

**Skilled interaction: Concepts of communication and player management in the  
development of sport officials**

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### Abstract

Communication and player management are integral to effective sport officiating but most research has focused on physical performance and decision-making. The few previous studies of officiating communication tend to use ‘transmission’ conceptualisations of communication (e.g., decision communication, impression management). Eleven officiating development managers and coaches from seven peak Australian sport bodies were interviewed to explore conceptualisations of communication and player management, the way officials improve, and the role of the sport bodies in improvement. Four salient themes emerged in conceptualisations of effective officiating communication and player management; *personal qualities* of the official; *one-way communication* direction-giving and impression management; *situation monitoring* (interpreting player and context), and *skilled interaction* (adapting communication appropriately for context). The findings highlight a mismatch between interpretive and interactive communication skills perceived to be most important and challenging, and the training that is currently provided to officials. There was general commonality in practice and training issues across sport codes. The paper makes theoretical contributions to the study of sport official communication and practical recommendations for improving approaches to training skilled communication and player management.

**Keywords:** *communication, player management, sport officials, referees, training*

## Introduction

Officials (referees, umpires, judges) are integral to sport and have a significant impact on order and safety for billions of sport participants worldwide. One of the fundamental expectations of officials is that they interact with players in ways that encourage cooperation and adherence to the laws of the game (Rooff-Steffen, 2011; Simmons, 2011). In this paper we argue that the ability to communicate effectively is central to officiating well, that most sports find it difficult to support the development of communication and interaction skills and that this important aspect of officiating has been under-researched. The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) offers an online learning program across sports, '*Introductory General Officiating Principles*' that has been completed by over 33,000 officials. The ASC recognises that some aspects of officiating such as rules and conventions are best taught by individual sports, but they provide minimum standards across sports in their National Officiating Accreditation Programmes for self-management, managing the competition environment and people management. This paper focuses on communication and player management aspects of officiating that are common to many sports. It reports a study conducted with officiating development managers and performance coaches in peak Australian sport bodies. It sought to understand the way they conceptualise communication and player management skills, how they believe that officials improve, and the role they perceive for sport bodies in managing or facilitating this improvement.

In sports such as soccer (football), rugby, hockey and basketball, officials work with many players in close physical space (Dosseville et al., 2012) and influence the continuity or '*flow*' of game activities (MacMahon & Plessner, 2008). At all playing levels, officials deal with complex, ambiguous situations occurring rapidly in and out of view. They are expected to interpret, judge and communicate appropriately in atmospheres of heightened passion and pressures.

Communication, contextual judgement and game management are clearly essential to effective officiating (Mascarenhas et al., 2005), yet most research on officiating performance has focused on physical and psychological factors, such as judgement and decision-making. Across sports the most important aspect of officiating performance is the accuracy of decision-making (Dosseville, Laborde & Garnarczyk, undated), however, importantly, our perception of the accuracy of officials' decisions is significantly influenced by different communication behaviours and styles (Simmons, 2010).

Officiating requires a range of complex skills. Fitness, positioning, signalling techniques and law knowledge are thought to be easier to train than 'humanistic elements' (Mascarenhas et al., 2005, p. 373) such as judging game context and communication. Academics and coaches of officials say that communication and player management are often displaced in formal development programs. According to Mellick et al. (2005), officials learn their communication through a '*hidden curriculum*' involving personal experience and advice from peers, assessors and mentors. A referee blogger and former professional official for the South African Football Association (SAFA) says there remains a strong focus in officiating training on technical components (physical fitness, law knowledge), while little is done to directly address interaction skills and other psycho-social aspects of officiating, such as professional attitudes, coping and stress management, and 'man-management' skills (Theron, 2013). Recently the Australian Rugby Union (ARU) surveyed their referees to identify perceptions of the effectiveness of their referee coaches. Coaches were generally rated highly for technical knowledge, commitment, ability to help referees understand 'game sense/feel' and to deliver honest, trustworthy and useful feedback. One area perceived to be in need of improvement was the ability of coaches to assist in referees' game interactions, communication and body language with players (personal communication

Andrew Cole, ARU). Most of the few studies of sport officiating communication have focused on preventative and decision communication, and managing impressions intended to shape player attitudes towards the official and their decisions (Dosseville et al., 2012; Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2010). Preventative communication techniques, such as stronger verbal and gestured warnings, and advising players of the consequences of transgressions, aim to deter players from committing violations in the future (Grunska, 2011; Mascarenhas et al., 2005). In the context of policing, this type of interaction with the community has been referred to as 'order maintenance' (Sanders, 1979). One study explored decision communication in association football and rugby union and concluded that best practice would be 'to engage the offender's attention and instigate a decision interaction episode; to project confidence in the decision made; and finally to promote perception of the decision as fair and just' (Mellick et al., 2005, p. 42). Players associate different verbal and non-verbal displays of officials such as their appearance, behavioural actions and decisions with more abstract qualities about the official such as accountability, resilience, and mental acuity (Simmons, 2011). One study found that players generally rated officials as more *fair* and *correct* when they communicate decisions calmly or with a short explanation (Simmons, 2010). These decision communication focused studies (Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2010; 2011) were informed by branches of organisational justice theory and ways that people perceive and react to fairness and unfairness. They indicate that communication style influences player perceptions and responses, especially to negative decisions.

