

Principles of Bridge and Life

(These can apply usefully to relationships, business, music, and more....)

Introduction

I believe the game of bridge is as much about personal character as about technical skills: handling oneself at the table and knowing how to deal with others. Equanimity, flexibility, focus, respect, and sense of humor win the game.

The following (loosely-organized) principles are my reflections about the game, thinking back to my typical patterns and feelings when I'm playing well (and when I'm not). Some of these are undoubtedly also influenced by the more than 100 bridge books I've studied as I continue to work on my game.

I also try to observe the situations where good players who "should" be winning fail to do their best: one can always learn from occasions where things didn't work.

Some of these principles overlap or repeat one another, but what's wrong with that? It is useful to look at ideas from different angles. The whole list can probably be summed up as: "*Honor others*" - "*Think creatively*" - "*Conserve energy*" - "*Say less*" - "*Move on*" - "*Evaluate context*" - "*Stay balanced*" - "*Count*" ... But the depth appears in the ways these are worked out.

One's own focus

- There is no substitute for thinking clearly on your feet, with a fresh and alert mind.
- Experience should help you make reasonable moves automatically, saving your concentration for the close decisions.
- Think of several alternatives before choosing an action. The most immediate idea is not always best.
- Let your plays speak for themselves; they don't have to be explained to anyone. Especially don't *volunteer* an explanation that nobody asked for.
- When there's only one choice, take it...but also consider a line that holds your probable losses to a minimum. Sometimes accepting a small defeat is much more valuable than staking all on a miracle. Figure out what the opponents can make, and hold your losses to be surely less than that.
- In a disaster, get it over with and move on. Prolonging the agony won't help.
- "What if" discussions after a bad result (or even after a good result) usually waste more energy than they help. Stay fresh for the next problem. When someone has a disaster, just write down the score quietly and move on.
- Take breaks between rounds. Real breaks. Talk about something else.
- Fresh and relaxed beats tense and nervous.
- Don't let emotion keep you from doing your best. But have enough emotional engagement to enjoy what you're doing.
- Do the best you can with what you're given to work with. Don't focus on the things you don't have.
- Don't let anything break your concentration. Little things will get an edge into your mind, and there will go your game.

- When you are the dummy (out of play), relax and really rest. Save your mind for the times when it will matter.
- Collect as much information as you can before committing to the most difficult decisions. Often the decision can become a sure thing given enough context.
- Know more than you say.
- Play steadily and don't give away anything in your manner.
- Do your thinking before any crisis comes up, so you can handle it calmly.
- Don't try to solve the crisis after it's already passed.
- Learn more by listening (reading) than talking...let useful information from the opponents come to you in the bidding, rather than shutting everybody out with an unsound aggressive guess.
- Conduct yourself with quiet confidence. You might be egregiously wrong, but if the opponents don't know that they might misjudge the situation and let you out.
- Say *less* than your instinct tells you to say.
- When you are already in a position to win, don't blow it by trying too hard. "Just take it out of the freezer and heat it up."

Handling teammates/partner

- Let your partner do his/her job.
- Make things as easy and clear as possible for your partner.
- Help your teammates/partner enjoy the game and do their best. Criticizing them in action never helps.
- In any close situation, err on the side of supporting your partner or in leading your partner's suit. Show your partner your solidarity with the partnership effort. Show your partner you believe him or her!
- Choose the action that best keeps your partner in the picture. Let two heads be better than one. A masterminding approach says you don't trust your partner.
- Give your partner accurate information.
- Your partnership's assets combined are far more important than your own in isolation. A telescope is two separate lenses focused together with an optimum distance and orientation.
- "The most important single skill any bridge player can possess is to be a good partner." (motto on the back of score cards)
- Your partner means well.
- If partner may be already out on a limb, don't saw it off. If partner is under some pressure, allow leeway.
- If partner's play had good reasoning but it just didn't work out this time, don't blame your partner.
- Be rational enough that your partner can trust you.
- Prefer a practical if imprecise move if there is any chance your partner would be confused by a more scientific move. The practical move also gives less information to the opponents. This game is an art, not a science.
- If partner makes a final decision, don't overrule it. It's bad for partnership trust. Keep in mind that partner's final decision might well be "pass."
- Keep your promises. Show up for the game on time. Have the cards that fit your bidding. As often as possible put down a *better* dummy than your bidding may have suggested.
- Talk about "we" and "us" rather than "you" or "I" or "me." It's a cooperative effort.

