

## MAKE THE CALL

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In a sense, officials must be cold-blooded killers to be effective.

Since the word “decide” is derived from the Latin word “decidere,” which literally means “to kill or to cut off,” the act of deciding is to actually kill all but one of two or more alternatives. Similar words with the “cide” root are homicide, pesticide and genocide.

Officiating is all about making decisions. That’s arguably the one and only reason why they give us a paycheck. Sometimes, in the process of decision making, we eliminate alternatives that may actually be better than the one we ultimately choose. That is one reason why officiating is so difficult — truly effective decision making requires a considerable amount of data analysis, listening and reflection. We’re expected to decide sometimes hundreds of times during the course of a game, and we have to do it *now!*

Granted, most officiating decisions are simply a choice of this or that - call or no-call, out or safe, in bounds or out of bounds - but that doesn’t make the decision any easier when it’s truly a whacker of a play and you’re trying to replay in your mind what you saw in order to come to the correct decision. All that while any number of players, coaches and spectators wait. Two seconds can seem like two weeks while you analyze and reflect on the play.

Imagine: game seven of the World Series. The score is tied in the bottom of the ninth, one out, and there’s a runner on third. There’s a ground ball to the shortstop, who makes a great play, throwing to first base for the second out. As the first baseman looks up, he sees that the runner on third has broken for home and fires the ball to the catcher.

The ball and the runner get to the plate at the same moment. There is a cloud of dust, a tag, then ... silence. The umpire is frozen, considering every option thoroughly before making the call of the season. He stands straight up, tells the runner and catcher that he needs a few moments to think and then proceeds to pace behind the backstop for a few minutes before returning with an emphatic “Ooout!” Ridiculous, isn’t it? But why shouldn’t the ultimate outcome of an entire season, hinging on that single call, be worth a few extra minutes of analysis? Maybe that could happen in a different world where referees and umpires could retire to their own private “judge’s chambers” for quiet reflection after every play. The reality is that anyone who officiates has to make split-second calls that could change the course of a game, even a season.

That’s why you must be more than a decision maker; you need to be decisive. It’s the ability to make the call, sell the call and engender a confidence in your ability as an official from all those involved in the game - players, coaches, spectators and your fellow officials - that you nailed it (and killed the other options; who knew how violent officiating really was?). And all that must be accomplished in a mere moment of time.

There may be natural born killers, but the problem with decisiveness is that you are not born with it. It doesn't come in the rulebook or with your new uniform. It is the result of a concerted effort on your part to improve in nearly every aspect of your game as an official. It comes with experience, but not automatically. You must strive for it. But once you have it, chances are you'll be considered one of the top officials in your area.

### **The Components of Decisiveness**

“Decisiveness in officiating is basically being sure of what you call and selling your call,” says Steve Newman, a Big 10 football referee. “If you're confident in your call, the coaches have more confidence in you, your partners have more confidence in you. They're going to trust you.” And that, according to Newman, is a leadership quality essential to superior officiating performance.

“It's one of those intangible things,” adds Pat Smith, a retired high level soccer referee and current USSE national assessor. “You know what it is when you see it.”

In the business world, money can be made or lost based, in large measure, on the decisiveness of the executives. In battle, the decisiveness of the command often determines who wins or loses. In a ballgame, the outcome can often turn on individual calls that happen “in the blink of an eye.”

“Officiating is more of a reaction process than a thought process,” says John Cahill, a Division I men's basketball referee who works in the Big East and several other conferences. According to Cahill, officiating decisiveness is instinctual because of the immediacy required in a ballgame.

Because of that, people often mistake speed for decisiveness. Speed is an element of being decisive, but it's only one component. Tom Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Associates, a CEO consulting firm, says that decisiveness in any discipline has four components:

- 1. Speed** — the time it takes to make a decision.
- 2. Importance** — the nature of what is being decided upon.
- 3. Commitment** — to carry out the decisions, no matter how difficult,
- 4. Rightness** — the correctness of the decision.