There are some well established expectations concerning sport officials at all levels (Dosseville et al., 2012) and impression management has been the focus of several studies of sport officiating communication. Goffman (1959) used the metaphor of dramaturgical performance to account for impression management in social interaction and interpersonal communication in

everyday life. He suggested that individuals intentionally and knowingly create an impression of their self while also unintentionally giving off impressions. Goffman (1959; 1963) believed that we are involved in an ongoing negotiation with others to publicly define our identity and the nature of the situation. Players esteem qualities such as competence, dependability and respectfulness in officials (Dosseville et al., 2012; Simmons, 2011), as well, high performance and elite officials report that they are consciously motivated to project impressions of competence, decisiveness and confidence (Cunningham et al., 2012; Thatcher, 2005). Elite rugby union referees use the term ‘corporate theatre’ to describe decision communication behaviours and interaction strategies intended to meet the perceived expectations of others connected with match proceedings (i.e., players, coaches, officiating peers, television audiences and commentators; Cunningham et al., 2012). Decision communication occurs at important moments during games when emotions are heightened, and can be a catalyst for undesired reactions in players, coaches and spectators. Generally, we can say that it is important for officials to convey calm and confidence (Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2011) however it is also important to interpret people and situations, and respond appropriately and effectively to the unique requirements of game situations.

A focus on decision communication and impression management in research and the practice of officiating tends to limit conceptualisation of communication and player management to one-way communication, or broadcasting skills. This transmission (one-way) (e.g., Berlo, 1960) conceptualisation has often led to teaching communication as a toolbox of discrete skills that need to be learned – behaviours, styles, techniques and displays that an official draws from to direct play, manage impressions and influence reactions to decisions. However, a transmission model of communication is inadequate for conceptualising and training sport officiating communication because of the interactive and inter-subjective nature of real life situations and exchanges

(Simmons & Cunningham, 2013).

Communication researchers in some domains outside sport have argued against teaching a toolbox of skills, instead favouring approaches that aim to develop '*skilled communicators*' who are prepared for different situations and circumstances. For example, medical educators and researchers debating the training of communication skills in doctors and health practitioners (Chen, 2011; Kelly, 2007; Salmon & Young, 2011) have suggested that a toolbox of 'communication skills' approach can reduce the communication process to a set of 'surface' level skills that misrepresents and detracts from the pedagogy and complexity of the development of communication. In the case of doctors, communication tasks such as breaking 'bad news', or a focus on information gathering skills can lead to poor dialogue with patients and insensitivity to important contextual influences on interactions (Salmon & Young, 2011). In officiating we might imagine similarly that a focus on sending messages could result in less-developed skills used for interpreting situations and responding to the unexpected.

Proponents of approaches that aim for skilled communicators in medical practitioners advocate a range of learner-based and context-oriented strategies that complement rather than replace the teaching of a toolbox of skills, including emphasising flexibility and adaptability in communication, and making training more holistic (Rollnick et al. 2002; Salmon & Young, 2011). A more holistic approach would integrate rather than separate communication and clinical skills training (Rollnick et al., 2002). Burlison (2007) says that training needs to engage directly with the unspoken in interactions, including feelings, motives and intentions of others, if people are to become more skilled and perceptive communicators. Some communication scholars emphasise a holistic understanding of interactions including ways that people *mindfully* interpret interpersonal

conflict and manage interaction situations appropriately, effectively, and adaptively (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2003). Along with Goffman's (1959) view of the negotiation of identity and definition of situations in social interaction, these ideas extend current thinking based on transmission and a toolbox of skills for officiating communication. Sport officials would benefit from practising a toolbox of skills and techniques, a support framework within which officials can develop their own officiating personality or approach to managing impressions, and opportunities for immersion that allow for conscious, guided reflection on technique, context, and interaction goals (Simmons & Cunningham, 2013). To date there is limited knowledge or evidence concerning the training or experiences required for an effective holistic approach to improving sport officials' communication and player management.

There are few formal opportunities for sports to share perspectives and understanding of officiating and player management. Most studies of sport official communication have focused on one or two sports and have used officials and players as participants.

Three main research questions in this study are:

*RQ 1: How do peak (national and state) sport bodies conceptualise officiating communication and player management?*

*RQ 2: How do peak (national and state) sport bodies believe officials become better communicators and player managers?*

*RQ 3: What role do peak sport bodies perceive they have in helping officials to become better communicators and player managers?*

## **Method**



### ***Participants***

The study used interviews with 11 senior sport official development managers at peak national and state sport bodies in Australia. They included three national high-performance academy referee coaches, and four national and four state level official development managers (or directors/coordinators). Seven sports were represented including soccer (football), rugby union, rugby league, Australian Rules football, netball, basketball and field hockey. These sports have been described by officiating researchers as ‘interactor’ sports (MacMahon and Plessner, 2008) and team sports where officials and players share the same space (Dosseville et al, 2012). There were nine males and two female development managers that participated as interviewees for this study.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were asked by email if they would participate in an interview as part of a study exploring sport official development. An information letter and consent form was provided to participants prior to each interview to explain the purposes of the study and assure confidentiality. Eight interviews were conducted in person, and three by telephone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Most interviews went for at least an hour.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

All semi-structured interviews were conducted by the principal researcher. The co-researchers were involved in an ongoing process of reviewing and refining lines of questioning following interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to initiate topic areas of discussion during interviews around sport official development (e.g., characteristics of ideal officials, factors

important in the instruction and development pathway of officials). This gave participants the opportunity to respond openly and introduce what they felt was relevant (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviewer used a guide that included four main lines of inquiry. These were the *role of the referee development coach/manager* in their organisation; beliefs about *traits of ideal officials* and how people get better at officiating; beliefs about *the ways that officials improve in player and game management*; and their organisation's *strategies for improving and evaluating communication and game management* in officials. Question probes were used to obtain *detail* ('could you give an example of an officiating situation where you've previously seen that occur?'), *elaboration* ('could you expand on what you mean by 'communication skills?') and *clarification* ('are you saying that a strict approach works best for that official to influence cooperation?') (Patton, 2002). Following interviews, participants were asked if they had any questions, and were given the opportunity to add any comments, or corrections to their responses. The same interview guide was used with each participant.

