we’d need an edge to beat the South Koreans and Americans,” he explains. “We practiced a different approach to sequencing the skaters but didn’t use it until the Final. I think the other teams were surprised and it helped us capture gold. capture gold.”

Christian Hrab’s advice includes being aware of the obvious. “Don’t forget to schedule a week off after the Games. It’s critical.”

But even with exhaustive planning and clever innovations, sport is blessed or cursed – depending on how you look at it – with being unavoidably unpredictable. Long Track’s Marcel Lacroix points to Denny Morrison, who finished a disappointing 13th in the Men’s 1000 metre race in the early days of the Vancouver Games.

“The week before, Denny skated the same distance at the same venue without another skater to push him,” recounts Lacroix. “The time he clocked would have earned him a silver medal on race day. Everything appeared to be right on track, but sometimes it just doesn’t come together.”

With Delhi and London on the horizon, Lacroix is encouraging his summer sport colleagues to set the bar high. “The Commonwealth Games should be a top, top priority,” he adds. “Coming out of Vancouver, we’re starting to believe as a nation that we really can beat the best in the world. Delhi gives us our next chance to prove it.” 

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know him or her via social media (which is how most young people prefer to communicate). Once engaged in these communications, you will become aware of activities that will impose disclosure obligations upon you, especially if the athlete is a minor.

For example, legally you might be able to turn a blind eye to underage drinking (as many adults do on a regular basis), but the context of this drinking may require that you disclose your knowledge to your sport governing body. For example, if your players hosted a drinking party in a hotel room during a team trip, and you saw photos of it on Facebook, your organization likely requires you to take action and report the activity. We would further suggest that, as

a coach, you have a clear ethical obligation to report any use of substances that are banned or restricted under the Canadian Anti-Doping Program, including marijuana.

Morally, you also have a duty to report indiscretions to parents if the athletes you coach are minors. It may turn out that the parent and athlete are friends on Facebook, and the parent is already aware of the improper activity. But having this conversation would be far less difficult than having a later conversation in which a parent accuses that: “You knew!” about their child’s drug habit and you said nothing about it.

So what is a coach to do? We suggest a number of things: be aware of new CMC media and

how they can enhance (and complicate!) your communication with athletes; be particularly sensitive to the phenomenon of hyper-personal communication; and spend some time to think about your own personal standards about using CMC media with your athletes.

There is no doubt that communication technology is growing rapidly, and that considerations of law, ethics and privacy are lagging behind. CMC media have the potential to significantly enhance your effectiveness as a coach, but for the reasons we have described here, we urge prudence and caution. 