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Good Boss—Good Umpire

Second 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.

In Part One of this two-part article, the Rudy Marsh decision making suggestions were:

- “Close calls” are not as difficult as unexpected calls.
- Preparation is the backbone of quick decisions.
- Not in the rules? then use fair play and common sense.

I continue now with some Randy Marsh **words of wisdom** for a decision-making boss.

Go with your gut. When you can, ask your crew. The runner being waived home is at full speed and the throw from the left fielder is properly cut, the relay is on the way. The catcher is in front of the plate, I am a few feet beyond him and into the field of play and the runner has no idea a play is being made on his effort. Smack, the catcher secures the ball and lunges toward the runner who at this point looks more like a gymnast dismounting his apparatus. Did the swipe tag meet the mark? I declare the runner out and when play stops the player and manager are in my face. I was on my own here and I knew it. In baseball, you do not ask for help when no one else is in a position to see the play. It is my decision to make. I went with my gut.

Sometimes others are in a position to help. A common example is a field umpire on a two-man team trailing a runner who is in jeopardy at third base. My ability as a field umpire to see the play is limited but my home plate partner has a great angle to see the tag. In this case, I initiate the call by pointing to my partner, thereby granting him permission to make the call. Essentially, I ask a member of my crew to make the decision for me.

In your real world, when it is time for a decision, make it! Back to a baseball analogy, imagine going to a ball game, the pitcher throws a ball, the batter watches the ball pass by and the umpire does nothing. This lack of decision-making on the part of the umpire will stop the game. Nothing can proceed until the umpire makes a decision. Note, we are not talking about a correct decision; we are talking about a decision. With no decision, the ballgame comes to a stop. The same is true in your real world. Sometimes you “go with your gut” and sometimes “you ask your crew” for help, but when a decision is required, make it!

Be consistent and approachable. Stay professional when others get angry. In baseball, we have what most call “the code.” The code is the mostly unwritten rules of respect the game demands on the field of play. As long as people respect the code, umpires are approachable and they will stay professional even when others get angry. Suppose a player disagrees with an umpire decision. The player might turn directly to the umpire and say something about the decision and in the meantime, the coach is rushing to the fray. You will always see an interesting little dance when all involved are in compliance with the code. The umpire will stand still, look the player—and eventually the coach—directly in the eye, listen and otherwise demonstrate approachability. The coach will step between the player and the umpire and at that time, take up the cause and the player will retreat to the dugout. The coach will have his say with the umpire saying little in return. The coach will then back off, give a few parting shots, the umpire stands alone, arms behind his back looking directly at the coach absent any type of expression and the deed is done.

With a violation of the code, things look different but the approachability of the umpire and the need to stay

professional when others get angry remains the same. Again, the player is yelling at the umpire but violates the code by personalizing the discussion (I will let your imagination define “personalizing the discussion”), a clear violation of the code, and the player is ejected with a wave of the umpire’s arm.

The interesting little dance in your world of work should be like the umpire’s dance as the umpire takes heat for a decision made. After you make a decision, you should be consistently approachable and you should stay professional if others get angry, all in accordance with your organization “code.” People affected by your decision may get angry; you stay cool and listen. People may say things that they may later regret; you stay cool and listen. People may violate your unwritten organization “code.” You keep your cool, listen and act on the code violation as appropriate to your organization. Notice, all this hubbub has nothing to do with the decision. What it has to do with is your need to be consistently approachable and you should stay professional when others get angry about a decision you made.

Some errors are correctable. Live with those that are not. No outs, a runner on second base, the batter hits a sharp ground ball toward the shortstop. The runner advancing to third on the crack of the bat prevents the shortstop from making a clean play on the ball, a ball that is now slowing as it enters left field untouched. The left fielder is rushing to gain control of the ball. The runner scores easily but there is a play at second to tag a batter-runner. The left fielder makes the throw and the runner is out. Nobody says anything. No coach objects, my partner is pleased with his call at second base, the runner scores and everyone was happy. So what do I do? I call dead ball! I get together with my partner and explain the mistake we made, get his agreement, and then correct our decision-making error. “Coaches and scorekeeper,” I yell, “the runner at second base is out for interfering with the play of the shortstop. The ball is dead at the time of interference and the batter-runner is awarded first base without jeopardy.” Now, those who care went nuts and because we made an error in decision-making, we have heck to pay, but this is an example of a correctable error in baseball, correctable because our error is in the application of a rule.

Some errors **are not** correctable. Decisions that are not correctable are judgment calls—ball, strike, foul, fair, safe and out—and where your partner(s) or any other authorized means cannot be of assistance. If I am the plate umpire and I declare a pitch a strike that pitch is a strike and even if I immediately believe I made the wrong call, I cannot correct my error.

Some decision-making errors **are** correctable. By established protocol, if a batter makes a “check swing” and the plate umpire does not declare a strike, the plate umpire can ask a partner for help on the call. With the permission of the plate umpire, the field umpire can now make a call and that call takes precedence, the field umpire corrects the decision of the plate umpire. (Note, if the umpire behind the plate calls a strike, no appeal is ever made to change the call to a ball.)

If you are a decision maker, I am willing to bet there are times when you made a decision that you later had to correct and I am willing to bet that there are times when you made a bad decision and you just have to live with the consequences. Well, that is exactly the point. This is simply part of the decision-making process. A key decision-making skill is to know when you have a decision that is correctable and to know when you must live with a bad decision.

I believe the analogy of baseball umpire decision making to that of every day work is worthy of consideration. No analogy is perfect, but observations of major league umpire Randy Marsh in this and in my previous Policy Perspectives article provides sound and credible advice for decision makers. After all, how many of us enjoy second guessing the decisions of sport officials like umpires? The answer is probably about the same number of people who arm chair quarterback the decisions you and others make at work.

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”.