### ***Data analysis***

The three main research questions were used as a structure for organising data. An inductive thematic analysis was used to generate category schemes that represented participants' responses. We accomplished this analysis by grouping similar meaning units/quotes into categories within a six-phase data verification method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved (1) gaining familiarity with the data by reading and re-reading each transcript, then (2) identifying and generating initial meaning coding of actual words, phrases, descriptions and case examples used by participants. Next, (3) codes were collated and established into potential themes that were given meaningful labels to represent their thematic content. Themes were (4) reviewed and checked for their

congruency with coded extracts and full data set to generate a thematic ‘map’, and then given (5) a final definition and name to provide further specific refinements to each theme. Finally, (6) appropriate extracts were selected for discussion of analysis and related back to research questions and previous literature for final reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The principal researcher conducted the main data analysis, however initial thematic labels given to emergent concepts were further scrutinized by other research team members by providing more explicit coding and classification to interview data.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Maxwell’s (2002) recommendations for enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative research design guided this study. Descriptive validity was supported through the use of dictaphones to record interviews and avoid missing data. Each audio taped interview was then subsequently transcribed verbatim. All transcriptions of interviews were read through and compared to the audio recordings to confirm their accuracy in their translation. Interpretive validity was enhanced through member checking used at two points (Patton, 2002). At the end of each interview, participants were given the opportunity to add or modify any answers or particular ideas they had provided during the interview. Second, all participants were sent the final report of the thematic results and asked to identify any concerns, misinterpretations, or comments with respect to the overall findings. The trustworthiness of the researcher’s analysis was considered credible (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) as they had previously completed analysis(s) on a similar topic area with interviews with elite officials (see Cunningham et al., 2012). Members of the research team included highly-experienced interviewers who were continually involved in the ongoing process of data analysis and confirmation.

## Results and Discussion

This research sought to identify the way ‘communication’ and ‘player management’ are conceptualised by those who govern the instruction and development of sport officials. There were many patterns in the way officiating is described and discussed across sports. Four core and generally complementary themes emerged that account for the ways the interviewees conceptualise communication and player management in officials; (a) *personal qualities*; (b) *one-way communication*; (c) *situation monitoring*; and (d) *skilled interaction* (See Table 1).

[Table 1 here]

### *Personal qualities*

When discussing ‘communication’ and ‘player management’, all interviewees stressed the importance of personal qualities and traits that help, or hinder, the task of officiating. Some personality types were thought to be more beneficial to officiating, and some less:

*The players perceive a good referee as somebody who they feel comfortable with, they've got a comfort zone with that referee and even when he makes decisions they don't like, they go 'Mmm, alright, I don't like the decision, but I'm happy with this guy running the match'*  
[R3]

Previous research has referred to an ‘X-factor’ quality, or charisma, characterised as a ‘common sense’ and ‘interpersonal ease’ with others that some officials display (Mascarenhas et al., 2005). Interviewees in the current study also referred to an ‘X-factor’ that was considered an ideal

attribute of an official and can positively influence their level of game appointment and rate of upward advancement (i.e., factor in talent identification):

*He has that bloody 'X-factor', the way he can work with people under stress and be able to keep a nice lid on it, where everybody feels comfortable with him. Fitness, all the right faculties, and intelligence that you need to referee, he's got those. A lot of people got those. But then there is management technique, and he's just a natural. [R7]*

Interviewees referred to this intangible trait as a personality type, or communication style that is difficult to label and perhaps impossible to train. Interviewees frequently mentioned being 'respectful', 'professional' and 'empathetic' (with players), as well as 'approachable', 'decisive', 'calm', 'confident' and 'resilient' as indications of preferred characteristics in officials. Previous research has identified competence, dependability and respectfulness as favourable qualities in officials that predict player perceptions of fairness (Simmons, 2011). Interviewees said that officials can express respect to players through a variety of actions and behaviours, including being open to discussing player frustrations, limiting unwarranted or excessive whistle use and demonstrating accountability for decisions. A personal quality that interviewees in this study referred to very positively was openness and willingness to interact:

*... it's a personality kind of thing, I mean the good ones [officials] will often talk with the players and be a bit more approachable, relaxed, and not so domineering [R6]*

*We talk about 'presence'. That includes being cooperative and professional, as opposed to overly familiar or over officious [R4]*

The most commonly cited negative qualities in officials referred to a theme of over-imposition using descriptors such as ‘dictatorial’, ‘domineering’, ‘over-controlling’ or ‘officious’. These were considered a sign of a lack of experience, or inability of an official to have self-control or manage their comportment. Other negative qualities related to a failure to establish authority and included ‘submissive’, ‘overly-friendly’, and being ‘easily offended by players’. It is important that officials are perceived to have the right balance between personable and authoritative. Interviewees frequently emphasised that a power differential with players can often lead to a game atmosphere of frustration and agitation that translates to aggression and resistance to officials and their decisions:

