

ETHICS FOR EXPERTS  
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HOW IMPORTANT are ethics to the game of bridge? To my mind they are crucial. If the foundation of bridge is not completely "clean," then the entire game is tainted.

The sad truth is that every player is guilty of some ethical misdemeanors, i.e., those of which the player is unaware (when he is aware, it's a felony). Once information has been transmitted, a player's judgment is affected. You cannot truthfully say, "I was always going to make that bid anyway," because you cannot *know* what you would have done. Even if you made your decision prior to partner's huddle, this claim is invalid for two reasons: first, you may be unaware of how much the onset of the huddle crystallized the decision for you; second, and more important, *haven't you ever changed your mind?*

People sometimes come to me saying, "I have an ethical problem for you," and my answer is, "You already ruined it." The situation should always be presented as a straightforward problem with no huddle. Even then, there is a major difficulty. Many errors occur because the player at the table says to

himself, "It doesn't matter what I do." Regardless of whether the responder suspects that it may be an ethical problem, he knows there is a relevant decision to be made, and this must affect his judgment. Strangely, this can work against players who are trying to justify a questionable call. Whenever I poll a hand where partner has made a penalty double, the expert asked almost invariably passes. His reasoning, conscious or otherwise, goes as follows: "He (the poller) probably doubled. I am not going to be the (only) one to pull the double and miss an 1100 penalty like his idiot partner did. If they make it, I can always say I would never have doubled with that hand."

Thus a "right" answer is assured. The same type of bias (in reverse) works itself on directors and committee members. The temptation to think, "I would never have let the opponents go +930 on this hand," is great. Of course, the good adjudicators are already aware of this, whereas I believe that the majority of players are unaware of the shift in their judgment when answering ethical problems.

### Short Huddles

One of the most pervasive ethical problems that should be faced is the two-second huddle. This frequently conveys information to partner (intentionally or otherwise) and is extremely difficult to police. One of the most common examples is this:

Opener	Responder
1 ♣	1 ♠
2 ♠ (after a short huddle)	

The short huddle shows three-card support. Also, a short huddle followed by giving a preference tends to show a doubleton whereas a bid in tempo shows three. In competitive auctions, the short huddle followed by passing can be used as a weapon, either showing a desire to compete, for example:

West	North	East	South
1 $\diamond$	1 $\spadesuit$	2 $\diamond$	2 $\spadesuit$
pass			

or showing doubt about the current contract, for example:

West	North	East	South
1 NT	double	2 $\clubsuit$	double
pass			

Even if the existence of these huddles is conceded, it is unlikely that a favorable ruling could be obtained by the non-offenders. In most cases they won't even bother to call the director.

### Flexible Bids

An old bone of contention between experts revolves around the following question: Is it better to carefully explore the best contract by describing your hand, or is it better to take a quick stab at a final contract? The bashers believe that what they lose in science they more than gain in opponents' "errors" due to lack of information. The flexible bidders (or flexers) either do not agree with this or feel more comfortable with the type of results they achieve.

It has been my experience that bashers are more successful than flexers, or at least more successful than I think they "should" be. The major reason for this, I believe, is that bashers will be faithful to their style as long as partner is bidding in tempo, but after partner huddles, *bashers become flexers*. This means that when partner has a classic hand for his bidding the basher immediately bids the best contract giving away no unnecessary information, but when partner has a slightly flawed bid, the basher can check out alternatives by flexing.

For example, Ben the Basher holds:

$\spadesuit$  A 10 8 x x    $\heartsuit$  x x    $\diamond$  A Q x    $\clubsuit$  A Q x.

His partner opens one club. Ben responds one spade and partner, after some consideration, bids one notrump. Without the huddle Ben would have bid three notrump in order that the defenders might not be given any unnecessary information. However, now Ben checks back with two clubs, reasonably enough, and partner bids two hearts. Recognizing the most likely meaning behind the huddle, Ben flexes with three clubs, natural and forcing. Partner bids three hearts, Ben bids three notrump. Partner bids four clubs, Ben bids four diamonds and partner bids six clubs. Partner's hand was:

♠ Q ♥ A K x x ♦ K x x ♣ K J x x x.

This was a well-bid hand, and if you believe a committee could change this result you *may* be right, but there are countless hands such as this where Ben can either gain or not lose.

Here is another situation:

Opener	Responder
1 NT	2 ♥ (transfer)
2 ♠	3 NT

Normally, this is merely a choice of games, but responder may have a hand that only has slam possibilities if partner has at least three spades. Opener usually passes or bids four spades at this point, but he may also cuebid. Felix the flexer *will* cuebid whenever he has a maximum hand in light of his already having failed to pre-accept over two hearts. Of course, the disadvantage of the cuebid is that it may help the opponents' defense when partner, as expected, signs off. Therefore, Ben the Basher will only think of cuebidding when partner has huddled. It is true that an ethical partner would have planned his auction by thinking before he bid two hearts, but if Ben is alert it will come to the same result. Yet again, it's a case of "heads I win, tails you lose" for Ben.

