

2026-2027 *FIRST*® Tech Challenge

Escalation Guidelines

This document provides details on the incident response process used by *FIRST* Volunteers and Staff to protect the integrity of the competition.

ESCALATION GUIDELINES

2026-2027 FIRST® Tech Challenge: BIOBUZZ™ presented by RTX

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Contents

1	Key Terminology.....	3
2	Incident Response.....	4
2.1	Incident Response Considerations	4
2.1.1	Incident Response Principles.....	4
2.1.2	Team Interaction Guidelines	5
2.1.3	Rule Review.....	5
2.1.4	Information Gathering.....	7
2.1.5	Reminders and informal warnings vs. VERBAL WARNINGS.....	7
2.1.6	Decision Authority.....	8
2.2	Incident Response Process in Matches	10
2.2.1	Making Judgement Calls.....	10
	Goals	10
2.2.2	Judgement Call Considerations.....	10
2.2.3	Start with a VERBAL WARNING.....	11
2.2.4	Determining STRATEGIC Actions.....	11
2.2.5	Additional Scrutiny	12
2.3	Incident Response Outside of Match Play	13
2.3.1	Application and Examples	14
2.3.2	Egregious or Exceptional Situations	15
2.3.3	Incident Response Decision Aid (Flowchart).....	16

1 Key Terminology

These terms are used in the *FIRST* Tech Challenge Competition Manual and supporting documentation to describe actions and behaviors. It is recommended to know and become familiar with these terms. This list is not comprehensive.

- **Competition Integrity Contract (CIC):** The commitment that teams will compete honestly, follow the rules and their intent, avoid exploiting loopholes, behave with integrity, and allow event staff and *FIRST* Headquarters to enforce the rules. The Competition Integrity Contract (CIC) is located in Section 1 of the [Competition Manual](#).
- **Competitive Advantage:** A benefit involving scoring, RANKING POINTS, field position, access, timing, an opponent's actions, protection of an existing advantage, or another effect that could influence the competition.
- **Egregious or exceptional behavior:** Conduct above and beyond the scope of what is listed in the rules and addressed under G205 because of its severity, its deliberate use for competitive advantage, or continued violations during the event. G205 allows the Head Referee to assign a Yellow or Red Card, when warranted.
- **Incident:** An event or situation that occurred, which is potentially in violation of *FIRST* Tech Challenge rules and may require some form of investigation and potentially require mitigation
- **Infraction/Violation:** An incident that has been assessed to be against the rules and requires mitigation.
- **Judgement Call:** A decision made by volunteers using the information they have available to them regarding the severity of an incident, and the appropriate mitigation.
- **Mitigation:** An action taken to protect the integrity of the competition and health of the program by enforcing *FIRST* Tech Challenge rules in response to an infraction/violation.
- **Penalty:** A form of mitigation assessed to teams which affects their performance in a MATCH. Types of Penalties: MINOR FOUL, MAJOR FOUL, YELLOW CARD, RED CARD, DISABLED, DISQUALIFIED, VERBAL WARNING.
- **REPEATED:** An action that occurs more than once within a MATCH. When the Competition Manual uses REPEATED as a defined condition, apply this definition.
- **STRATEGIC:** An action performed with the aim of gaining a competitive advantage.
- **VERBAL WARNING:** A warning issued by event staff or the Head Referee.

2 Incident Response

FIRST Tech Challenge is built on *Gracious Professionalism*®, shared respect, and the belief that every participant wants to contribute to a positive experience. Volunteers should begin by assuming positive intent and helping participants understand and meet expectations. When incidents do occur, a clear and consistent response can correct the immediate concern, prevent it from continuing, and protect the integrity of the competition. These guidelines help volunteers respond with fairness, empathy, and sound judgment so every participant can enjoy a safe, fun, and amazing FIRST Tech Challenge experience.

This section is intended for event volunteers and leadership who may observe, receive, or respond to a potential violation or conduct concern. It provides a shared approach for responding consistently, identifying the appropriate decision-maker, and escalating when needed. Incidents involving an immediate threat to health, safety, or security require a different response:

Emergency Response: Follow Event Procedures!

If the incident involves personal injury or a direct threat to the safety of any participant: Volunteers should immediately follow event [emergency response procedures](#), seek medical assistance if needed, and contact the event director.

