

TARGETED ADVICE TO IMPROVE YOUR  
COMMUNICATION WITH PLAYERS

# EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR REFEREES



written by ***Paul Spacey***

USSF & FA Referee, Private Soccer Coach, ex Semi-Pro Player

# INTRODUCTION

*"Communication is about being effective, not always about being proper." – Bo Bennett*

**Welcome fellow referee.**

**Thank you for making the decision to improve your communication as a referee. If you implement the content of this book, you WILL become a more effective referee, I guarantee that.**

This book is not about the Laws of the Game (of which there are 17, plus the extra unpublished Law 18, known as common sense). The focus of the content of this book, as the title suggests, is **effective communication**, what I like to refer to as 'Law 19'.

If you are interested in learning more about the Laws of the Game and their practical application, read either ['The Art of Refereeing'](#) (Robert Evans & Edward Bellion) or ['Preventive Officiating'](#) (Randy Vogt).

Will the book help if you are a professional referee? Probably not, but read on and find out, there may still be a few things that help you! This book is mainly intended for referees outside of the minority of professionals.

Try to remember that communication is a two-way process; sending **and** receiving information is an important aspect of competitive sports and effective use of this process will make things much easier for you as a referee. Do not just be a sender.

I have intentionally kept the book relatively brief (16 pages) and not included waffling or dull content as 'fillers' like many books seem to. All of the advice and information is directly targeted at improving your communication.

*This book is dedicated to my Grandad, Peter Spacey, and William (Bill) Atkinson, both of whom are sadly no longer with us. My Grandad was simply the kindest man you could wish to meet. I never saw him play but he is often described as a 'legend' by those who did. To me, he is even more than that. Bill was always a source of great advice and had a hugely positive influence on my early refereeing development. Thank you, Bill. Thanks finally to my Dad (also called Peter); he is the man responsible for most of my communication skills.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Paul Spacey and I come from a family of soccer players.

My grandfather was a professional and my father was a semi-professional so I began playing the game at a young age (as soon as I could walk actually).

I played for Stoke City (now in the English Premier League) as a teenager but had a couple of injuries and ended up missing out on becoming a pro. However, I did still enjoy a successful 15 year semi-professional career at a very good level of soccer.

I stopped playing competitively in January 2013 (although I still play recreationally) before moving from England to California where I am now dividing my time between refereeing and private coaching.

I have been a qualified US Soccer and English FA Referee for 4 years so I have a fairly unique perspective on the game having been involved as a **player, coach and referee** (not too many people can say that!)

My goal is to give you the advice and tools you need to improve your communication with players, improve your understanding and relationship with them and ultimately become a more effective referee.

Donations – This eBook is FREE to download. To make a donation, [click here to donate](#).

What are you waiting for? Let's get started!

Paul

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# CONTENTS

(click the links to go straight to each page)

<b>PRE-GAME PLEASANTRIES</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<a href="#">Smile</a> .....	5
<a href="#">Be friendly</a> .....	5
<b>ESTABLISH A RAPPORT</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<a href="#">Be genuine</a> .....	6
<a href="#">Work with players</a> .....	6
<b>LOSE YOUR EGO</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<a href="#">You are not God</a> .....	7
<a href="#">Help the players</a> .....	7
<a href="#">Keep the game flowing</a> .....	7
<b>ADMIT YOUR MISTAKES</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<a href="#">Be selective</a> .....	8
<a href="#">Don't be antagonistic</a> .....	8
<b>KEEP TALKING</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<a href="#">Explain when possible</a> .....	9
<b>BE APPROACHABLE</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<a href="#">Don't be dismissive</a> .....	10
<b>COMMUNICATE WITH PLAYERS 'ON THEIR LEVEL'</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<a href="#">Talk to players as 'equals'</a> .....	11
<b>DON'T WORRY ABOUT BAD GAMES</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<a href="#">Make time for players</a> .....	12
<b>BODY LANGUAGE &amp; TONE</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<a href="#">Be confident and assured</a> .....	13
<a href="#">Tone – firm but friendly</a> .....	13
<b>YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A HATE FIGURE</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<a href="#">Adopt a communicative approach</a> .....	14
<b>MAN MANAGEMENT</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<a href="#">Preventive measures</a> .....	15
<b>PERFECT YOUR COMMUNICATION</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<a href="#">Contact Paul</a> .....	16

# PRE-GAME PLEASANTRIES

## **Smile**

Every time I turn up to officiate, regardless of whether it is just a recreational small-sided game or high school/university fixture with lots of people watching, I **always** arrive with a smile on my face. That is largely because I genuinely enjoy being a referee.