Flexers tend to remain faithful to their style and don't take

advantage of partner's in-tempo bidding. They have no realistic recourse to the director when the bashers flex. After all, they don't bash on *every* hand, just the ones that look right to them—and who can rule on that?

### Forcing Bids

I once watched a world-famous expert at rubber bridge hold: ♠ 10 x x ♥ K 10 x x x ♦ x x x x ♣ x.

His partner, also an expert, opened one club. He responded one heart and his partner jumped to two spades, whereupon he passed. As he left the table I whispered to him, "Do you know you were unethical on this hand?"

"What are you talking about?" he said. "Nobody huddled."

"Exactly my point," I replied. "What would you have done if partner had huddled?"

He thought about this and confessed he would probably have bid two notrump, hoping to hear three hearts, which he would raise to four hearts.

Obviously this doesn't feel right, but what can be done? If you call the director after the hypothetical huddle example above, you might be told that a player has every right to bid after partner has forced. If you call the director after the no-huddle example, you might be laughed out of the building.

Even if the huddle came before the one-club opening, it would probably be "right" to keep the bidding alive—partner might be 5-5 in the blacks with a near two-club opening and four spades might be cold. This case would be even more difficult to adjudicate.

### Forcing Passes

I remember reading about a case in which the director was called after a huddle followed by a forcing pass. His ruling, in effect, was that the forcing pass conveyed a message of doubt and the huddle said the same thing. Therefore no unauthorized information had been transmitted, and no redress was in order. Because I don't wish to offend, I won't print my one-

word reaction to this ruling. However, there seems to me to be a world of difference between an in-tempo pass ("I don't really want to do anything") and a huddle-pass ("I really want to do something").

A further problem can arise if partner, after the in-tempo pass, "takes a view" and passes. No complaint can reasonably be made, even if the opponents admit the pass is forcing, because no unauthorized information has been transmitted. The huddle transforms the pass into a 100% forcing situation. Tough, huh?

### Defensive Carding

Some of the most egregious ethical improprieties occur during the play. However, the issues are so complicated and sometimes so subtle that often nobody at the table realizes that anything untoward has happened. Let's look at a fairly simple situation:

	North (dummy)	
	♠ 6 4	
West	□	East
♠ K 8 5		♠ Q 10 9 7 2
	South (declarer)	
	♠ A J 3	

East gains the lead in a notrump contract and shifts to the ♠10, on which everyone plays small. East continues with the ♠7, on which South after some thought plays the ♠A. West, after a long thought, unblocks the ♠K. East regains the lead, cashes the ♠Q, and the defense triumphs. But what if West had played that king smoothly? Perhaps East would have played him for a doubleton and tried an alternate defense.

Another position:

	North (dummy)
	♠ K Q J 6
West (you)	<input type="checkbox"/>
♠ 5 2	

Declarer, who has opened one notrump, leads the ♠3. You follow with the ♠5, dummy plays the ♠K, and partner mulls over the situation. What could be more natural now than for you, while partner considers, to plan your defense. Of course, you suddenly have no problem piecing together declarer's highcards. Indeed, after partner ducks you may even now be able to make a fine play, such as ducking a king when declarer leads low from dummy to his queen in another suit.

Another example: You lead against three notrump and partner later wins a trick and starts thinking. Obviously, partner is not long in your suit, so now you can quite possibly calculate declarer's distribution. Incidentally, if partner returns your suit after huddling, it usually means he has a doubleton. This is a recurring ethical problem.

I found the following hand instructive:

	North (dummy)	
	♠ J 5	
	♥ Q 7 3	
	♦ 7 4	
	♣ K Q J 8 5 4	
West	<input type="checkbox"/>	
♠ K 10 9		
♥ A 8 5 4		
♦ A 9 6 3		
♣ 10 9		
South	North	
1 ♦	3 ♣ (invitational)	
3 NT		

In a major matchpoint event, West, a world-famous expert, led the ♠10, to the J, Q, 2. East returned the ♠4 to the 3, K, 5, and West continued with the ♠9 to the ♦4, ♠6, ♠A. Declarer led the ♣2 to the 9, K, 3 (upside-down signaling), then the ♦7 to the 5, king, ace. West now played the ♥A to the 3, 10, king, and paused for thought. Eventually, deciding that either declarer had tried to steal a diamond trick or it made to difference, he returned a diamond.

Declarer's hand was:

♠ A 7 3 2 ♥ K J ♦ K Q J 10 8 2 ♣ 2

He now got out for down one (switch the ♥7 and ♥8 and he would have made it by squeezing East). Obviously, a club shift at trick-seven would have set the contract two tricks and this was clearly the correct defense for two reasons. First, if South held the ♣A, he would have opened one notrump. Second, if declarer were trying to steal a trick, he would have attacked hearts, not diamonds, missing the queen.

What is my purpose in showing this hand? My point is that East ducked the club smoothly. Had he huddled before ducking, I have no doubt that West would have hit upon the winning defense. Had the declarer then claimed he was damaged, he would have been told that this West did not require any extraneous help to get this obvious position right. Further attempts to pursue the situation would probably result in South being told not to make frivolous protests.

