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Being a good boss is like being a good umpire

Over the last month more people may have come to realize how the best leaders are those who can make a quick decision, under pressure, without partisanship, and in the face of extreme unpopularity. Perhaps, no one does all those things more often than an umpire. Baseball survived the Great Depression to reach the 104th World Series, which starts Wednesday. USA TODAY management reporter **Del Jones** spoke to **Randy Marsh**, 59, who has umpired five World Series. Following are excerpts, edited for clarity and space.

Q: What advice do you have for those who now must make the right call without the luxury of time?

A: Know the rules, have a vast knowledge of what your job is. You can't stop learning about your job. Stay on top of it from day to day and be aware of new things coming along.

Q: Sounds like quick decisions are really the result of exhaustive preparation?

A: Absolutely. You're putting the percentages in your favor by being knowledgeable ahead of time. I was in the minor leagues for 13 years, and I did everything possible to improve. We have an expression: fair play and common sense. When something happens that's not covered by the rules, when something totally unusual happens, you do what's right and what's fair and use common sense.

Q: Fans probably think the toughest calls are the close calls, the bang-bang play at first base or the tag at home. True?

A: No, the tough calls are the unexpected. I was at first base doing a playoff game in 2006 when there was an errant throw. I was where I was supposed to be, but I wasn't expecting to have two fielders stand right in front of me when I was trying to see the play. The runner (intentionally) knocked the ball out of the fielder's hand, but I didn't see it. You can't have an ego, so I got the entire crew together, and we got it right. We corrected another play later in the game. These were not popular decisions, but we did the right thing. You can't say: "I'm the boss, I'm not going to change this." When something unusual happens you must do what is best for the game, what is best for the company.

Q: Should leaders always ask for help?

A: In some situations. Sometimes you don't have help.

Q: Right decisions are not always the most popular. What have you learned about controversial calls?

A: If you truly know in your heart that it is best, you should be just fine.

Q: What is the best way to deal with an angry manager or player?

A: I'm not there to get into a yelling match. I'm going to try to keep myself totally under control. I'll listen, but if it gets personal the argument will be short-lived. Just be professional about it. I've learned to let them come out and see what they have to say. They might not always get the answer they want, but there is mutual respect. Listen. See what's going on here. Then make your decision.

Q: What personality type is best at making quick, unpopular decisions?

A: There are all types, but I think a consistent personality is something that anybody at any job is going to appreciate. You want a boss who is consistent and approachable. You want to ask questions and get professional responses. All of these things are found in a successful umpire. Bosses must also be professional and upfront.

Q: Umpires have been around for more than 100 years. You've been in the big leagues for 26. After all that time, is everything you do set in stone, or do you still look for ways to do something differently?

A: Years ago, when umpires made a call, that was it. There was never getting together as a crew to get the call right. Now, if it makes sense, you can get together and discuss it. Sometimes there are things messed up that you can't change. Like when you have multiple runners on base and it's a matter of whether a hit ball was trapped or caught.

Q: So, are there times when a leader makes the wrong call but must stick to it?

A: Yes. There are correctable errors. Sometimes they are not. You try to use common sense.

Q: You are known for a small yet highly consistent strike zone. How important is it for all decision-makers to be consistent?

A: That assessment about me was made years ago before they brought in QuesTec, the computer thing (used as a tool in 11 of the 30 ballparks). The strike zone was getting very wide with a lot of umpires. I tried to keep mine where it should be. Now, I think most umpires are pretty consistent, tighter for everybody. Consistency is very, very important for everybody. If employees know that you're consistent, they will understand when something unusual comes up once in a while and you veer off course.

Exclusive to USATODAY.com:

Q: Right decisions are not always the most popular. What have you learned about controversial calls?

A: If you truly know in your heart that it is best, you should be just fine. I was working the plate last year and we had a young umpire working the right field line. We had a guy hit a home run and the young umpire called it foul. We got together as a crew and I said that I could tell it was a fair ball. I changed the call and, naturally, the manager came out. He's got 36,000 fans screaming and hollering because we gave a home run to the opposing team. It's just too bad. He's got to let his fans know that he's going to give us static on this play, that he's going to stick up for his team. I tried to talk to him, but I'm not going to get into a yelling match. We knew we got the play right. That's all you can go by.

Q: In a heated discussion, do you ever try to disarm an upset player or manager with humor?

A: No. That would come across as trying to be smart, trying to be a wise guy. It might just make the situation worse. If the manager is being light-hearted, OK. If you do that in the business world, you're upsetting somebody in your company. This is something that affects a life and you can't be joking about it.

Q: In business there is something known as the "rock star CEO," a leader who seeks attention and gets on magazine covers. Do the best umpires make important decisions without drawing attention to themselves?


A: Absolutely. The best umpires walk off the field and the fans say: "Who umpired today?" For leaders, that may not be easy to do all the time.

Q: How do you help develop the next generation of umpires?

A: Any drill instructor can yell at somebody. It's one thing to tell a young umpire where they should have been on a play, it's another to tell them why. What logic comes into play and why they should do it.

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■ WORDS OF WISDOM

- Close calls are not as difficult as unexpected calls.
- Preparation is the backbone of quick decisions.
- When it's not covered by the rules, use fair play and common sense.
- Go with your gut. When you can, ask your crew.
- Be consistent and approachable. Stay professional when others get angry.
- Some errors are correctable. Live with those that are not.

■ ABOUT RANDY MARSH

- Born in Kentucky and still lives just across the river from Cincinnati.
- Attended the University of Kentucky, where he planned to return if umpiring didn't work out. May have become a dentist. U.S. Army Reserve, 1968-74. Married, one daughter.
- Knothole (like Little League) umpire at 15. Major League ump in 1982. All-Star Games (1985, '88, '96, '06); World Series ('90, '97, '99, '03, '06).
- Hobbies: Golf (11 handicap) and photography.
- Underwent open-heart surgery in May. Was back on the field Aug. 1.