7 Steps to Better Conversations
By Referee, September 25, 2017

Dealing with adversarial relationships can be tough. These seven tips to better conversations will make your difficult job a bit easier.

1. Pause before responding

Let the other person get more words in if he wants. Don’t cut him off; that only exacerbates the situation. In responding, avoid using words like “but” and “however” because they usually cancel out the first part of a sentence, lessening the message. “I understand the situation but we’re going to have to …” is an example of how the word “but” lessened the effect of the initial positive statement “I understand.”

2. Discreetly praise players

Congratulate them on good plays and encourage sportsmanship. You can win over many players with a kind word; that can help you later in the game if problems arise.

3. No matter whom you’re dealing with, apply the “golden rule.”

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Be reasonable with the words you choose and the tone you use. It will go a long way to handling situations effectively.

4. It’s OK to say you made a mistake

Honesty is your best policy. Under no circumstances should you try to lie your way out of trouble. Recipients know and then they’ll think you can’t be trusted. Lying fuels their negative perceptions of officials.

An old school of thought in officiating was, “Never admit making a mistake.” That theory has gone away over time. If you blew a call, it’s OK to admit it quietly to the coach or player. Many times, they’ll respect you more for that than if you tried to twist the truth and equivocate. Most coaches understand you can’t change judgment calls, but admitting you missed it often ends the argument. Do it too often, however, and your reputation will suffer.

5. If a coach or player is begging, listen to that person.

If a reply is necessary, reply with an even tone. Be brief. Do not use sarcasm or put-downs. Acknowledge that you’ve heard and understood the complaint. That’s not an admission of guilt or error on your part; it merely shows the person you are listening. Many times, all the person wants is to be heard.

6. You may be able to smile or use humor to diffuse a potentially volatile situation.

Be careful; what you think might be funny may not be to the other person, thus adding to the problem. However, smiles and a deflective word can work in the heat of battle. An official who can chuckle or smile is in control. An official who can’t see the humor in a situation may be perceived as uptight.
However, officials shouldn’t get into joke-telling. It’s simply too dangerous because people differ in what amuses them. What you might think is a great joke might offend the listener. Try humor sparingly and make it as light as possible. Humorous attempts can also cause problems. Here are two examples using the exact same attempt at humor. One worked; one didn’t.

Former World Cup soccer referee Vinnie Mauro said in a Referee magazine interview, “I remember a player who had a breakaway and missed the shot. Afterward, he used a four-letter word, which I heard. I said to him, ‘Hey, what if your mother heard you say that word?’ He chuckled and said, ‘I’m sorry ref.’ He didn’t direct his comment at anyone, so instead of penalizing him, I used humor to make my point.”

In a comparable situation, a basketball player missed a free throw and used a four-letter word, which the referee heard. The referee used the same exact line that Mauro used, saying, “Hey, what if your mother heard you say that word?” The player responded, “My mother died a month ago.” Discretion is the byword.

7. Don’t ever utter the phrase, “It’s just a game.”

Few phrases turn participants to rage quicker than that one. Remember, they’ve worked all week, all season and all their careers for that game. It is critically important to them, no matter what the sport or level. That phrase is often interpreted by coaches and players as a flippant “I don’t care” response. Basically, it is demeaning.

Follow those seven tips when dealing with players and coaches and the relationships developed will be positive for the game.