How many times have you heard a player on defense say, "I'm not thinking about this trick; I'm thinking about the whole hand." This normally means the player does not wish to be caught thinking on some subsequent trick. Aside from the fact that this is a little disingenuous, there are several flaws to it. First, information may be given to partner. Second, I've noticed that the player sometimes is actually thinking about this trick but doesn't want to admit it. Finally, in my opinion, declarer has a right to know on which trick you have a



problem—I believe speedy thought should be rewarded. Then, of course, there are the pairs who “always think before playing to the first trick,” except when they don’t. Strangely enough, they usually forget to think when they want partner to continue with the “obvious” defense. This brings us to the subject of signaling.

### Signals

When partner is winning a trick you often need to signal to tell him how to continue. Frequently, it is not clear which signal to give, so you play your card after deliberation. Now partner finds the winning defense and you congratulate each other after the hand. It feels very wrong to me that the tempo of the signal becomes part of the signaling method itself. I don’t even want to mention (well, maybe I do) players who emphasize their clear-cut signals by huddling before making them—everyone knows that’s wrong. But the case of the unclear signal may be just as bad, if not worse. Take for example, the Smith Echo. It may be really difficult to quickly know if you want partner to continue or switch. But by thinking about this signal you dramatically increase the probability of partner knowing the winning defense. He will never go wrong when you have given him the “winning” signal, and when you haven’t he may be able to use bridge logic to figure it out. Meanwhile, had your signal been in tempo, partner was much more likely to have followed it blindly without thought.

Personally, I refuse to think before making a signal. I must admit this has cost me many contracts over the years, either because I made the wrong signal or because partner misread my ambiguous signal, or because he didn’t even realize I was signaling. In fact, sometimes partner has tried to give me a ruff in the suit I was signaling, which I doubt would have happened if I had considered my signal more carefully. For me, all this is counterbalanced by knowing that when my partner does the right thing, I feel completely clean about it.

## Solutions

The first solution is directed at the officials. It should be a matter of absolute routine for the director to rule in favor of the non-offending side. The onus to appeal should always be on the huddlers. The only situation that the director should rule for the offending side is where he feels sure that an appeal by the non-offenders would be frivolous. Also, it should be a grave decision for the appeals committee to rule in favor of the offenders. Only this way can a message be sent throughout the bridge world.

Completely solving the problem of short huddles is not practical, but there are certain things one can do to alleviate the problem. One is to take two to three seconds over every call, thus removing any inferences from fast actions. Another good idea is to sometimes plan your auction, huddling over the obvious action but preparing your next bid. If the timing of your huddles is somewhat random, it is difficult for partner to derive any advantage from them. The biggest crime in this area is to find yourself short-huddling when you want partner to bid, and fast-passing or signing off when you want him to pass.

There is really no answer to the problem of flexible bids after huddles, except for each player to be guided by his own conscience. When partner bids quickly, consider allowing for the hands you "know" he can't have. When he bids slowly, consider the advantages of being unscientific.

Regarding forcing bids, I believe every pair's convention card should state whether they are allowed to pass forcing bids. If the answer is "no," then any violation would require extreme justification (i.e., if a player psyched an opening bid, he could pass the response). If the answer is (more commonly) "yes," then bidding over a slow forcing bid would call for careful scrutiny. Similarly, every pair should have its forcing-pass agreements as clearly defined as possible on its card. Any situation not so defined could be deemed non-forcing by a director or a committee.

When partner huddles on defense, consider if it could be logical to play him for what he "can't" have. If so, you should play for just that. For example, while partner is huddling about whether to duck an ace, your only thoughts and plans until partner actually plays should be under the assumption that partner does *not* have the ace.

Thinking about which card to play on a future trick should be illegal, with two exceptions: being on lead, and the first trick. My suggestion for how trick one should be handled is as follows: The four players should jointly decide how long declarer should take before playing to the first trick (probably between 10 and 30 seconds), with the highest number determining the action for that table. After tabling his hand, the dummy (or the opening leader) should wait the agreed time and announce "play." Thereafter any thought before playing a card must pertain to that card. Perhaps declarer should be allowed to play before the agreed time if he wishes, but then the next player should have the right to play his card at any time up to the moment dummy calls, "play."

Thinking about a signal should be illegal. If your signaling methods frequently require you to huddle, perhaps they are too complicated. Don't panic—nobody's going to go for this anyway. However, I am seriously suggesting that you try it.

### Summary

Huddling is like ringing an alarm bell in partner's head. It behooves us to attempt to overcompensate after huddle situations to atone for all the occasions of which we are unaware. If you never find yourself in the situation of making a bid or play that you "know" to be the losing action, you cannot be an actively ethical player. Instead of attempting to rationalize taking the winning action, try to justify the case for the losing action.

Why should you do these things when those around you do not?

Only because we must start somewhere, and the only person whose ethics you can truly improve is yourself. If we don't do this, we shall never be able to elevate this game that entralls us to the level it deserves.