*I think that a problem with some officials is that they can be not very personable people, and they should avoid coming across as over-authoritative, or that excess power because while you need to show it you'll never get them [the players] on your side [R2]*

Some interviewees felt it would be useful for officials to have a greater awareness of the way their personality influences their ability to officiate and learn different strategies and skills to use an appropriate officiating style to fit the requirements of game situations, or individuals they are dealing with:

*... quite often there are people that don't identify that their personality actually has an impact on the way that they referee. When players are consistently getting frustrated, then you have to look at the personality of the referee and say: "OK, is the individual driving those two ends of the spectrum?" And, I think to a degree they are. The individual drives the management context that's happening in the game, and it's what they bring to the table [R9]*

For most of the interviewees, an official's personality is integral to their concept of communication and player management. While some aspects of personality are 'natural' assets or liabilities, most said it is important also to be self-aware and to be able to control the display of personality with both purpose and restraint.

### ***One-way communication***

Most sports expect officials to use an array of one-way communication or 'display' skills to communicate and deliver messages to players. They noted the importance of officials' ability to '*manage their presentation*', or '*image*' through the use of particular body language, facial expressions and other verbal and non-verbal behaviours. A self-regulatory process that has been associated with role distress in officials is impression management (Thatcher, 2005). One-way displays (posture, confidence) and tools (whistle, hand signals, flagging) were viewed as necessary to help convey credibility and authority as an official:

*Part of the communication begins in the way you actually blow your whistle and the sounds you're making, and confidence with which you do that. Similarly, the signals you are making, how clear you are to both players and spectators, and the confidence with which you actually hold yourself when you're doing this and the talk is really only the last aspect.*

[R2]

In most sports, there is often little time for discussion between officials and players or coaches, and in most instances communication is brief and one-way. Many interviewees viewed an official's capacity to self-regulate their emotional displays as an important component in transmitting or '*sending messages*' to players, especially in highly stressful or confrontational game situations. Interviewees said that officials should be concise in the verbal messages they

deliver to players and they value an official *'who is calm, who doesn't speak quickly, who can get a message out to the player in a succinct, clear fashion [R3]*. Interviewees frequently referred to the importance of directive communication that officials use to instruct players, encourage obedience or deter a player response:

*... if you want something to happen, you've actually got to be directive, you've got to direct traffic, you've got to tell someone to do something, if you want something to happen, don't sort of give them some fluffy sentence which means they have to think about what they are doing, "Well maybe I should do this". [R9]*

Several interviewees referred to the value of non-verbal behaviour to communicate decisions through whistle use and hand signals alone. Interviewees from hockey and netball felt that due to the customs in their sport, a reliance on one-way communication can offer limited opportunities for officials to directly interact with players and proactively influence the atmosphere of the play.

### ***Situation monitoring***

The ability to detect players' intentions is one of the fundamental requirements for good officiating in ball sports (Dosseville et al, undated; Morris & Lewis, 2010). Interviewees consistently described an aspect of officiating referred to here as 'situation monitoring'. They referred to observing and interpreting players' emotional and behavioural displays in order to select appropriate officiating responses. This was explained as an official's ability to appraise players' emotional states, underlying performance motivations and intentions accurately in relation to game and other contextual factors. Many interviewees said the ability to monitor and interpret and *'deal with situations'* [R2, R4, R6, R7] is an essential communication competency for officials. Interviewees emphasised the importance of recognising changing patterns or trends in player



behaviour. This included escalation of anger in moods and changing attitudes (including towards the official) that often lead to conflict, or ‘boil over’ points:

*It's reading and understanding people's faces and expressions and being good at dealing with changes in others' body language [R4]*

*Have an understanding from the players' point of view about what they might be going through at the time, sometimes it is not always black and white, there might be something that has been building up for 10 or 15 minutes, that you may know a player has been copping a bit of stick from his opponent but it is about having a bit of empathy. [R7]*

Some interviewees said that some officials have a ‘feel for the game’ or ‘game sense’ [R1, R3, R4, R7] that involves a heightened awareness of game (‘score’, ‘time’, ‘competition context’, ‘tone’, ‘history’, ‘spectators’, ‘importance’) and player characteristics (‘reputation’, ‘personality’, ‘interactions’). This was described as a highly developed capacity in some officials to recognise others’ interpretations of decisions and game events, performance stakes, and attempts by players to exploit the rules, which help officials to more deeply comprehend factors that may influence and predict player responses and actions. An underlying awareness and appreciation for what players and teams are trying to achieve, as well as contextual game factors, was viewed as an asset to officiating:

*You need to recognise when someone is angry, recognise when someone has done something out of frustration, as opposed to some intentional act, someone who is on a bit of a downer because they aren't playing well, not that that is your problem as a referee at the end of the day, but you have to recognise those things and how to then communicate [R10]*

Interviewees said referees need to be able to monitor player body language and emotional responses, as if they were a barometer for game context. This heightened emotional intelligence in the officiating environment, as well as what other researchers refer to as a feel for ‘game context’ (Mascarenhas et al., 2005) emerged as an important and highly valued capability in sport officiating. The ability to read and interpret situations is important largely because it enables officials to communicate and adjudicate more carefully and sensitively to the needs of each situation (Nikbakhsh, Alam & Monazami, 2013). They can use different types of preventative communication techniques, and adapt their interpretation of rules and communication of decisions according to the requirements of the situation. Insightful situation monitoring leads naturally to a fourth important dimension sport officiating, skilled interaction with players according to the needs of the situation.