2.1 Incident Response Considerations

If an incident occurs, what is the escalation path for volunteers to assess the potential infraction and determine the correct mitigation? There are several considerations that must be taken into account when responding to an incident:

2.1.1 Incident Response Principles

- **Protect people first.** Follow all emergency, medical, safety, and [Youth Protection](#) procedures.
- **Keep it positive.** Communicate with a calm, friendly, and empathetic tone that helps participants understand expectations and move forward constructively, even when emotions are high.
- **Use observable facts.** Use data and direct volunteer observations rather than relying on reports from 3rd parties and assumptions about intent.
- **Use the least severe response.** The goal is to address incidents using the least severe method that is likely to stop the conduct and protect the competition, unless a rule prescribes a specific penalty.
- **A warning is an intervention, not an entitlement.** While a warning is preferred, a first incident may receive an immediate consequence when the rule specifies a specific penalty for an infraction or severity requires it, in accordance with G205.

- **Address conduct consistently.** Handle similar situations across teams, people, locations, and phases of the event in the same manner.
- **Keep the response timely.** Delay can allow a behavior to become normalized or copied by other teams.

2.1.2 Team Interaction Guidelines

Help us create a positive climate at our *FIRST* events. It's important for all volunteers and staff to remember that we are all here to enable an exceptional team experience, and the teams are our "customers". Just as we would never raise our voice to a VIP or a guest speaker; we should treat team students and mentors with the same amount of respect. Even in frustrating situations we always need to be kind, calm, and patient. As volunteers in our community, it's important to set the right example for everyone by maintaining our focus on team experience.

Be mindful that students have different communication styles, confidence levels, and emotions. Listen with empathy and acknowledge how they may be feeling. Empathy does not require bending rules or procedures.

Explain rules and decisions calmly so teams understand what happened and can learn from the experience. When disagreements occur, offer to review the relevant rule or policy together. If the issue remains unresolved, explain the escalation process and involve the appropriate lead volunteer.

Power Imbalances

When interacting with teams, it's very important to be aware of any power imbalances that may exist. Many of these may be subconscious, the person affected may not even realize they are being deferential. Power imbalances can include things like:

- **Age Imbalance:** Adult volunteers will always have a power advantage over students. There is a natural tendency for students to defer to adults in these situations, even if they don't want to.
- **Gender Dynamics:** All people should be treated with respect and not given an advantage over any other person based on their gender.
- **Size Dynamics:** People with a larger physical presence can naturally feel intimidating
- **Experience Imbalance:** Newer participants may feel less qualified to share perspectives compared to someone that has been volunteering for 10 years.

As a volunteer, it is your responsibility to be aware of these power dynamics and actively counteract them and ensure you're creating opportunities for everyone else to be heard.

2.1.3 Rule Review

The correct response to an incident is largely dependent on the associated rule(s), and any mitigation begins with an understanding of the rule(s) in question. If there is any doubt about a ruling, start by re-

reading the rule. It is expected that re-reading the rules may be needed and volunteers of all skill levels should feel comfortable pulling out the Competition Manual and refamiliarizing themselves when needed.

Some rules are written with clear infraction criteria and specific prescribed mitigations for teams in violation. Often these rules leave very little opportunity for volunteers to make judgement calls. Volunteers only need to determine “did it happen?” and then apply the specified mitigation.

Other rules are written such that they do not refer to specific incidents, but rather around intended gameplay, or patterns of behavior. In these circumstances volunteers are asked to judge whether the actions they observe represent larger behaviors which violate the spirit of the rule. Except for violations that are clearly STRATEGIC or egregious, volunteers will be asked to warn teams about their behavior and work with them to avoid future incidents.

Additionally, some guidelines are listed as part of the CIC, and mitigations may require escalation since they apply to behaviors related to sporting ethics.

No Rule? No Competition Consequences.

FIRST Tech Challenge has many rules. Volunteers should *never* apply a mitigation for any incident that is not covered by the wording or spirit of an existing rule. Volunteers should *never* “create rules.” If a volunteer is uncertain about the correct ruling, they should ask for help and escalate the situation.

The Competition Manual cannot anticipate every circumstance. When judgment is required, the goal is to bring the team into compliance while preserving a positive experience. A volunteer addressing a concern should be able to identify the applicable rule(s), explain how the team’s actions do not meet it, and clearly state what must change.

2.1.4 Information Gathering

Correct incident response requires a clear understanding of the facts of the situation. It's important to note what was directly observed by volunteers as opposed to what was reported by others or is being assumed/inferred. It is also important to understand what discussions occurred between volunteers and the team in question about this and previous incidents.