- When partner is playing badly, don't say much. When partner is playing very well, don't say much. Do compliment partner on finding an outstandingly good play, but away from the table.
- Build rapport by talking about things other than the task at hand.
- It is more important to build partner's tactics and attitudes than to build partner's technical skills.
- Play a simple and logical set of agreements rather than a complicated system that requires a lot of memory. Why waste part of your mental effort on ideas that are unnecessarily complex? Elegance and grace make things easy for both partners.
- A difficult defense superbly played in cooperation by both partners is one of the most fulfilling aspects of the game...and one of the best places to pick up huge wins. Defense sets a great partnership apart from a good one.

Handling opponents

- Help your opponents have a good time and feel respected. If they don't keep coming back for more, there's no game.
- If you need the opponent to make an error to give you any chance, put the guess as early as possible so the opponent can't collect information first.
- Make it easy for opponents to volunteer information you can take advantage of. (If they want to tell you what their cards are, let them!) Let as much unforced information come to you as possible.
- Anticipate the opponent's move before he makes it; you might be able to stay a step ahead.
- Trust your opponents to know what they are doing. That is the case that matters. If they don't know what they're doing, you'll win anyway by skill and don't need to try hard to beat them.
- "Be courteous -- opponents may just be friends we haven't met yet!" (motto on the old standard Yellow Card)
- Give your opponents the room they need to make honest mistakes. Don't take their bad judgment out of the picture; let them use it to help you!
- Make your opponent guess last.
- Use subtle irrationality only in situations where partner can't be fooled, or where it doesn't matter if partner is fooled. The idea is to have partner trust you but also create the illusion that the opponents dare not trust you. (The illusion is enough -- make them second-guess you, especially when you're right.)
- Don't step into the opponents' argument. Politely and firmly remind them that it's time to go to the next hand.
- If opponents choose to defeat themselves with an unsound play, let them. Don't try too hard when the win is already coming to you; save your energy.
- If the opponents overstep, double them: not to punish them but to protect your own score.
- Push the opponents only *slightly* beyond their comfort level, and do it as early as possible -- they'll make the most wrong guesses that way. If they guess right anyway, don't sweat it.
- Let your opponents play their game, but don't get sucked into it! It is much easier to win on neutral turf or your own turf than on the opponents' turf.
- Don't let the opponents glimpse uncertainty in any of your plays.

Technique

- Count. Collect information all the time. Develop habits so information flows to you all the time without any "extra" effort. Count. If you know where almost everything is, having a mental picture of what everyone is working with, you can figure out the contexts for their decisions and know what is happening. Much of that picture can already come into focus early in the hand as inferences, and then continue to be refined as more facts come in. Count. A clear mental picture leads to plays that are either sure or very strongly with the odds. Count. Build a powerful combination of reasoning and intuition. Count.
- Know the language, the information that can be communicated legally through bids and plays. That is the way to know what your partner is doing, and to collect free information from the opponents.
- A moderate pace is best. Don't play too fast; you'll miss important details. Don't play too slowly; you'll annoy impatient people and perhaps lose your own focus as well.
- "Pass" is more often the winning bid than one might expect.
- Don't bid the same feature twice. Your partner heard you the first time.
- If partner has a bad hand but one long suit, try to get that suit to be trump so your partner can contribute some value. That is to say: your best role on any given hand might be to become the dummy; don't hog all the contracts.
- Often it's good to save your high cards for later...but not so late that they go away.
- One can win more by playing steadily solid defense than by playing too much offense.
- If you have wasted high cards in the opponents' suit, your hand and your partner's hand are not worth as much as it sounds like they "should" be. Circumstances alter values, sometimes severely.
- Timing is crucial.
- Be willing to give up one trick to get more in return -- take losses early to keep control.
- On offense: only rarely is it right to "take the money and run."
- Think as far ahead as you can, but not so far ahead that you forget what you are doing in the current moment.
- Play the card you are known to hold...especially if it is equal in value to some other card they don't know you have.
- Make plays that offer the opponent a losing option -- don't paint him into a corner where his only remaining desperation play will work.
- Know the basics thoroughly. Review them regularly.
- Learn how to sense when your own assets, nice enough in isolation, are worthless in context. And also sense when a meager-looking feature is worth gold. Act accordingly. (This level of understanding is difficult!)
- Capture the opponents' high cards, not your partner's high cards.