### ***Skilled interaction***

Interviewees identified three main aspects to interaction for officials: (a) adapting responses for encounters with players, (b) frequency and length of interaction in encounters with players, and (c) appropriateness (or suitability) of interaction with players, coaches and other officials. The interaction environment for officials was consistently characterised by its inherent time pressures, and changing requirement for different types of behaviour and communication:

*It's being able to have the ability which allows you to react to situations and talk with the player in the way that is appropriate and timely to that situation. [R9]*

*... that all takes a lot of skill about how you work with people, but under stress, no time frame to decide. So, it is like “How will I deal with this situation?” It is all very short fused,*

*and short timed decision making. What you're going to say and how you're going to say it. [R3]*

This finding is consistent with previous research that has made recommendations for a clearer understanding about when officials might use a particular interpersonal style, or approach to manage conflict (MacMahon & Plessner, 2008; Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Interviewees said that referees need to interact with players to explain decisions, discuss issues related to game procedure and to establish mutual understanding concerning expectations and limits to player behaviour; *'because they want to know where they are at and what they can or cannot do, and the good referee is telling them that all the time [P3]*. Interviewees said that the frequency of interactions with players, coaches and other officials can vary and largely reflect the game situation. Some interviewees felt frequency of interaction with players was predicted by context, game tenor, player and coach frustration (often as a result of reactions to decisions, or responses to poor individual and team performance) and use of certain communication strategies to facilitate game 'flow':

*If you watch an international [hockey] game it is very rare that they actually blow their whistle. They talk. They'll say "yeah, keep going" or "play on" or "go this way". Then obviously, now and again, they'll blow the whistle [R7]*

*A good way to diffuse a situation where the player might be getting a bit aggressive is a gentle smile, and a bit of 'I understand' attitude can go a long way and just being able to understand how to adjust your body language to deal with those different situations. [R4]*

One interviewee discussed a strategy where officials use periods of silence to improve the impact of subsequent interactions with players:

*When they want an outcome, a referee has to be much more directive and, at other times, when they don't have to say anything, 'shut up!' because we have a concept called 'less is best' where the less you say the more effective you are because when you actually say something, the players go "Oh he talked, I better do it". [R5]*

A consistent finding in organisational justice research is the 'voice effect', or tendency for people to judge procedures as more fair if they are given an opportunity to express their feelings, or "voice" (Shapiro & Brett, 2005). One interviewee identified a similar strategy that is used by officials in encounters with players during challenges or disputes about the merit of decisions:

*If you have a player being a nuisance, you give them the time, not too much time because they'll take an end out of you, but you give them the time and you've got to let them know you've heard what they said. You need to give them the feeling that they've been heard and that gives you a better chance of getting that player on your side. [P3]*

Appropriateness in interactions with players and coaches was another aspect of interaction skills for officials. Interviewees frequently stated that appropriateness in interaction situations with players is predicted by displays of *respectfulness* [R1-R5, R7, R9, R10] towards others. This aspect of skilled interaction was said to contribute positively to resolving interpersonal conflict and managing reactions to decisions. Some interviewees emphasised that officials should aim to proactively earn player respect rather than expect it, while others identified the importance for officials to create an atmosphere of respect to their authority at early stages of a sport contest:

*While the referee is not out there to win friends, it is important to engage with those players and build respect. For too long we just expected that you would get respect, now you have*

*to earn it, it is a two-way street. It is an important tool to keep them on your side, because ... they are more likely to understand if something does go completely wrong. [R2]*

*They [officials] need a high degree of acceptance in decisions and their authority from players, so they really get 'buy-in' from the players out on the field. How do they do that? They are communicating in a way that is acceptable to the players, they're able to explain their decisions well and they're able to manage the interactions with the captains and coaches. [P7]*

Interactions labelled by interviewees as inappropriate were characterised as '*antagonistic*' or where '*power difference*' develops between players and officials. These qualities in interaction with players were explained as having an adverse effect on the game:

*.... referees interacting in a poor way with the players that are frustrating them, then tension and animosity between the two teams builds-up, and the referee is clueless to this actually taking place and all of a sudden it ends up in a brawl and that had nothing to do with whether or not the referee was technically correct [P9]*

To conclude, interviewees conceptualise communication and player management for officials in several distinct but complementary ways. They consistently refer to the importance of *personal qualities* and personality traits in officials, *one-way communication* and behavioural displays used to efficiently signal and direct play in the different sports, *situation monitoring* and interpreting players' emotional responses in the context of the game, and the use of *skilled interaction* that is adaptable and appropriate to the situation.

**[Figure 1 here]**

The following sections discuss interviewee perceptions of the ways that officials improve in communication and player management, and the role that sport bodies play in this improvement process.

Four main themes emerged in discussions about the ways that officials improve communication and player management; (a) *experiences*, (b) *collaborative learning*, (c) *commitment to learning* and (d) *formal instruction*. Each theme is discussed in this section.