You should always turn up with a smile on your face and a positive attitude, even if you've had a bad day and don't feel too positive; being happy and positive is actually a choice we can make. Make that choice.

## **Be Friendly**

Find the team manager or club representative and introduce yourself. Act confident, sound confident but most of all be friendly and engage in some conversation. Talk about anything; the weather, the traffic, just be friendly.

Too many times I have seen a referee turn up to games, march up to the nearest club representative and demand to know where the changing rooms are, sounding like a strict school head teacher. Immediately, players and club officials are thinking to themselves and saying to each other, "Here we go. We've got a right one today." You are already up against it before even getting changed!

It makes such a huge difference to walk onto the field with the respect of the players, as opposed to walking on with players staring at you like you're the enemy. Do your best to get off on the right foot with players and team officials; it will work in your favour during the game.

## **ESTABLISH A RAPPORT**

Ensure you establish a rapport with team captains before kickoff. You don't need to be a comedian but if there is something witty or funny you can think of to say, even if the atmosphere is tense, go ahead and say it. It might just raise a smile and relax everyone.

When I was playing, I remember one game when I approached the centre circle before kick off to shake hands with the officials and opposing captain. The referee said to me, "Paul, what on earth did you do to your hair?" (I had dyed it peroxide blonde) I laughed and mumbled something along the lines of "It suits me doesn't it!" There it was. Rapport successfully established and I was automatically programmed to forgive him for failing to call an early penalty (he probably made the right decision anyway to be fair as it was a 50/50).

### **Be genuine**

You don't need to give captains high fives before doing the coin toss but if you can come across as a genuine human being, as opposed to a robot following strict protocol, players will be more inclined to cut you some slack when the game begins, even if you make a poor decision.

### **Work with players, not against them**

We should be trying to work with players, coaches and team officials, not against them. Communication is absolutely vital and it is important to remember that from the outset of any game. You don't need to be their friend but you can certainly be their equal and not attempt to be their master.

The large majority of players, when treated with respect, will respond positively to you. The danger of the opposite approach (it is beyond me why some referees approach the game this way but unfortunately they do) is that you very quickly form enemies. When any referee forms enemies, controlling that particular game (and future games) is made more difficult. Your goal should be to make your job as easy as possible and you can do this by communicating your way to a mutual respect and understanding with the players, coaches and team officials you come into contact with.

# LOSE YOUR EGO

The game is not about you, it is about the players. Leave your ego in the car; don't even think about taking it onto the field with you.

## **You are not God**

I attended a referees' training course once where the instructor (a respected ex-FIFA referee) opened with the words, "When you step onto that field, you are god." For me, that typified the approach many referees take to the game and if we are being taught that in the referee programs, it is no wonder we have problems when we step onto the field and realise we are dealing with players, not servants.

Far too many referees walk onto the field with an arrogance, genuinely believing they are the most important person there. I've seen this happen so many times and it immediately creates a negative atmosphere. If you act this way, invariably you will find it difficult to be accepted and win the respect of the players.

## **Help the players**

If you are an experienced referee taking charge of less experienced players, don't take an officious 'I know better than you' attitude. Use your common sense and communicate with players; consider explaining decisions more thoroughly than you normally would and take their ability into account when making decisions. In my opinion, as well as being a referee, you have a moral duty to help the players understand the game and the laws better.

When you officiate any match, you should see yourself as the players' equal. Nothing more; nothing less. In many ways you are actually working as a 'team'. If you do your job properly and communicate effectively with the players, they will generally respond positively and the on-field teamwork will result in harmony, making things easier for everyone.

## **Keep the game flowing**

Effective communication (and good refereeing in general) enhances the flow of the game which makes your job easier. Poor communication on the other hand often disrupts the flow of the game, making things more difficult for everyone involved, especially you!

## **ADMIT YOUR MISTAKES (sometimes)**

### **Be selective**

Use your common sense and don't always admit mistakes obviously, especially when you have got away with a poor decision without anyone actually noticing (this happens quite often).

If you make a decision and play restarts then you realise it was the wrong decision, don't be afraid to have a quick word in the players' ear next time they run past. Something along the lines of, "Sorry number eight, that was probably a foul, I missed it as I was unsighted."

Most referees have no idea how much players appreciate this. The referee can't turn back time but the player will invariably be content with your admission and won't bother hassling you over the decision.

