



How leaders can learn from referees

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THE role of a rugby referee can offer valuable lessons to corporate leaders. Knowing the impact a particular decision can have – and learning lessons from your decisions – can contribute immeasurably to the successful leadership of a business.

Two recent examples show the impact referees' decisions have had on the final match score:

1. In a November 10 Test match, Jerome Garcès, the French referee, referred a decision to the television match official (TMO), which resulted in the All Blacks beating England by one point (16-15). It was a marginal call but the correct call, even though the England coach Eddie Jones was quoted afterwards as saying: "I leave it to the TV umpire. If he cannot make a call after 10 replays, who could?"

2. However, in the England-South Africa game the week before, Aussie ref Angus Gardner failed to make use of the TMO for an illegal tackle by Owen Farrell on Springbok centre Andre Esterhuizen, and did not award a penalty, blatantly ignoring rule 16.9 of the law book. This resulted in a 12-11 score in favour of England. The consequences of these two decisions will live on in the record books.

Let's get back to business: How relevant is refereeing in business? Very much, I believe. Leaders have to make calls instantly, and the result can have a powerful financial and strategic impact. Here are some important leadership lessons that business executives can take from referees:

● Rigorous focus and concentration – for 80 minutes on the rugby field you have to be in the moment in order to be effective. Focus and con-



ENGLAND'S Owen Farrell, left, tackles South Africa's Andre Esterhuizen near the end of the match between the countries at Twickenham Stadium in London on November 3 last year. | AP African News Agency (ANA)

centration are as important for leaders to ensure important matters are not neglected or missed in the boardroom.

● Examine and consider the consequences – just as a referee needs to consider the outcome of his decision on the field, the manager needs to consider all the consequences of his decision on the organisation, its employees and various stakeholders.

● Facts – stick to the facts and the information you have available. Base your decision as leader on real facts, data and information to make an informed decision. Also, be decisive – there can be no second-guessing on the rugby field; it's make the call and move on. The same is true in business – you have to plan and move on.

Indecisiveness can be a huge disruptor and create uncertainty across the organisation.

● External interferences to be managed – the vocal crowd and interfering scrumhalf should not influence the decision of a referee. In the same way, a leader should not be influenced by interferences from negative business sentiment, the media or competitors. Referees have to remain calm under pressure from players and coaches, and fans yelling contradictory messages at him. Remaining calm while stakeholders are expressing their displeasure is even more important.

● Refer and consult when needed – when in doubt, refer your decision to someone who is in a better posi-

tion than you (touch judge) or has more resources available to make the decision (TMO). This applies to the leader who doesn't always have all the answers and resources and needs to engage with experts and resources when required.

● Employ the resources and tools given to you – technology is able to assist the referee in decision-making (television replays, referrals to the TMO). Leaders should also make use of the available resources, whether they be financial, human or physical.

● Embrace your actions and own the consequences – admit when you have made a mistake. Referees are never bigger than the game and should respect their role as match officials. You will make mistakes; own and learn from them and don't allow your past mistakes to cloud your future decisions. Be accountable for your decisions and take proactive action when faced with similar situations.

● In the same way that refs undergo regular, intense training to remain experts on the rules of the game, corporate leaders should engage in continuous learning to run their organisations as well as they possibly can. They need to be able to understand the changing rules of the (corporate) game and to remain experts at what they do.

● And finally, there is a reason that the "advantage" law allows referees to manage the flow of the game and make certain decisions. It is the same in business – allow space for objectivity, fairness all the things great leaders are known for.

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