### *Experiences*

Interviewees tended to stress officiating, occupation and personal experiences as the most important contributors to improving communication and distinguished match officiating experience as the most crucial contributor to refining and developing communication. Other research has emphasised the benefit of officiating competitive game situations (compared to exhibition or friendly) and more experience is better (MacMahon et al., 2007), differentiated match experience as official, player and spectator and importance of bodily learning (our visual recognition is enhanced by previous bodily experience; Pizzera & Laborde, 2011) and transfer of skills from other sport roles and occupations and ‘deliberate experience’ and ‘deliberate practice’ in developing officiating expertise (Ollis et al., 2006). Interviewees referred to the benefits of experiences as a player, and experiences outside sport such as relevant occupation (examples given were *teaching* and *policing*), or other life experiences:

*Learning how to manage a game comes with experience. It may not even be experience on the field. It could be learning how to speak to people off the field. It is obviously important they learn to speak effectively with different people and deal with them. But it will best come from them doing more games and getting feedback and coaching on how to do it.*

[R4]

*Some of the best umpires are former players. The last thing you want as a player is to have an umpire that is always blowing the whistle and always challenging. They want to let the play go on and we find with players that they understand when players are getting frustrated, and they are often a bit more lenient so it can flow for a better game. [R7]*

Most interviewees acknowledged the importance of formal and informal feedback and reflection to maximise the learning value of experience. However, they also said that at community levels in their sport, there is a lack of educational resources, coaching and mentor time that restricts the opportunities for officials to participate in consistent, structured reflection on practice.

#### *Collaborative learning opportunities*

A second theme concerning influences on improving communication and player management was labelled *collaborative learning opportunities*. Interviewees repeatedly described the importance of environments where officials are able to gather and interact with one another in structured and unstructured forms of discussion about their performance. These types of group forums were viewed as vital for allowing officials to share and assimilate general experiences and provide a range of secondary benefits including a ‘*collegiate atmosphere*’ and enhanced degree of ‘*self-worth*’ as an official. The value of role models (such as experienced officials) for officiating development was frequently raised:

*It is important officials learn from other officials, “I’ve made it to this level” or “This is the way I work” and “This is how I am, or this is my style”. We all learn off other people. It is easy to look at a player and copy what they do, as well as for a coach. I think the*

*same thing can go for officials. If you can watch good officials, see how they control and manage a game, I think that could be passed on. [R8]*

This belief about communication improvement is consistent with ideas about how people with a common interest or engagement in a particular profession or practice can accelerate development of skills, attitudes and competencies through ‘situated learning’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998).

### *Commitment to learning*

Interviewees often raised individuals’ drive, or motivation, to advance their knowledge and skills and to engage in learning opportunities as an essential feature in improving communication and player management. A *commitment to learning* was viewed as a good predictor of the development of many officials:

*Every time you are out there umpiring, you’re trying to do things to stretch yourself a little bit and become a bit better. I think that is part of an individual motivation that I believe occurs in all sports, and all walks of life, where some people are ‘purposeful learners’. Those are the ones that progress quickly. Some other people go through the learning motions and don’t go anywhere [R6]*

Regular attendance at education and training sessions (including group skills training and camps) was seen as vital, but some interviewees felt that getting officials to attend is often challenging. They also talked about the importance of getting officials to ‘buy-in’ [R3, R5, R10] to their development. Some interviewees felt that officials who actively seek knowledge, techniques, and strategies from inside and outside sport were much more likely to improve their communication,



body language and conflict management.

*Formal instruction*

Interviewees discussed the importance of *formal instruction* in improving communication and player management. They said that knowledge about whistle use, proper signalling mechanics, game conventions and positioning are fundamental to official communication and taught early on in their education. However, limitations of formal instruction in relation to other important aspects of communication and player management were frequently discussed. One-way communication techniques and strategies such as whistle use and giving directions, and some aspects of impression management, were said to be easier to train relative to monitoring situations and interacting appropriately:

*That 'feel for the game' really only comes with experience. Not all the umpires have got it, and you will find that a lot of our top, really top umpires have that. They all have the ability to manage the game in the spirit of the game. It is just their feeling for what the players are trying to do and why they are reacting the way they are. It is really hard to pin point, but is such a great skill when you get it. That skill set is really difficult to teach in umpires through their regular training and accreditation. [R9]*

The limit of formal instruction in some of the softer player management skills was a recurring theme across most of the sports. This trend across the interviews led naturally to exploring the role of sport bodies in the improvement of communication and player management.

Interviewees mentioned many sport body initiatives associated with the development of player management including the provision of special seminars and training, the control of game

appointments to ensure that game difficulty matched the official's skill level, and providing less experienced officials with different coloured clothing to identify them. They also frequently mentioned the importance of mentoring programs, but just as frequently said that they struggled to find enough experienced officials to implement broad mentoring programs. They identified three main aspects to the role of sport bodies in assisting officials to become more effective communicators, (a) maintaining *teaching (or coaching and mentoring) standards for officials*, (b) facilitating *self-help opportunities*, and (c) *skills training in groups*.

#### *Teaching (or coaching and mentoring) standards for officials*

There was a general consensus among interviewees that skilled communication and player management is difficult to teach and that relevant qualities and skills are largely determined by an individual's disposition or personal make-up. Some interviewees believed that they didn't have the 'technical expertise' or 'formal knowledge' to structure and implement explicit player management training. Representatives of one sport said they developed training material that outlines officiating types to help officials become more self-aware of using a particular type to certain game situations. Other interviewees stressed the importance of improving the match day environment for officials, including increased education of players, spectators, team coaches and influential others about the role and value of match officials.