### **Don't be antagonistic**

Too many referees seem unable to admit any kind of error and instead go on the offensive when questioned, quickly brandishing cards or warning players of a potential caution if they say another word. This isn't the approach I take and I do not believe it is the approach you should take either. In my opinion, it is not effective and only makes your job harder.

I was officiating an exhibition match for Santa Monica Sporting recently and failed to call a push which I realised upon reflection, ten seconds later, was most likely a foul. I had a quick word with the player at the next stoppage in play and apologised for missing it. His response was positive, "Oh don't even worry about it, you haven't missed much so far, it's cool."

Had I not said anything, it might not have mattered anyway and I'm not suggesting you should apologise every single time you make a mistake. However, if you can apologise briefly without coming across as 'weak', go ahead and the player will very likely respond positively.



## KEEP TALKING

It is the number one thing that I receive praise for from players and club officials. I don't say that to blow my own trumpet, I just want to encourage you to do the same thing and talk more during the game.

### **Explain when possible**

Instead of simply saying "go away" the next time a player questions a foul, if the speed of the game and situation allows it, give a quick explanation along the lines of, "Yes you won the ball number four but you went through the back of his leg first." This kind of thing goes a long way with players and if you say it with confidence and a smile, 99% of players will nod in agreement and get on with the game.

I don't believe you can ever have the problem of talking 'too much' when officiating matches. Sure, don't attempt to strike up conversation during games about something unrelated to the match itself; players are not there to have a chat and cup of tea. However, talking a lot is much better than not talking enough.

I was refereeing a Sunday league game a couple of years ago and found myself talking a lot to the players and using my normal communicative style. The match was going very smoothly when one player was angered by a decision and commented as he ran past, "We don't need a f\*\*\*ing running commentary ref." Clearly I could have dismissed him for foul and abusive language but I turned the situation into a positive one by replying, "Really, I thought I was doing a great John Motson (well known soccer commentator) impression." The player suddenly laughed and actually ran back to me to apologise for his language. I considered the fact that I had potentially been talking too much but at the end of the game a member of the other team came up to me and said, "Thanks ref, great game. We love you talking by the way, we don't often get that with refs and the players appreciate it as we always know what is going on."

It is important to apply the laws correctly; however among referees there is often an element of focusing too much on administering the Laws of the Game instead of managing the players. If players are managed effectively and you communicate with them, the application of the laws becomes slightly less important because you have less incidents and problems to deal with.

## **BE APPROACHABLE**

Being approachable is a great trait for referees to have. I am always approachable on the field and make a point of being so. Players like this and because many referees are not approachable in their nature, it works in your favour when you buck the general trend.

This does not mean you have to act like a counsellor and explain every single decision in detail. It does mean that you should allow players to talk to you and approach you (providing they do not do so aggressively) without waving them away like little children.

### **Don't be dismissive**

I was watching a game this summer and one of the players approached the referee for failing to call a foul (which clearly should have been given). "That was a foul ref," he said. The referee responded by flicking both of his hands at the player to wave him away, without even uttering a word. The player got agitated and shouted, "don't wave me away," to which the referee did exactly the same thing whilst actually looking the other way! It was completely dismissive and uncalled for. I just shook my head in disbelief.

It was a fairly easy situation to deal with in my opinion; quickly take a few seconds to explain to the player that you didn't consider it was a foul. "He got the ball as far as I could see; let's get on with the game." The player still won't thank you for missing the foul but he is much less likely to get agitated and almost certainly won't dwell on the situation. Subconsciously, he will be grateful that you quickly explained your viewpoint instead of waving him away.

Of course, there are occasionally times when you are dealing with players who won't respond well to any kind of communication. You can attempt to solicit support from the team captains but if this does not work, you will need to invoke the Laws of the Game to their fullest as some players really just do not listen. I believe those kind of players are a minority though and most of the time, effective communication can solve most problems before they escalate.

Be accessible and receptive to players as much as possible without allowing the flow of the game to be disrupted by a barrage of comments.

## **COMMUNICATE WITH PLAYERS ‘ON THEIR LEVEL’**

You don't need to be dictatorial or condescending (many referees unfortunately are), otherwise you will not get respect from players, trust me. No player wants to be spoken to like a child and there is absolutely no need for you to use that kind of approach or tone.

We, as referees, are not on the field to be anyone's best friend or win popularity contests; however, it is worth remembering that we are not there to make enemies either so I don't see any reason why you can't have the odd joke with players and smile throughout the game.

