

Communication tips and avoiding conflict

Be clear ■ Explore options ■ Be constructive

DO

- ✓ Always **show respect** and **remain calm**
- ✓ Allow venting, **within reason**
- ✓ Acknowledge **emotions** (without saying "I know how you feel")
- ✓ Show **empathy**
- ✓ Acknowledge their **point of view** (that doesn't mean agreeing)
- ✓ Accept **differences of opinion**
- ✓ Find something to **agree** with, if possible
- ✓ Listen actively and **paraphrase what they say** (show you are listening)
- ✓ Anticipate counterarguments and **address them upfront**
- ✓ Use 'I' and 'we' messages – 'I' messages **take responsibility**, 'we' messages **promote cooperation**
- ✓ Clarify whenever unsure and **check understanding**
- ✓ Set limits and **communicate these boundaries**
- ✓ **Manage expectations** – be clear on what you can and can't do
- ✓ Allow space and **time to think**
- ✓ **Admit mistakes** and apologise if appropriate
- ✓ Seek **resolution**, where appropriate

DON'T

- ✗ Don't **argue, defend** or **deny**
- ✗ Don't **give excuses** (explanations are different)
- ✗ Don't be **aggressive** or **confrontational** in your words or body language
- ✗ Don't be **overly formal** or bureaucratic
- ✗ Don't be **too informal** e.g. humour can be misinterpreted
- ✗ Don't respond to **fighting words**
- ✗ Don't suggest the person needs **therapy or counselling**
- ✗ Don't suggest the person is **being unreasonable**
Instead, focus on how the person's behaviour is affecting you
- ✗ Don't **invade personal space**
- ✗ Don't **focus on their emotions**, focus on the issue
- ✗ Don't **pre-judge or show bias** against a person based on their behaviour
- ✗ Don't restrict or end your engagement with a person without first **trying to understand** why the conduct may be occurring and **offering support**

Recognising signs of behaviour early

Look and listen for signs that may help manage complaints more effectively.



The person's history

- Repeated interactions and complaints about the same issue which has already had an appropriate decision.
- Contacting multiple different organisations/officials about the same matter.
- Numerous requests to access information that they are not entitled to because of privacy or legal considerations.
- Unfounded allegations of incompetence or misconduct.
- Linking major personal losses to pursuing the issue.
- Past behaviour involving violence, threats or abuse.



The outcome they're seeking

- Unrealistic demands for time, resources.
- Seeking extremely disproportionate outcomes/sanctions.
- Declaring they want revenge or retribution.
- Pursuing a "matter of principle" when the issue is clearly personal.



Writing style

- Dramatic language and excessive formatting (ALL CAPS, bold, colours).
- Overuse of technical jargon and mimicking official reporting styles.
- Copying in large numbers of people/organisations.
- Excessive repetition of the issue/s.
- Overly long or irrelevant documentation.



How they interact with your organisation

- Rudeness, anger, aggression, frustration, intimidation.
- Manipulation, flattery, or veiled threats.
- Excessive calls, emails, or meeting requests.
- Blaming others, refusing advice.
- Providing false information.



How they react to a complaint decision

- Refusing to accept decisions.
- Reframing the issue repeatedly and demanding repeated reviews.
- Focusing on minor technicalities to challenge outcomes.
- Alleging bias or corruption simply because the outcome was unfavourable.

What to do when you recognise early signs of unreasonable conduct



Don't react too quickly

Avoid judging harshly straight away. The early sign may not become a problem, the person may just be having a bad day.



Check your own processes

Ensure you have followed all complaints handling processes fairly to this point so you can have confidence in your decision making and next steps. If there has been an error, recognise it, apologise and restart.



Check your own communication

Think about how you've interacted with the person and what you could change to get a better response.



Stop and think

Take time to pause and think through appropriate strategies.



Seek guidance

Speak with a colleague or supervisor to develop an action plan on how you will respond if the person's conduct escalates.