Tactics

- Don't try to outrun an incoming attack, just sidestep it. Let the opponent waste his own energy.
- The simplest approach is often best. Fancy stuff just creates confusion.
- Arrange the situation so even if you're wrong you get something out of it. You can still win without being right.
- If a fish jumps into your boat, keep it.
- You can't change the laws of physics. If a hoped-for outcome is inconsistent with the facts, discard that strategy and look for something else.

- Some situations call for passive strategy: don't try so hard that it gives something away.
- Don't volunteer information unless it can help your side more than it helps opponents.
- When you see a clear solution, take charge. When you don't, don't!
- Think ahead during the bidding so the maximum amount of free information will come to you, while you give out no more information than necessary yourself.
- When it's right to play defense, play defense. When your side has no defense, try to take the contract or at least to push the opponents beyond their comfort zone.
- Negative inferences are just as important as the clues you do hear and see. They can reveal a remarkable amount of information; learn to listen to silence.
- If your hand and partner's hand don't fit, stop bidding. Let the opponents have this time bomb if they want it.
- If you already have the opponents right where you want them, don't get greedy and warn them to escape. Go for S J Simon's "best result possible rather than the best possible result." Don't gild the lily.
- If you have a natural advantage, don't throw it away. If you are at a disadvantage, act boldly anyway.
- Keep your partner on balance and the opponents off balance.
- A bad play can pay off in future situations.
- Focus on getting a good result for your side, not on giving a bad result to the opponents. Treachery isn't as profitable as simply playing well, especially in the long run.
- "Anything you say can and will be held against you." If your bid won't help your side buy the contract or help your partner's defense, choose to pass instead. Why tell the opponents what you have? Bids that advertise weakness backfire on the user at least as often as they work.
- A mostly moderate approach will probably win in the long run. Let those with extreme or uncooperative tactics burn themselves out.
- Raise your partner's bid sooner rather than later. It lets partner in on the good news immediately, and it shuts the opponents out of space where they could have done something to their advantage.

General attitude

- When a problem appears binary, stop to think of a third option (no matter how crazy) before acting. The third way might be better!
- The previous deal is over.
- On some days bad luck will stop even the best players.
- Focus energy on possibilities that need the attention or the close decision; let everything else take care of itself.
- One learns most by playing against and with the best.
- Every card might matter.
- Review both your good results and bad results *away from the table* to learn from them; be reflective and honest about aspects that need improvement. (One of my own acknowledged weakness is opening leads....)
- Let the director and other authorities do their jobs. Cooperate and don't take matters into your own hands. When something goes wrong, notify the appropriate authority. The authorities need to feel respected and honored in their jobs just as anybody else does.
- Principles are more important than memorization of facts. But the core of facts is also necessary. Keep a balance.

- If things appear easy, think of what might go wrong and guard against the unlikely bad breaks.
- If things appear impossible, visualize a possibility that at least offers a chance; don't give up.
- Even the winners might be right only 55% of the time.
- Trust the game to deliver reasonable rewards and punishments -- vigilante or vindictive tactics are a waste of energy. The system is bigger than you are.
- There is always room for self-improvement.
- Even the most brilliant player in the world cannot influence every hand. Pick the battles where your opinion does make a difference, and let the others go by.

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<https://www-personal.umich.edu/~bpl/bridge-principles.htm>