

Conflict Resolution

By Norm Glenn - for use by the Pony Club Association of Victoria Inc. (PCAV)

Don't Like Rules or Too Many Rules

Who likes rules or thinks that there are too many rules?

I often hear one of those two opinions. However, I want to impress upon you that the correct application and adherence to the rules, is the gateway to elimination or minimisation of conflict.

If there are no rules or rules are not followed, you end up with anarchy or at the minimum, a mismatch of expectations. The result is conflict.

Understand that as an official/steward (leader) the rules are your friend.

The key

The key to eliminate or minimise conflict is to:-

- (a) Apply the rules correctly and consistently (black and white)
- (b) Make the rules the issue and not yourself or other individuals

Fun and Creativity or No Fun or Creativity?

Some people will argue that rules mean no fun or creativity. I disagree. Within the rules there is plenty of opportunity. The rules do not say you cannot have fun or be creative.

The rules are only no fun for someone who wants to "win at all cost".

The issue is, to make the activity a fair and level playing field. Set the rules up-front, so that everyone has the same expectations.

The PCAV rules do not cover every possible activity that you could create. What the rules say is that you must undertake a risk management assessment and not conflict with the rules that do exist.

Providing you do not breach existing rules, think things through and act safely, you have the license to create all types of activities at pony club.

Often, people stymie creativity because they are focused on only what the rules say. But, what don't the rules say? Therein lays the pathway to creativity. Work with both what is and what isn't there! However, when being creative, you must still set the rules up-front for everyone to know and be consistent.

Why do conflicts occur?

Generally, conflicts are based around one of these reasons –

Perception that something is unjust or mismanaged

- The ‘perception’ is a result of ignorance or misunderstanding of the applicable rules or procedure.

Example –

- i. A rider and/or parent, being upset because the rider was ordered off the course after 3 faults at an obstacle, believing they are entitled to ride-on.

Something is unjust or mismanaged

- An official making up their own rules/procedure, failure to advertise and/or failure to implement rules/procedure, poorly run meetings and/or rallies etc).

Examples: –

- i. A fence judge allows a rider to ride-on after 3 faults at an obstacle, when a previous fence judge has ordered other riders off the course.
- ii. A club advertises a competition and omits to say that “dogs are not permitted” but has a sign on the gate to say “no dogs”, which must be complied with as it is a local council requirement. A family arrived with a dog, having travelled 100 klms and is denied entry.
- iii. A DC decides that all riders must use a snaffle bit at a rally when participating in flat lessons. A parent insists that their child can only ride with a Spanish Snaffle and is denied participation.

- Failure to set rules/procedure before the activity. –

Example -

- i. Committee meeting procedures – a committee member wants to re-raise an issue that was resolved three months ago. However, the right to discuss it again is denied by the President, as it is claimed that the subject matter cannot be re-raised in the same year. Yet, other committee members have been permitted to re-raise other subjects that had also been resolved earlier in the year.
- ii. An instructors point system at each rally to decide the end of year awards, has always applied and is known to the members. The committee decides to change the system in October opting for a round table discussion of committee opinions to decide the awards and the committee fails to advise the members.

- Failure to follow rules and procedures in the good times, when it seems to be unnecessary formality. - Failure to be consistent in both the good and bad times makes matters difficult in the bad times. It creates a lack of precedent and tardy habits.

Example -

- i. An official suddenly brings the rules out to justify their decision. The rules are rejected or received begrudgingly as it is seen as “pulling rank” and provocative. The aggrieved pleads that the decision maker has not always followed the rules, having let others “off-the-hook”, so why is the decision maker discriminating now?

Refusal to follow rules

- There are those who want to manipulate things to suit themselves. Some people will try to bully/intimidate to get their one way.