In several sports it is a current priority, or management agenda, to increase both the quantity and quality of qualified officiating coaches. Some interviewees emphasised the importance of improving the ability of referee coaches to improve referees' game interactions, communication skills and body language. A shift from *assessment and observation* of officials to a *coaching* paradigm was viewed as a more recent and developing philosophy about the support and training

culture of officials:

*It is about having a whole coaching philosophy around referee coaching that we are working on right across the system. Referees have just been traditionally observed and relayed feedback. The focus is now on the quality of coaching, the knowledge, and abilities of coaches that will, to a great extent, predict the quality of the refereeing outcomes out there on the field. [R1]*

Mentorship was seen to provide officials with important technical and social support to help officials become better at managing or re-directing frustration and resistance from players and coaches:

*Mentoring has a big impact. I think the fact that someone knows you are there in case they need you. With a new umpire it is always the fact that sometimes something untoward might happen and because they haven't the experience to handle it, that throws them for the rest of the game. [R5]*

Representatives of a number of sport bodies acknowledge the intrinsic value of mentors for officials and said they had begun to implement mentoring programs. However, they find challenges in providing mentors to officials regularly and establishing specific standards in how these individuals are trained.

#### *Self-help opportunities*

Several interviewees said that self-directed learning is an important factor for officials to improve their communication and a recognised role for sport bodies is to facilitate self-help opportunities. Self-help opportunities were said to include providing officials with information about training

and expertise outside sport on topics such as body language and interpersonal conflict. Some said they had established or were developing online learning modules in conflict management and body language to assist officials.

Interviewees explained that coaches can initially assist officials in this process, however it was better to promote self-review strategies that officials can initiate themselves independently. This included game management goals and plans that are later reviewed post-match, and developed for subsequent game appointments. These review and planning exercises were mostly carried out by upper level officials, as it was viewed difficult to engage more novice officials in such processes:

*They have to self-review and plan for their games, just as if a coach or someone might do. It is essential piece to improve. Some will sit down with a referee coach and go through things like how their calls affected the game and how well they communicated with the players. They can still get feedback, but they have to take it on themselves at some point. Partly because we want them to take ownership of the process, and the fact that we don't have enough resources [coaches] at the moment to track every single official at some levels*  
[R8]

Sport bodies said that part of their role to help officials become better at communication and player management was to direct them to seek outside knowledge and skills, and promote self-initiated review and game analysis.

#### *Skills training in groups*

Many interviewees said they can arrange *skills training in groups* to help officials improve in communication and player management. Some interviewees said they schedule multi-day camps,

one-day seminars, sometimes just prior to important tournaments. Such forums were thought to be valuable because they enable officials to interact with upper level (or elite) officials, referee coaches and other experts about officiating performance. Some felt they could provide officials with more integrated forms of education that combine general and more specialised officiating skills such as communication and player management:

*I would like to see more regular content education like how to better manage the game delivered in line with the physical training. In other words, where shorter periods of education can happen, dove tailed with the physical education, rather than you've got to come this particular one day. I don't know how it would work, logistically, but I can see the value in combining both of those aspects on a more regular basis for referees. [R7]*

Some interviewees said they use team coaches and video analysts to teach officials about game tactics and strategies to help officials better understand what players are trying to achieve in games and their performance roles as assigned by team or club coaches. This was viewed as essential higher-order awareness about the game that helps officials to better predict and anticipate player and team performance. At the highest levels in rugby union and rugby league, psychological skills training in coping and arousal regulation, as well as using actors in role play simulations were viewed as effective types of skills training used to assist and refine officials' communication and player management.

## **Conclusions**

This paper expands understanding of communication and player management in officiating and challenges sports to re-examine some of their assumptions about the development of skilled officiating communication. It highlights a mismatch between the communication skills perceived

to be important and the training that is currently provided to officials. Sport bodies, while recognising the importance of situation monitoring and skilled interaction, continue to focus their communication training and development on one-way communication skills such as decision communication (whistle use and signalling) and impression management. The findings here support Burleson's (2007) general assertions about the lack of understanding about the best ways to teach interactive communication skills, and more specifically Mascarenhas et al. (2005) and MacMahon and Plessner's (2008) claim that sports find interactive communication skills difficult to train in officials. Many similarities were found across sports in their conceptualisation of officiating communication, and practice and training issues. Thus the findings support the ASC approach to training, and further research and interventions in officiating communication and player management, across sports.

This research questions the dominance of transmission models of communication by highlighting the importance of higher-order communication competencies and capacities (reading and interpreting player cues; skilled and contextual interaction) necessary to officiating. The findings supports constructivist and dialogic conceptualisations of communication as more useful ways of understanding the richness of officiating practice. While one main purpose of this study was to explore commonalities in communication across sports codes, the findings also highlight other cultural influences on social and interactive norms in sport, including gender, sport environment, and cultural setting. Commonalities have been revealed across sports, but numerous differences remain to be explored.

Future research should aim to investigate the perceptions of other 'stakeholders' within the sport community (i.e., players, coaches, officials). Player perspectives of interactions with officials are

clearly important but remain largely unexplored, and the perspective of officials themselves, concerning the development of situation monitoring and interaction skills, need to be examined. What development needs do officials perceive? What types of training and experiences would they be willing to participate in? Further understanding about how officials view the training resources they receive and motivational mechanisms around learning in this area would be valuable information to governing sport bodies interested in the training (and improvement) requirements of officials in communication.