I believe it helps if you have played the game. I'm not saying ex-players make better refs; many top referees have not played the game at any kind of decent level. I just feel that if you have experienced the game as a player first of all, you can relate to players better when you begin officiating. I have experienced first-hand the things about referees that anger players (arrogance, condescending attitude, refusal to talk to them) and therefore I have been able to (for the most part) ensure those issues have not become a part of my refereeing style.

### **Talk to players as equals**

If you can establish a good rapport with players and talk to them as 'equals' rather than talking down to them, word will get around quickly enough and you will begin to establish a positive reputation which will make things easier for you.

I played in a semi-professional match some years ago and experienced one of the best referees I have come across in terms of communication. He did many of the things I talk about in this book, including constantly communicating with players instead of being dictatorial and he was very approachable. The game went smoothly, he had the respect of the players and I am sure he enjoyed it as he was smiling the whole time! I was so impressed that I wrote a letter after the game to the Football Association, complimenting the referee on his performance.

I watched an English Premier League game recently and saw this same referee sprinting up and down the line, operating as an assistant referee. I wasn't surprised to see him in the top flight of one of the world's best leagues and I felt that his being there supported the effective communication that I try to personally maintain when refereeing. Clearly it is an important factor in helping you to progress as a referee.

## **DON'T WORRY ABOUT BAD GAMES**

We all make mistakes and have bad games, the trick is to stay calm and don't lose any sleep over it.

I had a poor game recently and got a number of decisions wrong. I knew it and expected a negative response after the game. Nothing much was said although I heard someone shout something about "having a shocker" which was fair comment I thought. I certainly didn't try to go after the player and inflame the situation by dishing out after-match cards unnecessarily.

What happened later that night surprised me. I got a text message from the team official which basically said, "Hey Paul, it's Adam. Don't worry about the game, you are allowed a bad one every now and then." In all honesty, I wasn't 'worried' about it anyway. Once the game is over, that's it. I always analyze my performance straight after the match and think about correcting any obvious errors, then move on and don't dwell on it.

The fact that Adam went out of his way to find out my number and contact me was a nice gesture. His team had lost and so he had every right to be made. Instead, he was telling me it didn't matter, don't worry. Good advice for any referee. Don't worry, get over it.

### **Make time for players**

Anytime things don't go well and you have a poor game, don't react to any childish comments afterwards. Be professional, be approachable at the final whistle and take a couple of minutes to discuss any incidents with players if they come looking for answers (providing they are prepared to be reasonable and polite). You can often diffuse a situation by taking the time to show your human side and give an explanation of how you saw things. Again players do appreciate this, even when they are heated and angry. In my opinion, unless there is genuine hostility from players, communication is a better approach than surrounding yourself with your Assistants and marching off the field whilst waving players away furiously.

When your next game comes around, smile, adopt a positive attitude and focus on communicating effectively again. You'll soon have things back under control.

## **BODY LANGUAGE & TONE**

Body language is the silent communication tool but is extremely important. Studies have suggested that we communicate roughly 55% through body language, 38% through the tone of our voice and 7% through what we actually say.

Good communication skills (including the effective use of body language) influence player perceptions of fairness and correctness, there is no doubt about that. With this in mind, it is vital that you work on your body language and tone, as well as what you actually say.

### **Be confident and assured**

Your body language needs to be confident and assured. It is a natural and fluent process (or at least it should be) and you need to change it to suit the situation you find yourself in; one thing you should not do is show off or exaggerate using body language. There is no need for over the top signals or (as mentioned earlier) waving and flicking players away in a dismissive, officious manner. Be yourself, remain calm and show authority.

If tension is mounting during a game, it is especially important that your movements and gestures (body language) are slow and deliberate. Emotion is a natural part of being a referee but you must not allow yourself to get carried away and become erratic with your gestures and body language.

Body language and reaction of players is something you also need to consider. Do not dismiss out of hand an appeal by members of a team for a decision in their favour. Very often, you can use the body language of players to help you make a decision which is tough to call – players are sometimes more honest than you think and will quite often back away from a throw-in if it touched them last, allowing you to give the decision to the other team even though it was impossible to tell who touched it last.

### **Tone – firm but friendly**

Your tone should be firm but friendly. Players are not children (unless you are actually officiating juniors) and they do not appreciate being spoken to as though they are. There is never any call to scream or shout at players. Once you lose your calmness, you lose control. Be firm, be calm and back up your tone with confident, assured body language.

## YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A HATE FIGURE

I personally believe that you can be a successful referee and still be a well liked member of the sporting community. You don't have to be the stereotypical hate figure that most people perceive referees to be. "Don't be a referee unless you are comfortable being disliked by everyone," I was told by many people. I have not found this to be the case so far.