Certainly each element has a parallel in officiating. Speed is important. You never want to rush a call, but there is that fine line between pausing to make sure of what you saw and taking a split second too long. Many of the calls you make in a game (some people would say every call you make) are important. Do you ever treat a call as if “it wasn't mine to make” or as if “that one didn't matter anyway”? What is your commitment level to being the best official you can be? Do you want the big games? Are you ready for them? Speaking of readiness, are you committed to being ready every play? Finally, the cliché is that officiating is the one avocation where you are expected to start out perfect and improve from there. Being right? It's everything for an official!

So if the components can be identified, why is the ability to be decisive so difficult for some to develop? Some people are better decision makers than others. What makes their decisions more effective, more credible and more respected by their peers? It probably has most to do with a commitment they made to themselves to integrate decision making into their overall officiating learning plan. They consistently seek out better ways to get the work done, take responsibility for themselves and their decisions and strive to learn from others.

“Decisiveness comes from the knowledge you accumulate,” says Jerry Markbreit, longtime NFL referee, now retired, who often speaks to groups on how officiating helped him master the art of making split-second decisions. “You have to learn everything there is to learn, then you can work on becoming decisive.”

### **Make Better Decisions**

Effective decision making is the process of identifying potential infractions and then taking action. The three main stages of the decision-making process are: clarifying what the decision is, assessing exactly what is involved and utilizing all the necessary resources including rules knowledge, mechanics and experience.

Being decisive does not come naturally for most people. Experts say that the most common reason people have for being indecisive is that they are striving for perfectionism. In other words, they have a fear of failure.

Certainly, there isn't an official out there who doesn't want to call a perfect game every time, but the reality is that it rarely – if ever – happens. “Sometimes you make a call and think, ‘Damn!’” said Newman. “It's the wrong call, and there's nothing you can do about it. That's when you have to move on and tell yourself that the next time you'll make the right call.”

Another hindrance to decisiveness is that many people see conflicts as “bad”, and have trouble being decisive because they fear their decision will lead to confrontations. They refuse to take risks. “Referees are better when they show commitment, courage and confidence,” says Smith. “Mark Twain once said, ‘Courage is the mastery of fear, not the absence of fear.’ That's what officiating is about, too. A fearless official is dangerous; an official who has mastered his or her fear through confidence can be decisive.”

Without question, the best officials at every level are decisive. The tough calls come their way, and they make them accurately and without flinching. But how do the rest of us get to that place? There are several parts of your game you can work on that will improve your decisiveness.

**Rules Knowledge** — It seems almost too obvious: The first element to developing the confidence necessary to becoming a decisive official is rules knowledge, yet often it is dismissed as a given, something too rudimentary to give much more than a passing thought. “You have to have a complete and thorough understanding of the rules and how

to apply the intent of the rules to the game,” urges Newman. “That can’t be said enough times, in my opinion.”

“There’s just no excuse for not knowing the rulebook,” agrees Mike Sanzere a Division I men’s basketball referee from Cincinnati, who has worked three Final Fours. “And there’s nothing worse than going in and thinking you know what the rule is and being wrong.” Essentially, that is false confidence, flying in the face of the notion that “rightness” is one of the four key components of decisiveness.

**Mechanics and Positioning** — An official could be a walking encyclopedia when it comes to the rulebook, but that isn’t a guarantee that he or she will know what to do once the game starts. Good mechanics go hand-in-hand with rules knowledge. “When you focus on your responsibility,” says Markbreit, “you see the play in a very fine way. That’s what decisiveness is: being able to see something definitively”.

“Being in the right place at the right time will help you sell any call,” adds Smith. “If you are there, coaches will accept almost any call.” The mechanics of selling the call is important for appearing decisive. But selling a call doesn’t mean just being quick, being loud or making big, sweeping signals. That’s just fluff.

“You can be dead-on right with a call,” says Newman, “but if you look like you’re dead-on wrong, if your body language says you aren’t sure or if when you explain a call to a coach or player, you hesitate, you’re in trouble. You have to look like you know what the hell you’re doing.” Being where you are supposed to be, watching what you’re supposed to watch goes a long way toward demonstrating that.