### *Practical implications*

Skilled communication is often separated from general officiating skills (especially decision-making) in training. The research here supports holistic approaches to the development pathways of sport officials that places an increased emphasis and integration of communication. As Rollnick et al. (2002) suggested integrating clinical and communication skills in healthcare. This study supports linking communication with other performance elements of officiating, including physical training and decision making (or law application). For example, scenario training exercises should require officials to go beyond forming a judgement about an incident to practising ways they would communicate and enact their decision (Simmons & Cunningham, 2013). Craig (2005) emphasises communication as a *practice*, or set of coherent activities that people engage in and are meaningful in a particular way. Consistent reflection on practice can help officials to develop more sophisticated capacities for reflexivity, and thus learn from match experience in conscious ways.

Training for skilled communication in sport officials is currently not well understood (Simmons & Cunningham, 2013). This research highlights the importance of the capacity to observe and

interpret players' emotional and behavioural responses in relation to game and other contextual factors. *Person perception* (or the way we perceive, organize, and integrate social information to form coherent situated impressions of others) is crucial for police officers to make accurate interactional and person judgements in interpersonal encounters with members of the public (Ainsworth, 2002). Players can frequently attempt to create uncertainty in officials' decisions by undermining their confidence and by manipulating interactions with officials (Simmons, 2006). We recommend first that officials be told explicitly about players' preferences and likely motivations in interactions, in so far as we know them. To date players are the unexplored and heterogeneous 'other' in officials' interactions. Research is needed to better understand the diversity of player expectations and behaviours in interactions.

It remains to be formally tested, but training that allows officials to focus and reflect on the unspoken aspects of game interactions (Burlison, 2007; Simmons & Cunningham, 2013) should help officials to interpret players and communicate more sensitively to the requirements of situations. Such training could make use of new technologies such as 'referee cameras' that capture audio and video images in combination with video elicitation techniques (e.g., Henry & Fetters, 2010) where officials are guided to directly discuss less visible or unspoken aspects of interaction and context. Practice in making non-verbal judgements can improve people's accuracy, especially for bodily and affect cues (Puccinelli et al., 2013) and signs of deception (Morris & Lewis, 2010).

Finally, formally and informally, many communities of officials exist across sports. Sports can help officials to develop, maintain and improve standards of communication by facilitating exchange and reflection on related personal and match experience. This paper has highlighted limits of transmission as a way of understanding officiating interactions, sports should recognise



also that transmission has limited value for developing skilled interactors.

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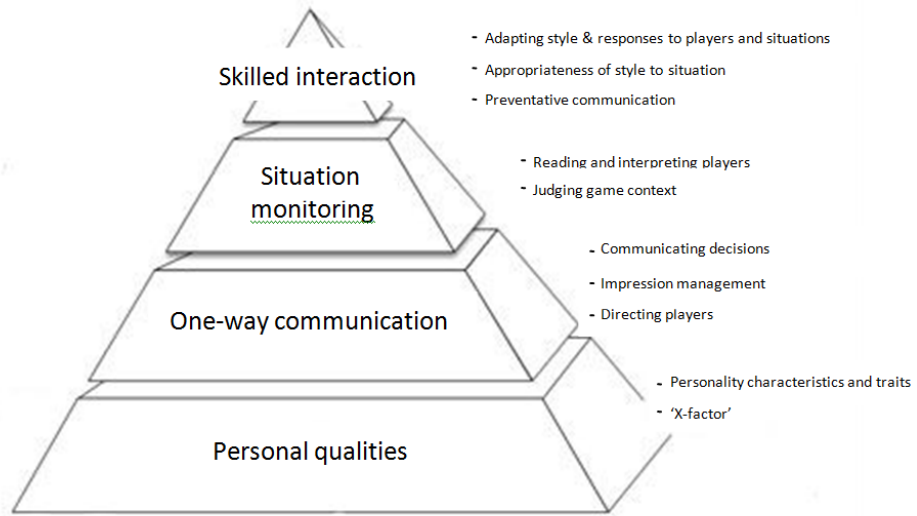
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**Table 1:** Summary of Concepts and Sub-concepts of Communication and Player Management in Sport Officials

<b>Concepts (meaning units)</b>	<b>Sub-concepts (meaning units)</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
<i>Personal qualities</i> (172)	Positive attributes and traits (87)	All R1-R11
	Negative attributes and traits (71)	All R1-R11
	'X-factor' (14)	R2, R3, R6, R7, R8
<i>One-way communication</i> (109)	Display tools (37)	R1-R11
	Impression management (24)	R2, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R11
	Decision communication (31)	R1-R11
	Directive communication (17)	R1, R2, R5, R6, R8, R9
<i>Situation monitoring</i> (79)	Observation skills (28)	R1, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R10
	Interpretive skills (21)	R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8
	Judging game context (17)	R2, R3, R6, R7, R8, R10
<i>Skilled interaction</i> (61)	Adaptability (27)	R1, R3, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10
	Frequency (13)	R4, R7, R8, R11
	Preventative communication (13)	R4, R5, R7, R8, R9, R11
	Appropriateness (21)	R1-R5, R7, R9, R10, R11



**Figure 1:** Conceptualising communication and player management in sport officiating