



Sport, Communication and Dispute Prevention

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The Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) has three major objectives¹ Objective one: the SDRCC will “enhance excellence in sport by improving the sport system through the prevention or reduction of sports-related disputes, thus creating a culture of fairness in Canada”; Objective two: the SDRCC will “strengthen the capacity of our sport community leaders and participants by creating a positive culture of fairness”; Objective three; he SDRCC will “operate and manage an organization promoting excellence and transparency.” Of the many strategies and suggestions given by the SDRCC through its website, publications, kiosks and workshops to help reach these objectives, the one constant that is advocated as the key to the prevention or proper resolution of disputes in the Canadian sport system is good oral and written communication. While the idea of “good communication” is obvious and stated frequently by the SDRCC, the concept itself seems ambiguous. What are some principles that allow for communication? There are examples that apply in a sport context. As Mayer (2000), a leader in the field of conflict resolution, states “at the heart of both conflict and resolution is communication.”² With this in mind, we need to delve into this further, to explore ideas of communication in a conflict prevention context, and then to apply it to the Canadian sport system.

As stated by Krauss and Morsella, professors at Columbia and San Francisco State University, “the positive role of communication in ameliorating conflict seems so obvious that the premise is seldom given serious examination”³. While a full examination of communication is beyond the scope of this article, the important idea is that, often, communication is used as a blanket fix-it solution without necessarily examining what communication means: Therefore, it would be practical for us to take a look at a few of the principles³ that Krauss and Morsella lay out.

Principle 1: *Stay away from communication channels that have too much noise associated with them; if that is impractical to restate the ideas in different ways, that is be redundant.* According to Krauss and Morsella *noise* is “any undesired signal”³. *Noise* can obstruct the proper understanding of a message and thus hamper communication. To overcome *noise*, the authors suggest redundancy as a one possible solution; that is to relay the same message in different ways. They do, however, caution that redundancy only increases the likelihood that a message will be received, it does not guarantee it will be understood. How would this look in a sporting context? Every year each National Sport Organizations (NSO) will produce carding criteria which will help determine which athletes receive cards, and every year the criteria is different to some degree. So how is this criteria transmitted to the athletes? NSOs have several different options available to them 1) mail it to the athletes; 2) email it to the athletes; 3) have in-person sessions/discussions; 4) have coaches discuss the criteria with their athletes; 5) post it on the website; 6) ensure that the criteria is available in both French and English. It is strongly encouraged to use as many communications avenues as possible to ensure that NSO members fully understand all of their obligations with regards to carding, team selection and conduct.



Principle 2: *When listening to someone, try to understand the intended meaning.* This principle specifically deals with intention, and not just the literal words being used. The question is what is the speaker intending to say, “understanding consists of recognizing communicative intentions - not the words used”.³ In the sport context for example, an athlete just asked his coach “why was I not selected?” If the coach immediately reacts defensively and assumes that the athlete is dissatisfied and is looking for an indication that the process was flawed or biased, he also eliminates any chance to have a productive discussion. The athlete may be sincerely looking for an explanation to better understand the reasons and realign his preparation for the next selection process. By jumping to conclusions without knowing the athlete’s intent, the coach risks compromising a positive relationship with an athlete simply wishing to obtain constructive feedback on his performance.

Principle 3 : *When preparing a message, consider what your listener will take you to mean.* This principle seems to be a natural extension of Principle 2; when taken together the emphasis is on both the listener and speaker/author to work together, cooperatively, to engage in the communicative process. How do these two principles look in a sporting context? Many NSOs have behavioural conduct requirements from their members. But are these written and communicated to those members? For example, NSOs should put together their code of conduct in such a way so that their members can understand it. On the other side of the coin, Principle 2 gets at what the listeners, or audience, needs to try to do to understand the message. So, for example, when reading a code of conduct, the reader (NSO member) is also responsible for trying to understand the meaning. That is to say, are your messages written in a clear and concise way as to avoid as much ambiguity as possible? We see that Principles 2 and 3, espoused by Krauss and Morsella, involve an almost synergistic approach to communication where all those engaged are responsible for successful communication.

Principle 4 : *When speaking, take the listener’s perspective into account.* The authors in this case refer specifically to oral communication and much of what was stated in Principle 3 holds true for Principle 4. An example in a sporting context may help explain the idea: the negotiation of athlete agreements with NSOs can at times become a heated topic, and how these, or any, negotiations are handled can go a long way in contributing to the relationship between NSO administrators and their athletes. As such, both the NSO administration and the athletes need to understand each other in order to effectively communicate; bearing down in the trenches probably is not the best strategy for effective communication. That is, when trying to communicate, in conjunction with what the listeners are trying to do, to try and understand what you mean (principle 2); the speaker needs to also be aware of what the viewpoint of the listener is, and to take into account where they are coming from.

Principle 5: *Be an active listener.* According to Krauss and Morsella, “effective communication requires that listener’s be responsive.”³ The authors suggest that an active listener raises questions, asks for clarification if things seem ambiguous and ensures that the same understanding is had by all.³ Again, we see the authors referring to communication as a cooperative endeavour where to have any success, everyone involved needs to be actively and positively engaged . So for example, one of the main case types that comes before the SDRCC deals with team selection. Within those cases there have been many instances where a change to the selection criteria was made from one season to the next, and then communicated to the members with timelines for members to provide feedback. However, it is too often the case that those same members before the SDRCC did not proceed to provide any initial feedback. In a sport context, this “active” role is essential, in avoiding disputes.



As Krauss and Morsella suggest, communication is not a universal remedy, but rather a tool, a “neutral instrument” that can help in dispute prevention and in dispute resolution. While the context of their message dealt specifically with conflict resolution, their ideas can easily be used in the sport environment, as in the examples shown above. In the Canadian sport context, it is important to prevent disputes in a proactive manner, by engaging with members in areas that have the greatest potential for disputes such as team selection, carding, discipline and athlete agreements. Mayer says that “good communication stems from intention not technique”, it is by good communication, that a lasting, stable and positive environment can be maintained and that the goals of bronze, silver and gold can best be achieved. ■