

# Control Emotions to Improve Communications

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It was a spring afternoon. John, the club president and general manager, Connie were having a casual conversation on the clubhouse patio when Bill, the known member bully, approached. Red-faced and looking for a confrontation, Bill began a ruthless verbal assault on Connie as John stood silently by. Bill continued the rant, approaching within inches of Connie, and finally Connie firmly asked Bill to step back. This appeared to fuel the emotional fire and the tirade escalated.

Catching the attention of a nearby staff person, Connie quietly asked her to find Barbara, the assistant manager who happened to be at the window of the adjacent ballroom amusedly taking in the sight, that is until the staff person gave her the summons.

As Barbara arrived on the patio, the tirade continued unabated. Connie asked Bill again to step back. With witnesses gathering and more of a crowd to impress, Bill began to use his index finger to enforce his point by jabbing Connie in the chest. Connie asked one last time for Bill to step back. When Bill continued the jabbing tirade, Connie administered a single sharp blow to Bill's chest, sending him windless to the patio floor. Connie turned to John, offering an immediate resignation. John responded that he only wished it had been him; a resignation was not necessary. Bill was subsequently dismissed from the club at a special meeting of the Board.

Most managers fantasize about such an ending, and while the story is as true as the participants can remember - the names were changed to protect the future job security of those involved - it is certainly an anomaly. Emotions made the difference, or more correctly the containing of emotions made a difference. Instead of reacting in a similar manner, by yelling, name-calling, or shrinking back, Connie decided to calmly act in a way to swiftly end the confrontation, realizing at the same time that a consequence of the action could be termination of employment. Connie's ability to contain emotions in the face of a tirade turning physical was exceptional.

According to David L. Brooks in his book, *The Social Animal*, all experiences in life are inherently emotional. Club members often form very intricate and complex relationships, not only among themselves but also among staff and management. These complex relationships also involve emotion. Clubs are therefore a uniquely emotional place because they are where people live, socialize, and relax. Thus managers are required to deal with emotionality and develop advanced emotional control, more-so than in a normal business or managerial setting.

While Connie was in control of his emotions, Bill was letting his emotions get the best of him. In the club setting, these complex emotions often result in the breakdown of communication: Connie may have been willing to listen to Bill's complaints and suggestions, but was unable to

because of Bill's emotionality. Additionally, John appeared not to know how to handle this type of interaction. Connie must straddle the line between calming Bill and also appearing professional to John, a superior. Thus, it is important for managers to be different things to different people.

"Dissociation" is a frame of mind that allows you to remove yourself from the situation - not to take it personally. In the program "The West Wing," there is an episode in which President Bartlett has asked his family priest to visit as the President must decide whether or not to go to war, a period of high emotion and stress. At the start of the meeting being held in the Oval Office, the priest asks Bartlett, "What do I call you?" The President responds, "Mr. President," because he must affirm his role as President, dissociating himself from Jed Bartlett, the citizen and father.

General Managers find themselves in confrontational situations many times during their careers (oftentimes daily!), and sometimes the confrontation will take on a personal tenor. Dissociation allows you to remove yourself from the equation and make more clearheaded decisions, as President Bartlett suggested and the one that Connie made.

How does the untrained GM maintain control in similar confrontational situations? Practice and training.

As it turns out, Connie had practice and training; years of working in the highly structured and confrontational world of military police offered training in maintaining composure in these situations. In his bestselling book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell stated that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to become truly expert; however, a key point is that all practice is not the same. The practice referred to in *Outliers* is "deliberative" practice and the concept comes from a paper by K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe and Clemens Tesch-Romer, "The Role of Deliberative Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance". Deliberative practice has two fundamental components: motivation to attend to the task and willingness to exert effort to improve performance. Once deliberative practice is undertaken there must be an understanding of the task, immediate feedback of the results of each attempt and repeat performance of the task. The simple act of repeating a task will lead to only minimal performance improvement even for the highly motivated - there must be immediate feedback and the assessment on how to improve. We have all had 10,000 hours of discussions over our lifetimes, but deliberately practicing how we have those conversations and how we control our emotions is something that we are probably short on. Control is the key and practicing control takes deliberate means.

One problem with training emotions is that it is similar to training for a ten-foot putt when the club championship is on the line: it is hard to recreate that level of pressure in practice. A person can falsely recreate pressure, but the active mind knows that it's not real pressure. A practical way to train your emotions is by reacting calmly in situations where you are sensing an emotional change, but the issue is simple: your spouse wants you to go out to dinner rather than cook, your pet has made a mess on the floor, or your child is being disobedient. Realize that your emotions are kicking in and see what it takes for you to be in control. Counting may be one technique: Thomas Jefferson was noted as saying, "When angry count ten, when very angry one hundred." By practicing on somewhat non-essential issues you can be better prepared when a club member, after a few drinks at the bar, offers constructive criticism of your management

style or when your spouse lets you know that the in-laws are pulling in the driveway to stay for a few days and, of course, you know your club's Invitational is over the weekend.

As Rick Kirschner, ND, suggested in his seminar, "Influence and the Art of Persuasion" at the 2012 CMAA World Conference in New Orleans, 58% of communication meaning is derived from what it looks like: body posture, animation and facial expressions. Another 38% is from voice tempo and volume, and 7% is from what is actually said. We think we know what we say, but often we cannot witness our own nonverbal communication.

One method of observing both verbal and nonverbal communication is watching yourself on tape. Most laptops have a video feature built in, but video cameras and software are easily found and reasonably priced at most electronics stores. Arrange for conversations to be held in your office and record yourself interacting. You will find that by minimizing the screen, you will soon forget that you are recording yourself and the conversation can flow more naturally. (There are state laws on videotaping, so be sure to adhere to local laws). After the discussion, review the video and critique your performance - essential in deliberative practice. By watching yourself in an actual discussion, you may be able to see how your emotions play a role in your communication. You will be able to realize the moments in the discussion that were emotionally charged and how you reacted.

Communication is essential to successful interaction among club members, managers, and staff. Honing your emotional control is one way to improve your effective communication skills. Recognizing the different roles you must play as a club manager and adapting your nonverbal skills are crucial to creating an environment of open and positive communication at your club.

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