

De-escalation

What to do:

- **Talking:** Talking with someone helps shift the focus away from the circumstance that is provoking distress, and towards something else, hopefully helping to calm the situation.
- **Show active listening:** This means not cutting athletes/coaches off, not simply waiting for a gap to tell them what to do. Make them feel that you are treating them with respect. At most, ask for clarification, or repeat back one of their points to show that you heard them. For some people, being heard is an important experience.
- **Look at the person:** Natural conversations require that we look away at times, and sometimes staring can make people feel more agitated. But eye contact is a powerful connector.
- **Nod:** It's a light cue of agreement, or perhaps approval. Let the listener interpret it as they will. But it's a basic human gesture that what they are saying matters, that they matter.
- **Paraphrase back:** This shows you've been listening and processing what they have to say.
- Use open questions. This keeps them talking and keeps them explaining and unpacking. It makes them think.
- **Position and proximity:** Stand at a non-threatening distance. Or sit, if you can. Little nonverbal cues that suggest you're for an escalation, however implicitly, aren't helpful.
- **Preserve dignity:** Treat them with dignity, even if they are in the wrong. They may clearly be in the wrong but remember what the goal is: to get everyone calm and safe with the minimum of fuss.

Assertive, not aggressive, behaviour

Be assertive, not aggressive, or submissive. This should be the default model of communication, but it is even more important when dealing with athletes/coaches in challenging circumstances.

Use of assertive body language

- Making and keeping eye contact
- Maintaining an erect posture, facing the athlete/coach, but keeping enough distance so as not to appear threatening
- Matching one's facial expression with the content of the message

Use of appropriate tone of voice

- Speaking clearly and deliberately
- Using pitch that is not greatly elevated from normal speech
- Avoiding any indication of emotion in one's voice

Persisting until the appropriate outcome is achieved

- Not ignoring an inappropriate behaviour
- Not being diverted by an athlete/coach arguing or blaming, but listening to legitimate explanations

Clear sequential instructions

The most effective instructions are clear, in sequence, and direct. "Please row to the 1st pontoon".

Lower the stakes

When tempers are high athletes/coaches need a reason to get calm. Avoid accusing them of anything; try to focus on immediate steps to make things better. Tell them that you're there to help them, and that in order for you to do that, they need to 'X'. Remove the audience if possible. Provide somewhere calm and quiet and away from what is triggering the incident.

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What to do:

Every small cue (verbal or otherwise) that we give to athletes/coaches is vitally important:

Consistently emphasise that your goal is to help athletes/coaches to enjoy fair, safe and equal racing rather than to reinforce your power as the Umpire. When addressing concerns, try to link it to the intended purpose and link to our high expectations of conduct, rather than the concern itself.

Remind athletes/coaches of what they should be doing rather than telling them what they should not be doing. This way, you are not just reprimanding them unnecessarily; you are calling them out but also telling them how to fix their behaviour.

- When attempting to de-escalate it is important to look at all the cues we give to the athlete/coach. It is important to look at how we speak; every hand signal; eye contact and non-verbal communication.
- Tone, volume, pitch and pace becomes paramount to every part of the conversation. These cues will impact the next stages of the interaction.
- Defusal is key. This stops situations from snowballing. Attempt to encourage them back onto the right track. Two approaches can support athletes/coaches to be successful.

1. Pivot

What should you be doing right now? What do we need to do when something annoys us? Please do not use why questions!

This encourages the athlete/coach to think about the next steps, rather than focusing on what has gone before. Provide clarity and an example of what to do next, making it easier to do it.

2. Focusing on the misbehaviour or its consequences

'Stop doing (x); if you do make this choice or display (x) then I will have to (y)' This is much more clearly designed to address unsporting conduct, rather than tease out and encourage sporting conduct.

It is an act of professional judgement as to which approach is used. However, the message must be prompt, it must be clear, and it must be confidently issued.