

Crew Chiefs' Role in Managing Perceptions

By Brian O'Cain

10 February 2008

The media lust for “viewable moments” has added a dimension to officiating that must be addressed as we go about our work. The desire for material with “entertainment” value makes it imperative to set standards for our crews in this critical area. Crew standards define the activities necessary to project a positive image as we perform our work. This applies at all officiating levels due to the constant presence of video and cell phone cameras. When you combine the demand, with the relative certainty that you will be “caught on tape”, your actions better pass the “Washington Post Front Page” test. I offer some thoughts on how crew chiefs can address this dimension in their role as leaders.

There are many articles written on the importance of appearance, presence and mechanics related to on-field work. These are critical skills and tend to dominate how we are viewed by teams, coaches, supervising authorities and fans. However, it is not the complete picture. We must be increasingly aware that we create perceptions by all our actions, on and off the field. Since perception is reality, to the observer, we must work to avoid actions that are viewed negatively and reinforce those that are viewed positively. Leading your crew through this discussion allows you to set standards, which can be used to monitor performance through the season. This increased crew awareness of how we should work, combined with evaluation of how we actually work, will minimize the chances of a “negative event”. Officials who work in “provisional” crews on a weekly basis, should have this conversation at the organization instructional level as well.

So what needs to be considered? We convey perceptions from the moment we arrive at the stadium, through when we depart. Therefore, discussion of off-field actions that could be viewed as biased or improper is imperative. This includes socialization with people wearing team logos, or actions that imply an unprofessional or casual approach to the work at hand. People traveling with your crew, must also be mindful that they are creating an image of you by their actions. Once in the stadium, our interaction with coaches, teams and fans before and during the game must consider that we are always being observed and judged. Be polite, professional, personable and brief. Always be mindful that a photograph of you, in uniform, hugging the coach's wife hello could create a stir when it appears on the opposing school's website the next day, even if she was your close friend from high school. If your action can't stand this test, then don't do it.

During the game, we try to project an air of organized efficiency in order to instill confidence in those observing us. This image is conveyed by the way officials individually cover their areas and by the interactions between crewmates. If we move with confidence, are in the right position, have interactions that are concise and decisive, we will have created the image we want. However, we know we must get the decisions right, no matter how we look doing it. That said, the ideal is to get the calls right and do it in a manner that generates a perception of competence. This is the area that the crew needs to agree on, so that the manner in which duties are carried out can be defined and then evaluated. Our crew had that discussion and came up with a single page list of what we felt was most important. This list includes performance, as well as perception management thoughts. I have attached it, but the list itself is only as useful as the crew discussion that created it. We agreed that this is what we would do, and then held ourselves accountable to do it. We used the list in our pre-game conference to review whether we had done those things we felt were important, and if not, then how to improve.

The management of perceptions must become part of your crew discussions. I urge all of you to set crew standards and then measure yourselves as you work. Remember to absolutely ensure you get the calls right, but make an effort to appear competent as you do it. After all, we really have no other means to influence the way people think of us.

What defines Crew Excellence?

(B. O'Cain, A. Granado, M. Feldman, J. Wharrie/J. Rinne, B. Glenn, M. Mothershed, J. Freitas/J. Sadorus)

- On-Field Performance
 - Attitude
 - Understated Confidence
 - Focus, anticipate, evaluate, react, sell
 - Position, position, position
 - Be in the right place looking at the right thing
 - Hustle, but never hurry to the right place
 - Teamwork
 - We are only as good as each other
 - Trust each other to cover assigned areas
 - Help when needed to avert major mistakes
 - Work together as a unit/team
 - Quality Calls / Quality No Calls
 - Advantage / Disadvantage- Be consistent!
 - Be great *Dead Ball* officials
 - Nothing unobserved
 - Engage players
 - Make your presence known

- Managing the perception of performance
 - Be aware that you are always being observed
 - No pre-game contacts that could be misinterpreted
 - Between downs and during breaks, presence and position
 - Be decisive/methodical when reporting and enforcing penalties
 - Get the enforcement correct (yardage and position)
 - No long crew discussions or group meetings
 - Avoid the appearance of confusion or indecisiveness
 - Good ball mechanics
 - Get the correct ball in after finishing the prior play
 - Clear and concise communications
 - With Coaches
 - With each other (signals/verbal)

Conclusion: "The officials did what was necessary for the game to be played safely and by the rules. Nothing the officials did had a negative effect on the outcome of the game. The calls were there. They were called fairly and consistently. And finally, the game was decided by the *players* on the field."