Whilst officiating in England during my 2<sup>nd</sup> season after qualifying, one team official approached me after the game and said, "Thanks ref, you're the best we've had all season." It was a nice compliment but I didn't let it affect my ego. When another half dozen teams said the same thing during the season, I wondered whether it was my communication and refereeing style that was winning me compliments. I don't know the Laws of the Game better than other referees so I felt it had to be my communicative style that was working.

My belief in this communicative approach was completely vindicated this year after moving to Los Angeles, California. Following the first 11-a-side game I officiated a couple of weeks after arriving, both team captains approached me and said I was the best referee they have had since Alex Gorin (Alex by the way is a former Russian Premier League referee who is well known in Southern California).

It might be because I am 'the English ref' (the accent does help I'm sure), it might be because the other referees make me look good (I don't think that is the case at all) or it might actually be because my communicative style works. Naturally, I think it is the latter.

Fast forward ten months and the same thing has been said by over a dozen teams, many from different leagues. I believe they appreciate my honesty, my interpretation of the laws, my ability to relate to them and understand where they are coming from but most of all my ongoing communication which is the focal point of my refereeing style.

I know that the above paragraphs may appear like I'm giving myself a huge pat on the back and blowing more trumpets than a brass band, however my intention is simply to point out that the communicative style of refereeing I use is clearly working and is obviously popular among players, team officials and referee assignors (I was selected to referee the Championship game in the SMASL this year) so it is something that you should consider adopting if you don't already use this type of communicative style.

## MAN MANAGEMENT

You don't always have to rely solely on the Laws of the Game to deal with problem players or officials from teams. Your people skills are just as important, if not more so, than simply applying the laws strictly.

I often have situations arise whereby I can see a player is beginning to lose his cool; if not dealt with, most likely the player will end up committing a serious foul or at the very least begin to cause unnecessary tension among other players. I invariably deal with this kind of player by having a brief word at the next stoppage in play. I will say something like, "Number six; take it easy. Don't end up losing your temper, come on just relax."

The simple act of speaking to the player about his temper is usually enough for him to recognise that he is in danger of overstepping the mark and potentially letting his team down. Most of the time you will find that the player responds positively; if he doesn't, then you have done your job as an effective communicator and given him fair warning. Use the Laws of the Game and your discretion to deal with him as necessary, depending on what offence he commits.

You can also have a quick word with the team captain. "Skipper, have a word with your number six please, he is losing his temper and treading a very fine line." Captains generally relish the responsibility they have and will usually respond by talking to the player. This will invariably help the situation but if it does not, again you have communicated effectively and the team captain will recognise that his player has no defence should he step out of line and be punished accordingly.

This approach won't usually work if a player has 'lost it'. It is your job to intervene and speak to the player before he reaches that stage, if possible. Most of the time, if you use your common sense and experience, you can spot players before they get to the 'out of control' stage and communicate with them to manage their ego. I've given two red cards in the past 20 or so games I have officiated. This isn't because I am soft or lenient, far from it; it is because I man manage players effectively through communication and rarely have situations arise that require an instant dismissal. Both red cards were for instinctive 'violent conduct' reactions in games where there were previously no problems. If you finish any game with 22 players on the field, no injuries and few complaints; consider it a good day at the office.

# PERFECT YOUR COMMUNICATION

**Well done, you've reached the end (well, the start actually) of this 'Effective Communication For Referees' eBook. This is just the beginning of your journey to improve your communication skills and ultimately become a more efficient, effective referee.**

Try to implement some of the concepts I have highlighted during your next game. Watch and listen to player reactions. You can judge whether implementation of the concepts makes things easier for you or not. Of course, I am convinced that if you implement the concepts correctly and with enthusiasm, your job as a referee will not only get easier but will also become much more enjoyable.

As humans, we all have an inbuilt desire which makes us want to be respected and appreciated and so when regular abuse (which is what many referees are used to) is replaced by compliments and appreciation among players, it is a good feeling.

**Talk to your fellow referees and encourage them to consider reading this eBook. It would be great to know that it has helped just one person but if it can help many then I will be very satisfied.**

## **Donations**

This eBook is completely free to download, as you already know. There is an option for a 'donation' if you feel that the program has really helped you to improve your communication as a referee. If you would like to make a donation, no matter how small, please visit my website [www.paulspacey.com](http://www.paulspacey.com) or [click here to donate](#).

Keep up the good work and remember you can contact me anytime for help or advice.

Your fellow referee

Paul

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