2.1.5 Reminders and informal warnings vs. VERBAL WARNINGS

Most of the guidance given by volunteers at events falls more under the category of a reminder or simple warning to re-direct behavior to create a safe, fair, and fun environment for teams. Ultimately, the goal is to create a fantastic experience for everyone involved.

- **Reminders and informal warnings:** Supportive guidance that helps participants understand expectations, avoid a violation, or promptly correct a minor concern. These interactions are not the same as official VERBAL WARNINGS as described in the Competition Manual.
- **VERBAL WARNINGS:** A defined response to an identified infraction or as required by a rule and most often delivered by the Head Referee or Event Director. Clearly, directly, and empathetically explain what occurred and what must change.

Key guidelines for warnings:

- Warnings are direct but empathetic descriptions of an infraction and the desired mitigation by the event participant. They should only be delivered when the volunteer feels confident that they can communicate in a calm and friendly demeanor.
- There is no event-wide numerical cap on warnings in general, or the number of warnings prior to an escalated violation.
- Multiple warnings may be appropriate when the team is struggling, responding in good faith, and not gaining meaningful competitive advantage.
- Warnings outside of match play are not assessed for penalties but may be subject to escalation if egregious in accordance with rule G201 or G205 in the Competition Manual.

Examples of simple reminders or warnings

Here are some situations where a volunteer would provide a team with a reminder or warning. If not resolved, these situations may escalate, but it is best to start with a polite request.

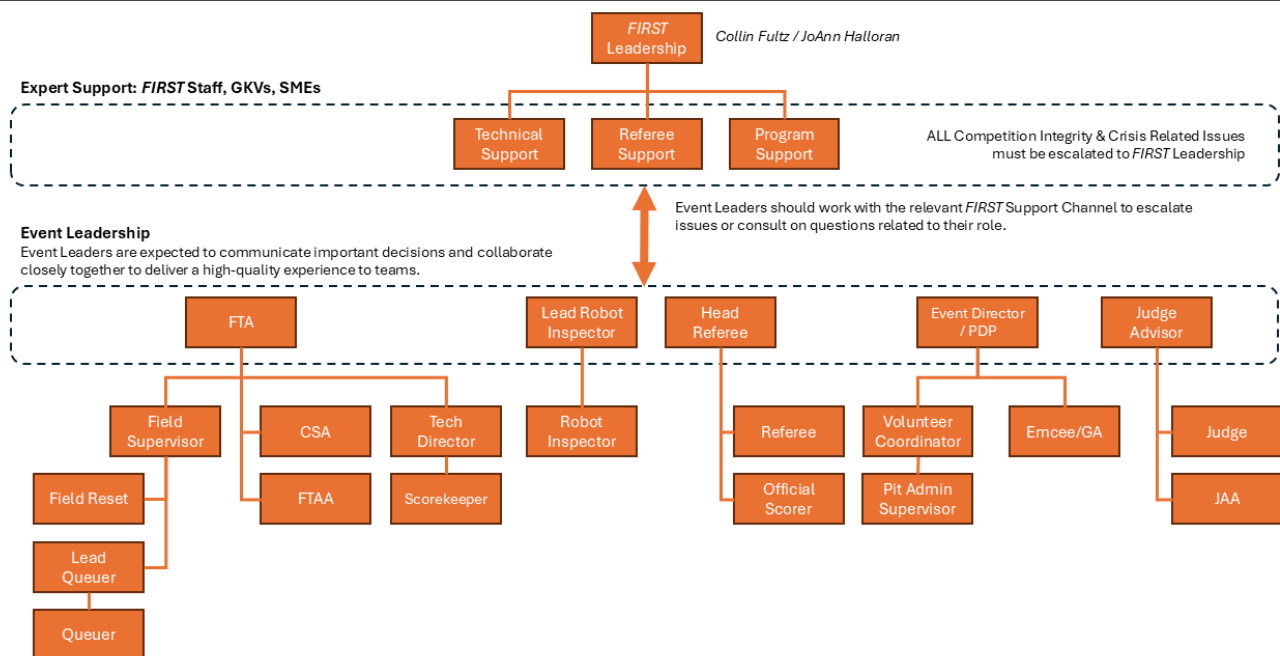
- A student begins working on a robot without safety glasses. A volunteer calmly reminds the student of the safety requirement, and the student puts them on. No further action is needed.
- A coach argues a ruling in a disruptive manner but calms down when a volunteer redirects them to the approved question process.
- A team leaves equipment partially blocking a pit aisle. The equipment is moved promptly when requested, but the team and coach is advised that repeated occurrences may result in escalation.

