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## **Good Boss—Good Umpire**

First of a two-part article about decision making

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During tough times, people come to realize how a good boss is one who can make a quick decision, under pressure, without partisanship, and in the face of extreme unpopularity. Perhaps, no one does all those things more often than an umpire does.

USA Today management reporter Del Jones interviewed Randy Marsh, a long-time major league umpire who has some words of wisdom for a decision-making boss. The article got me thinking about my fifteen hundred plus games as an umpire—and of course—decision making.

**“Close calls” are not as difficult as unexpected calls.** Half the crowd yelling “great call” and the other half, “that’s terrible Blue” is the “bang-bang” play with the runner and the ball arriving at a base at the same time. These are “close calls” but not as difficult as the unexpected call such as having no outs, a runner on base, and a batter with a two-strike count duck a third pitch when the ball touches the bat, and is immediately caught by the catcher. In an instance, the plate umpire must realize the unexpected is a foul tip; strike three, batter is out and the runner can advance, but with jeopardy.



When someone in your organization does something unexpected, like an otherwise out of character sexist remark or a failure to perform some critical function, it can make for some difficult decision making. The Randy Marsh decision-making skill is to understand the unexpected, make judgments as to the ramifications of the act and then, take action. Understanding and making good judgments come before acting.

**Preparation is the backbone of quick decisions.** Ball 4 hits the lip of the plate, and bounds over the umpire’s head to find the only hole in the fence. The umpire shouts “Dead ball, batter-runner proceed to first base without jeopardy.” The coach is already yelling, “Come-on Blue, the award is second, not first.” With the added dig, “Get you head in the game!” Now, the umpire has two “on the spot” decisions to make. The first is to reaffirm the call, and the second is to maintain control of the game/coach. The umpire briefly describes the applicable rules of play and for his violation of behavior protocols, the umpire warns the coach.

In a baseball game or in the world of work, having the knowledge ahead of the time to make a decision is critical. An umpire and the boss must prepare for action and know the rules of the game. A customer is demanding an exception and making a big scene. You are the boss and find yourself in the center of the action. Preparation is the key here; you must know how to apply your organization rules to the situation and you must know the informal rules of acceptable customer behavior before you can take action. The Randy Marsh decision-making skill is preparation.

**Not in the rules, then use fair play and common sense.** The umpire is doing a 10-year-old game and one team is just dominating in every aspect of play, the score, “a whole lot to nothing.” The team on the losing end had long ago lost interest in the game and parent frustration is about to boil over. The umpire decides to widen the strike zone and encourage the dominating team coach to advance runners only by force. Well, believe me, there are no written rules for expanding the zone nor is there for asking a coach to stop players from advancing during play. Well then, why make a decision to widen the zone and encourage players to stop playing the game? The answer goes back to the purpose and values of the game, the unwritten “code” of baseball. Baseball is a game where all participants respect the abilities and interests of opponents during play. When one team dominates and by normal play has the potential to humiliate another, it serves the greater cause of the game to level the playing field. From tiny T-baller’s to the highest paid major league player, the “code” dictates behavior on the field and even modifies the official rules of play.

It seems that often we find ourselves caught between two rights and in choosing one, the other loses (an

ethical dilemma). A good friend of mine is an Executive Recruiter and he tells the story of consulting with a committee about two candidates for a job. The reality is that both were qualified and the committee was struggling to make a decision. It happened that my friend knew one of the candidates, a former neighbor. The relationship had absolutely nothing to do with the job, but the committee was struggling and my friend knew he could sway the decision. In this case, fair play and common sense told my friend to say nothing—a wise decision—and one that complies with the unwritten “code” of Executive Recruiters. It happened that his former neighbor did get the job, but his decision to say nothing made sure that the decision was indeed that of the committee and removed any possibility of impropriety. The Randy Marsh decision-making skill is use fair play and common sense.

More on Randy Marsh’s words of wisdom and decision making in the August Policy perspectives.

Note to reader—the Del Jones article appeared in the Monday, October 20, 2008 edition of USA Today. The article was in the Money section, Executive Suite: Advice from the top, page 4B. The title of the article is “Being a good boss is like being a good umpire”.

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