Assess risks

Consider if the person's conduct poses an unreasonable level of risk to the health or safety of you or others. This will usually guide how you respond.



Set limits

If the person's behaviour concerns you, communicate your boundaries to them.



Stay positive

Try to limit the impact on you and how you feel about work.

Important: When a person in distress reports serious concerns about something that has happened to them in sport, you must not label them as displaying unreasonable conduct. Focus on why that person is in distress and what steps you can take to support them.

5 types of unreasonable conduct and strategies to help manage them

	What it looks like	How to approach it
1 Unreasonable persistence: Continuous, unrelenting behaviour.	- Not accepting a complaint is closed. - Reframing an old complaint or continuing to argue.	Say no, firmly but politely. Don't be defensive or overly apologetic but be clear that no amount of pressure will change the outcome.
2 Unreasonable demands: Unrealistic and impractical demands.	- Raising issues beyond the sport's scope of responsibility. - Insisting on speaking with the 'boss'. - Directing how to handle the complaint e.g. asking for more time to be spent than is warranted.	Set and enforce limits. Inform the complainant clearly if and why a demand will not be met. Explain why they need to stop making the demand and offer them a choice, if possible.
3 Unreasonable lack of cooperation: Lack of ability or willingness to cooperate with staff or the complaints process.	- Dishonestly presenting information. - Presenting an unnecessarily large quantity of material. - Failing to provide key documents. - Constantly re-defining a complaint.	Set conditions. Explain that these must be met before you can act on their issue e.g. summarise and organise lengthy documents before you agree to read them.
4 Unreasonable arguments: Disputes or claims that are incomprehensible, false, inflammatory or trivial.	- Exaggerating issues. - Holding irrational and obsessive beliefs and refusing to consider counter-arguments.	Decline or discontinue your involvement with the matter. Politely refuse or stop assisting the complainant as soon as it's apparent that the matter is groundless or the request is unreasonable.
5 Unreasonable behaviour: Conduct that compromises the health, safety and security of staff, other participants or the complainant themselves.	- Threatening violence or self-harm. - Abusing staff. - Being rude or aggressive.	Set limits and conditions. Establish clear boundaries, including placing limits on interactions or services.

10 steps for responding to anger and threats

Step 1: RECOGNISE RISK

What to do If anger is directed at you and you feel in danger, leave.
Only consider restarting the conversation with clear boundaries if the person's behaviour improves.

What to say "I will not continue if you are directing anger at me or making threats."

Step 2: REPEAT

What to do Make sure threats are clear.
Ask the person to clarify/repeat them.

What to say "You have just said [this] to me ... is that what you meant?
Are you threatening me?"

Step 3: REACT

What to do Continue to show respect. It is okay to ask for respect in return and to react to any anger or threats by advising you may need to discontinue the interaction. Do not over-react or make threats in return.

What to say "The way you're speaking to me is not acceptable, so we're going to need to take a break and decide if this conversation can continue."

Step 4: RESPOND

What to do Communicate clearly and consistently what the consequences will be if the behaviour continues.

What to say "I need you to stop shouting at me or I will have to end this conversation."

Step 5: REDIRECT

What to do Ask questions about the complaint to try to move them from an 'emotional' state and back to the issue.

What to say "Let's go back to the issue itself, can you tell me more about ..."

Step 6: REFOCUS

What to do If you do bring the person's emotions under control, refocus attention on their issue.

A question about the facts can change a person's focus from feelings to thinking about the substance of their issue.

What to say "You've mentioned [a fact from the case], what other details can you provide?"

Step 7: RAISE CONCERNS

What to do If you feel threatened, leave the room and call for assistance.

Step 8: RETREAT

What to do If all else fails and you feel any risk of danger, retreat to a safe location.

Step 9: RECORD

What to do Record all threats 'verbatim' and keep with the relevant file.

Step 10: REPORT

What to do Report the matter to a manager so you can review responses and identify strategies to manage future interactions with the person.