2.1.6 Decision Authority

Some incidents can be mitigated by any volunteer, others will need to be escalated to a volunteer leader (e.g., a Referee escalating an incident to the Head Referee), and some mitigations will require escalation to the Event Director and/or *FIRST* Headquarters. Any volunteer who is uncertain about the correct decision authority or has concerns about a ruling should ask for help and escalate the situation.

Event leadership should not hesitate to reach out to *FIRST* Headquarters for guidance on a decision or situation where additional support is needed. For detailed official guidance on decision authority, please consult the *FIRST* Tech Challenge Decision Authority Matrix.

FTC 2026-2027 Decision Authority Matrix



The table below details some of the responsibilities of Event Leadership.

Type of concern	Primary event lead	Response approach
Gameplay or drive team conduct connected to a match	Head Referee (HR)	Apply the Competition Manual, even if the relevant discussion or follow-up occurs away from the field. Coordinate broader conduct concerns with the Event Director, PDP, and/or <i>FIRST</i> Headquarters
Field systems, robot connectivity, queuing, or other technical field concerns	<i>FIRST</i> Technical Advisor (FTA)	Diagnose and correct technical issues using available system data. Coordinate robot legality with the LRI, gameplay decisions with the Head Referee, and serious or deliberate technical interference with the Event Director or Program Delivery Partner (PDP).
Robot legality or inspection process	Lead Robot Inspector (LRI)	Resolve robot compliance prior to competition field access. Escalate suspected circumvention or deception to Event Leadership.
Judging interaction or process	Judge Advisor (JA)	Protect the integrity of judging. Escalate conduct that may require an official warning. Award-impacting actions or program-level responses must be escalated to HQ.
Pit, stands, hallways, ceremonies, parking, or other event space	Event Director or Program Delivery Partner (PDP)	Address safety, access, disruption, and conduct. Involve the Head Referee only when a game rule or match-impacting consequence applies.
Online or off-site conduct connected to <i>FIRST</i> participation	PDP or <i>FIRST</i> Headquarters	Escalate when it creates a Code of Conduct, Youth Protection (YPP), CIC, eligibility, or event-safety concern. Do not attempt to police unrelated private conduct.
Egregious behavior or situations with uncertain responses	<i>FIRST</i> Headquarters (HQ)	For serious and/or unique situations that require further guidance, do not hesitate to reach out to <i>FIRST</i> Headquarters. Staff is available to support you.

2.2 Incident Response Process in Matches

After understanding the rules in question, gathering information about the situation, and confirming they have the correct authority, volunteers can then choose the correct incident response.

2.2.1 Making Judgement Calls

In situations where volunteers must make judgement calls about a team's behavior, how should they approach them?

Goals

- Help every team succeed and actively help competitors avoid breaking rules whenever possible.
- Maximize "good times per capita," knowing that making a call in favor of one team will often be at the expense of another.
- Protect the integrity of the competition through reinforcement of *FIRST* Core Values and in the spirit of Gracious Professionalism.
- Err on the side of "let the teams play."
- Be consistent! Consistency is the cornerstone of integrity. Similar situations should be called the same way throughout the event.

2.2.2 Judgement Call Considerations

FIRST makes provisions for dealing with STRATEGIC rule violations and "egregious" behavior, but how does one determine what behavior is egregious?

Consider the factors below together. While violating any of the considerations below may constitute an incident, no single factor proves intent or automatically determines the response unless the rule says otherwise.

- **Impact:** Was there a safety risk, competitive advantage, harm to another participant, delay, or disruption? How significant and reversible was it?
- **Occurrence and pattern:** Was it isolated, REPEATED in one match, REPEATED across the event, or similar to earlier conduct already discussed with the team?
- **Opportunity to correct:** Did the team have clear instructions and a reasonable chance to comply? Did the conduct stop?
- **Behavior and response:** Did the participant(s) cooperate fully, or did they refuse, conceal facts, retaliate, or continue after the boundary was explained?
- **Evidence of intent:** Is there direct, observable evidence of planning, concealment, coordination, or deliberate circumvention?

- **Evaluate the action itself:** A team's experience, reputation, competitive success, or the outcome alone is not evidence of intent. (i.e. Do not infer that a team should know better just because they are a competitive veteran team.)
- **Unacceptable Behavior:** Is there evidence of bullying, harassment, abusive language, refusal to cooperate with reasonable requests, a serious disruption to the event, or prevention of others from participation?
- **Consistency:** Would the same response be used for another team with materially similar facts and the same prior event-level history?