Airing Dirty Laundry

- 'He said, she said' scenarios.
- Members, especially committee members, bitching behind the scenes rather than bringing concerns to the committee.
- Allowing inappropriate letters (that effectively breach code of conduct) to be read at committee meetings. It is very unwise to read a letter out at a meeting that slanders someone and/or does not objectively and unemotionally, deal with facts. Sure it can be "received and noted" rather than tabled. It does not need to be read by everyone. It is advisable for the President and Secretary to be tactful and use discretion. Maybe it is better to be dealt with by the Executive? Maybe all parties involved can prepare a response and meet under the disputes resolution procedure? Seek to repair relationships within the club, do not "fall into" scenarios that damage them.

Breach of the Code of Conduct

- Someone behaves in an inappropriate manner and does not correct or apologise.

Ways to Avoid Conflicts

To minimise the likelihood of a conflict, you need to invoke the six P's -

“Proper prior preparation prevents poor performance”

To achieve the six P's -

1. Understand that you have a responsibility to your club, the PCAV and your family, to follow the rules. Why?
 - To manage risk and avoid liability (personal, club and PCAV)
 - For efficiency, consistency and positive club environment that fosters the aims of the PCAV. It promotes goodwill and good citizenship.
2. Avoid hiding behind rules only when things go wrong. Set the precedent of following the rules consistently so that:-
 - People know where you stand as a DC, as a President, as a club
 - There are no 'grey' rules. The only time it is grey is when people want to manipulate or bend rules to suit their own purposes
3. Read the rules (bedtime reading until very familiar)
4. Know the current rule books - where to find specific rules. Make sure you always have the latest information. Check the PCAV web site.
5. Keep your rules at hand during pony club activities (includes meetings)
6. Look at rules before conducting an activity
 - Get your entry schedules/forms correct (use the PCAV templates for wording, not necessarily format) – the Zone Rep must approve them!
 - AGM procedures – (DC's are not elected at AGM's)
 - Membership procedures – renewal is not an automatic right.
7. Work from rules, do not make them up or interpret (unless none exist for what you are doing, in which case set rules before the day).
8. Follow this credo “the rules are my friend” – you must make the rules the issue and not yourself.
 - This means you need to follow the rules and avoid making decisions in an ad-hoc manner.
9. **NEVER** succumb to emotional pressure. It will come back to haunt you.
 - Giving way to the 'tears' does not serve anyone. No one learns and it comes back to bite you – e.g. “*you did it for them, why not me?*” or “*You did it last time, why not now?*”
10. Be consistent, black and white – follow the rules, it is much easier
11. Think ahead to what are the common conflicts and apply strategy before the day to minimise (education, getting it right, paying attention to detail)
12. **Conduct specific education for your members** (sessions, newsletters etc).

Yours and the Club Committee's Role in Minimising Conflicts

Like a business, you and/or your club needs to be proactive in reducing conflicts -

1. Support your key people such as DC and President with a uniformed approach
2. Do not be a part of the problem by bitching in the background
3. Whatever your role or if it is a club problem, sit down and create a list of the conflicts that you have encountered or witnessed in the last year
4. Write down the ways you believe the conflicts could have been avoided
5. Determine a course of action to eliminate or minimise in the future
6. Keep records, monitor the conflict numbers and type
7. Make the rules the issue by following, not individuals
8. Follow PCAV rules (know them well)
9. Check your club Rules of Incorporation:-
 - make sure they reflect your club needs.
 - How many have updated in the past two years since age has increased?
 - How many clubs have used the PCAV model rules (not the Consumer Affairs Model)?
10. Maintain written, accessible club By-laws
 - late arrival policy
 - annual award policy
 - ground use policy
 - rally uniform policy
 - whatever is particular to your club and not covered by PCAV rules

WARNING – PCAV By-laws rule 6.3.a.vi (zones 5.1.h)- do not contravene, contradict or alter the intent of PCAV rules.
11. Make your club rules and by-laws available to members via your web site, club rooms; and have them at your committee meetings
12. Tie in your club membership form (new and renewals) to KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) e.g. set-up and pack-up duties
13. Run club meetings properly – understand how a meeting is supposed to be run and follow it.
14. Process new and renewing membership applications properly. It is not an automatic right to renew
15. Run rallies efficiently and make them fun – to time, comply with rules, follow guidelines for rally gear, do not make up your own rules and impose more than the PCAV require.
16. Do things by the book when things are running well so that when they don't run so well, the precedent will have been already well established!! e.g. There is nothing worse than feeling that someone only uses the rules or brings out an old meeting minute as a defence, OR in other situations, to pull-rank, when their usual form is to be tardy, ignore rules and bend the rules to play favourites
17. **NEVER** succumb to emotional pressure. It will come back to haunt you.