**Experience** — Oscar Wilde once said, “Experience is the name everyone gives their mistakes.” Nowhere is that more true than in officiating. Imagine stepping onto Lambeau Field at the start of your second year as an official to call the Chicago Bears versus the Green Bay Packers. Absurd? Of course. Still, how many officials do you know who push for “bigger” games before they are ready? More often than not, those officials fail miserably and get eaten alive by coaches, players and fans. Decisive? Shoot, they’re happy just to get out of there alive.

“Learn everything you can, watch as much of your sport as you can, officiate as much as you can,” says Markbreit. “Learning from your mistakes, that’s a necessary step toward becoming decisive.”

**Continued Learning** — Most of us know an official who thinks he’s at the top of his game, but is, in fact, lacking in one or more areas. Any suggestion that this official may want to join you at a clinic is rebuffed. Chances are, when the game is on the line, that official will have problems. Do you ever get “good enough” to stop learning?

According to Fitzgerald, relying on assumptions and guesswork instead of facts and knowledge — a trap easily fallen into if you don’t keep up with new training every season — will lead to faulty decisions. An erroneous perception of the factors involved

in a call can predispose a decision to failure. Limit your reliance on intuitive, impulsive or emotional responses, and base your decisions on high-quality data whenever possible.

Talking game situations over with new officials who have questions often helps veteran officials at least as much as the newer official. “One of the best things for me to do is sit down with a young guy just starting out in college football,” says Newman, “because he’ll ask questions that I’ve never thought of. It makes you think, keeps you fresh and forces you to consider new ways of looking at something.”

### **Risks and Rewards**

“Do it right the first time,” is a good guideline when decisions involve a repeated process, such as making quality calls game in and game out. But don’t let the fear of failure keep you from taking decision-making risks. Success often comes through what could be considered failures or mistakes. Every successful official has made bad calls and poor decisions at one time or another. Mistakes and failures are some of the hardest lessons in life, but they create opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Smith urges officials to strive to make the right calls at the right time with confidence and integrity, and make decisions that you take responsibility for and can support publicly. Above all, learn from mistakes, he adds. Discuss what worked and what didn’t with your mentor, supervisor and trusted peers. Avoid blaming others. Relive the process and reassess what you would do differently, then move on.

You may not have identified becoming more decisive as an area of need in your game, but take the quiz at the end of the article to see if you could stand to do better. If you make the effort to become a more decisive official, what’s in it for you? Plenty.

Certainly your games will go better: Coaches and players will accept your calls most of the time, you’ll suddenly start to have an “easier time” of things out there, but you’ll also quietly be developing something much more important to any official — a good reputation. Coaches, players and fans all want to believe that their game is in the hands of one of the most competent officials in the area. Want to be one of those officials? Be more decisive.

“Decisiveness is one of the elements that speaks to the credibility that an official enjoys,” says Cahill. “Coaches need officials to be decisive, and when they see an official who shows confidence without arrogance they feel more comfortable with that official. All around the country, the officials who are the most respected are the ones who are the most decisive.”

“Since so much of refereeing is about reputation,” says Smith, “a referee who has the reputation of being decisive can get along famously with coaches, players and assigners.” Another benefit to increasing your decisiveness is that you will likely be perceived as a leader. Decisive officials are those officials who are truly ready for the biggest calls in the biggest games. Like all-star players, they want the critical plays to come their way.

“I don’t think you can be a leader without being decisive,” says Newman. “It is probably the most important element in leadership. You have to want to be a leader; it isn’t just given to you. We all need leaders on our crews.”

Decisiveness is one of those intangibles in officiating that can make or break you in so many ways: having your calls accepted, getting the big games, moving up, earning you a good reputation and identifying you as a leader. The good news is: You can work on it. As you do, you’ll notice things changing for the better.

Markbreit summarized it well. ‘To be decisive, you have to be a decision maker, a risk taker and a long term student of the game. Then you’ll be super-efficient and successful in officiating.’