2.2.3 Start with a VERBAL WARNING

Except for obvious STRATEGIC or egregious situations, mitigation should almost always begin with a VERBAL WARNING. Volunteers will politely let teams know that they are concerned about an incident. Volunteers will sometimes ask the team clarifying questions to ensure they fully understand the situation in question. They may then let the team know that their behavior is in violation of a rule.

For situations where volunteers are asked to make judgement calls regarding a team's strategy or intent, volunteers may warn a team if their actions are "close to being assessed a violation."

Does this mean that teams will always get a VERBAL WARNING for their first infraction?

No. While volunteers are encouraged to help teams avoid breaking rules and should err on the side of "let the teams play" - some incidents require immediate mitigation to protect the integrity of the competition.

Does this mean that teams will only get one VERBAL WARNING before other mitigations are applied?

No. Volunteers may provide multiple VERBAL WARNINGS for similar/related incidents, depending on the severity of the infractions in question.

2.2.4 Determining STRATEGIC Actions

When a rule requires a judgment call, volunteers should generally err on the side of "let teams play." An apparent accidental violation that causes no significant damage or meaningful competitive advantage warrants only a VERBAL WARNING when permitted by the rule. REPEATED, deliberate, or reckless conduct should receive additional scrutiny and may require the consequence or escalation prescribed by the Competition Manual.

Determining whether a violation is STRATEGIC, use this three-part test:

1. **Was a rule violated?** Identify the rule and apply its stated violation.
2. **Did the action create or seek a competitive advantage?** The advantage does not need to change the final score. It may involve scoring, access, position, time, opponent restriction, RANKING POINTS, or protection of an existing advantage.
3. **Was the action aimed at gaining that advantage?** Use observable evidence. An admission is not required. Consider whether the action was deliberate, reckless, continued after the concern became apparent, or produced a foreseeable benefit.

Accidental or unforeseeable occurrences cannot be STRATEGIC.

An unexpected ROBOT action that is promptly corrected and provides no meaningful advantage is generally accidental. Continuing the same action after its benefit becomes apparent, exploiting a loophole, or accepting a violation because its benefit outweighs its consequences should be evaluated as STRATEGIC or egregious behavior.

ACCIDENTAL BECOMES STRATEGIC
A ROBOT unexpectedly loses communications in part of the FIELD that prevents the opposing ALLIANCE from accessing SCORING ELEMENTS:
NOT STRATEGIC: When communications are restored, the team immediately attempts to correct the situation and gains no additional meaningful advantage.
STRATEGIC: When communications are restored, the team recognizes that the position restricts an opponent and deliberately keeps the ROBOT positioned there. The accidental situation is now being used for advantage. Note: The FTA can be used as part of the fact-finding process if a team claims technical difficulties.

2.2.5 Additional Scrutiny

Scrutiny should increase as the competition progresses, and teams have opportunities to learn from mistakes and respond to VERBAL WARNINGS. Early in Qualification MATCHES, an isolated or ambiguous violation may reasonably be treated as accidental. As similar conduct continues, less

additional evidence is needed to determine that its consequences were foreseeable, and the action is perceived as STRATEGIC.

During Playoff MATCHES and other high-impact moments, any advantage resulting from a team-controlled violation should prompt immediate consideration of whether the action is STRATEGIC. Accidental or unforeseeable conduct remains non-STRATEGIC.

More consistent with an error	Requires additional scrutiny: Likely STRATEGIC	Evidence of STRATEGIC violation
- isolated occurrence, - plausible connection to normal play, - immediate effort to stop or correct, - candid explanation consistent with observations, and/or - no meaningful benefit or benefit promptly relinquished	- REPEATED outcome, - meaningful advantage, - inconsistent explanation, - conduct recurs in similar circumstances, - prior VERBAL WARNINGS have been issued, and/or - correction is partial or temporary	- planning or coordination is directly observed, - systems or safeguards are circumvented, - facts are concealed or misrepresented, - conduct continues after a clear warning, and/or - advantage is knowingly retained

2.3 Incident Response Outside of Match Play

Incidents may occur in the pits, queue, stands, judging areas, hallways, ceremonies, or other event spaces. When responding outside MATCH play, volunteers should first address any immediate safety concern, gather the available facts, and identify the nature of the incident rather than relying only on where it occurred.