If you do these things, I promise you, that you will reduce your conflicts by at least 80% and more likely 99.5%.

Steps To Resolving A Conflict

When queried (not a conflict) - don't answer from memory. Use this phrase, it will be your friend:-

“Why don't we see what it says in the rules?”

When confronted with a conflict, implement as much of this strategy as possible:-

1. You definitely need to adopt a mindset that acknowledges:-
 - You do not need to be right
 - Be prepared to accept, how ever unlikely it may seem, that it is possible for you to have made a mistake
 - Put your ego in you back pocket
 - Take a deep breath and relax, tell yourself it is a discussion (not a fight)
 - Control your emotions, you must be objective and keep calm
 - Never raise your voice or breach the PCAV code of conduct
2. Have the complainant put it down in writing, when possible. It helps them to clarify their thinking and dissipate emotions.
3. Defer the discussion (five or 10 minutes) until you can have another relevant official with you. Always have an objective witness.
4. If a pony club rider, ensure they have their guardian present
5. Find somewhere to sit down with the complainant rather than stand up. Sitting helps to put everyone on equal terms and reduces the intimidating body language that can occur due to height, size and gender differences. Sitting has more chance of defusing the situation.
6. Isolate the complainant and yourself from onlookers who are not involved. Do not allow friends of the complainant to be involved and gang up on you.
7. Take another deep breath (quietly) and Listen! You need to allow them to fully express their real concerns. Do not assume what the complaint is, even when you do know. Sometimes, if you allow them to talk enough, they fix the problem. It may also “give them enough rope”!
8. Once fully heard, then assess if the complainant is:-
 - Objecting to a rule that they know exists
 - Objecting due to a misconception of what the rule is
9. Always confirm or ask questions to clarify - the art of handling the matter is to get to the bottom of what their belief is versus what is reality. E.g. Ask “my understanding of what you have just said is..... have I understood correctly?”
10. **Never say** “ so let me get this straight.....” Anything starting that way will induce defensive emotions.
11. Never quote rules verbally. Always open up a rule book and ask them to read the specific rule and discuss any part that is unclear

If they are at fault –

1. Explain in a conversational manner your responsibility to maintain the PCAV rules. Do not preach or act in an authoritarian manner, be empathetic and compassionate, firm but fair. Examples are -

- DC's rule 6.11
- President's rule 6.1.c
- Risk management – rule 3.1.b:-

3.1.b - Zones, clubs and club members must not act outside of the rules and policies of the PCAV, in accordance with this quote from the insurance policy:
“Insurance cover has been structured based on the PCAV risk management policies, procedures, rules and regulations and anyone acting outside these guidelines may prejudice their entitlement under the policy or be left uninsured.”

- Find the relevant rule for what you are doing. You need to know what rules apply before the day. What authority to act do you have?
2. Show them in the rule book, to prove that you are not making it up.
“Why don't we see what it says in the rules?”
 3. Be true to the PCAV rules and abide by them. You do not have the authority of the PCAV or insurer to decide which rules you will ignore.

If You Are At Fault

1. Acknowledge your mistake, apologise and correct it immediately if possible.
2. If too late to correct, apologise and advise what you will do to avoid the mistake happening in the future. Work out the best amicable agreement possible.
3. Follow through so that a repeat mistake is avoided.

Unresolved Conflict

1. Refer it to a senior official/officer if possible for assistance either at club or zone level.
2. If still unresolved, the disputes resolution outlined in the club's or PCAV's Rules of Incorporation or Consumer Affairs may need to be implemented. If so, seek advice from your zone if you are unsure.