Refer to the **Decision Authority Matrix** to determine the appropriate event lead. Concerns connected to gameplay remain under the Head Referee's authority, while non-gameplay event decisions are generally led by the Event Director.

- Any Youth Protection concern or medical incident/illness taking place at a FIRST event must be reported to FIRST Headquarters (HQ) using the [FIRST Reporting Portal](#).
- Competition Integrity Contract (CIC) or Code of Conduct concerns may require coordination with the PDP or FIRST HQ.
- If behavior is particularly egregious, the Judge Advisor (JA) should be informed for escalation to HQ and potential award disqualification. Focus on maintaining a supportive environment by keeping team feedback strictly between you and your Lead Volunteer. Do not share team observations with other volunteers or participants, as full context is rarely known.

- If a team's behavior impacts your ability to perform your duties, or if you observe repeated or serious issues, report it directly to the Lead Volunteer for your role. They will ensure the situation is addressed appropriately through the standard escalation path to the PDP and/or HQ.

2.3.1 Application and Examples

Always begin with fairly applying applicable rules and any prescribed consequence(s). The goal is to choose the least severe action that will effectively stop the behavior, prevent recurrence, and preserve a fair and positive experience for everyone.

Examples:

- **A team attempts to enforce the rules.** Team members confront another team in the pits about a suspected violation and demand that the team change its ROBOT or behavior. A volunteer redirects the concern to the appropriate event lead and reminds the team that teams do not investigate or enforce the rules. Continued accusations, public callouts, or confrontational behavior may raise a CIC or Code of Conduct concern and should be escalated using the Decision Authority Matrix.
- **Adult interference during judging.** A coach or mentor repeatedly answers questions directed to students or actively coaches them during a judging interaction. During the interview, judges remind the mentor of this rule and the interview continues. If the mentor continues to interject, judges inform the Judge Advisor. Exception: Mentor is acting as a translator with students speaking to the mentor, who in turn may speak to answer the Judges.
- **Conduct in the pits.** A team member repeatedly blocks an aisle after being asked to move equipment. The Pit Administrator has given the team multiple warnings and has informed the Event Director. If the same team later blocks another operational area, the Event Director may treat it as similar event-level conduct and coordinate the next response. A match-impacting penalty is not issued unless a competition rule authorizes one.
- **Suspected inspection circumvention.** An inspector observes a team restoring a noncompliant configuration after inspection. The inspector informs the Lead Robot Inspector, who prevents the robot from competing until compliance is restored, preserves the facts, and coordinates with the Head Referee and Event Director or PDP, as appropriate. Evidence of deliberate deception or a broader sporting-ethics concern is escalated following the Decision Authority Matrix.
- **Harassment away from the field.** A participant reports targeted insulting or threatening comments in the stands or online in connection with the event. The receiving volunteer ensures immediate safety and contacts the Event Director or PDP. Because the concern may involve the Code of Conduct or Youth Protection, it is handled through the appropriate reporting process rather than treated as an ordinary progression of gameplay warnings.

2.3.2 Egregious or Exceptional Situations

What type of infractions would result in a mitigation escalating beyond a warning? Conduct is “egregious” when its severity, impact, or intentional nature requires an immediate consequence or escalation, even without a prior warning. Indicators include:

- Creating a significant safety risk or threatening another person
- Causing substantial competitive harm or purposefully gaining an unfair advantage
- Deliberately cheating, deceiving volunteers, or circumventing a rule or safeguard
- Bullying, harassing, intimidating, or using abusive language
- Refusing a reasonable instruction from an authorized volunteer
- Seriously disrupting the event or preventing others from participating
- Continuing prohibited conduct after a clear warning

Code of Conduct Infractions

The *FIRST* [Code of Conduct](#) provides behavioral and youth protection requirements to ensure the safety of all *FIRST* participants. Incidents involving a potential violation of the *FIRST* Code of Conduct should be escalated to *FIRST* Headquarters.

Competition Integrity Contract (CIC) Infractions

The CIC includes behavioral guidelines to help teams act in a way that embodies *Gracious Professionalism*. It should be extremely rare that violations of these guidelines would result in a more serious mitigation than a warning. The CIC also includes a Sporting Ethics Code which is critical to the integrity of the competition. Ethical violations, such as if a team is believed to be knowingly cheating, should be escalated to *FIRST* Headquarters.

2.3.3 Incident Response Decision Aid (Flowchart)

