

“Director, Please!”

Your opponents have just called the director to the table, and you feel as if you’ve been sent to the principal, or worse, you feel that your opponents are trying to intimidate you. Understanding the director’s role may help alleviate some of these feelings. Understanding the concept of proprieties will help you feel more confident in uncomfortable situations. Understanding your own responsibilities to uphold the ethics of the game will make you a more respected partner and opponent.

Disclaimer. Please be aware that the ACBL gives club managers and directors a lot of latitude in how they choose to run their games. This article presents this author’s views only, and is simply meant to demystify common rulings and procedural situations for the players. It should not be construed as a “do-it-this-way” manual.

RESTORING EQUITY

We directors are not school principals – or even football referees. Our job is not to punish, it is to *restore equity to the non-offending side*. To the best of our ability, and as directed by the laws of duplicate bridge, when something irregular occurs at a bridge table, we resolve each case as equitably as possible to both sides. Our goal is to see that the non-offenders are not damaged by an irregularity. If damage does occur, and if that damage was directly caused by the irregularity, a director will try to award an adjusted score. If no damage was caused by the irregularity, or if any damage was self-inflicted, no score adjustment will be awarded, other than that mandated by the laws. In other words, an irregularity committed by the opponents does not guarantee you a good result on the board.

Although a director’s overriding concern is equity, sometimes penalties must be handed out. These could be *procedural* or *disciplinary penalties*. A procedural penalty might be incurred for a cell phone violation or for continued slow play. A disciplinary penalty might be assessed for a Zero-Tolerance violation. These penalties are given to the pair involved, and there is no corresponding reward given to that pair’s opponents.

ZERO TOLERANCE, ACTIVE ETHICS, AND PROPRIETIES

You’ve heard the terms, but do you know what they mean? The ACBL’s *Zero Tolerance* policy covers player behavior.¹ If you’re polite and exhibit good sportsmanship, you’re already following this Z-T policy. If you’re constantly badgering your partner, gloating over your opponents, arguing with the director, or giving gratuitous lessons on every hand, you need to change your behavior immediately. A Z-T violation should receive an immediate disciplinary penalty. Repeated violations will result in an ejection from the event. Club directors may choose to suspend a player violating this policy from his or her club indefinitely.

The ACBL *Code of Active Ethics* emphasizes the principle of full disclosure.² All information as to bidding and style agreements between you and your partner must be made available to your opponents. Bridge is not a game of hidden agreements, and partnerships that do attempt to conceal partnership agreements are not abiding by this code. During the auction, this information should be conveyed to the opponents only upon request. Actively ethical players, when declaring, will frequently volunteer

¹ American Contract Bridge League, “Zero Tolerance Policy” (http://www.acbl.org/tournaments_page/ethics-and-discipline/zero-tolerance-policy/ : 2016).

² Ibid., “ACBL Code of Active Ethics” (http://www.acbl.org/tournaments_page/ethics-and-discipline/active-ethics/ : 2016).

information to the opponents before the opening lead is made, ensuring that their opponents are fully informed. Active ethics requires you and your partner to play conventions responsibly. At a minimum, you know what conventions must be alerted, you know how to explain your conventions, you have discussed in what situations those conventions do and do not apply, and you have discussed variations in style that might occur depending on vulnerability or auction position. The Code of Active Ethics also includes comments on behavior and makes a strong statement on slow play.

Duplicate bridge *proprieties* stem from this statement in the *Laws of Duplicate Bridge*: “Duplicate bridge tournaments should be played in strict accordance with the Laws. The chief object is to obtain a higher score than other contestants whilst complying with the lawful procedures and ethical standards set out in these Laws.”³ All players should become familiar with the laws covering proprieties: Law 73 covers appropriate and inappropriate communication between partners; Law 74 covers conduct and etiquette; Law 75 explains mistaken explanation vs. mistaken call; Law 76 governs spectator behavior.

- ♣ Note that club directors are allowed to conduct their games in a more laid back manner, but all players planning to play in tournaments are expected to be familiar with proprieties.
- ♣ Most players learn proprieties by osmosis. They commit an infraction, the opponents call the director, and the director makes a ruling. *This ruling is an opportunity to learn proper bridge etiquette.* It is not an offensive action by your more experienced opponents. If you don’t understand the ruling, ask the director for a more complete explanation after the game.

UNAUTHORIZED INFORMATION

Authorized information: This is information you obtain from legal calls and plays, from illegal calls and plays that were accepted, or from the mannerisms of the opponents – but the latter at your own risk. *Note that a player may not deliberately mislead an opponent by an action, such as unduly hesitating when holding a singleton in a suit.*

Unauthorized information: This is information you obtain from partner’s actions, such as a noticeable break in tempo, an unexpected gesture or special emphasis on a bid or play, a remark, a question or reply, an unexpected alert or failure to alert, etc.

Whenever an irregularity occurs at the table, the potential for unauthorized information exists. If your partner does something that might give you unauthorized information, you *may not choose from among logical alternatives an action that could have been demonstrably suggested by the extraneous information.*⁴ When partner has made unauthorized information available to you, it’s not always easy to determine the most ethical action to take. Do your best. If your opponents think your action might have been influenced by the unauthorized information, they will call the director. The director will listen to all sides, determine if the opponents were damaged, and make a ruling, possibly after conferring with other directors or experienced players. *You have the right to appeal this ruling.* If you don’t understand the ruling, be sure to ask the director for an explanation after the game.

Many players feel that if the director has cautioned the opponents to take no inference from unauthorized information, they are free to do whatever they choose. If they get a bad result, the director will consider they were damaged and adjust the score. **This is not correct!** If a pair is damaged by their own actions, even after an opponents’ irregularity, *there is no score adjustment.* Players are not allowed

³ *Laws of Duplicate Bridge* (n.p.: American Contract Bridge League, 2008), 87, Chapter VII, “Proprieties.” Pages 87-94 cover Laws 72-76, all dealing with some aspect of duplicate bridge proprieties.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, Chapter IV.B, “Irregularities.”

two bites at the apple. Players should also be aware that adjusted scores do not need to balance. A director can assign separate scores on a board to each pair at the table.

ALERT!

Players like learning new conventions, but with the fun of using those conventions comes the responsibility of using them properly.

- ♠ You are responsible for knowing whether or not your new convention requires an *alert*, an *announcement*, a *delayed alert*, or a *pre-alert*. If you're unsure, check out the ACBL's *Alert Chart* or talk to the director.
- ♠ Do you know *how* to alert? You are obligated to give both an audible and a visual alert. Say, "Alert!" and tap the Alert card in the center of the table or tap the Alert strip on the bidding box, whichever is relevant. You are responsible for making sure the opponents are aware that a bid was alerted.
- ♠ You and your partner should discuss in what situations the convention applies and in what situations it doesn't. For example, is Sandwich NT played by an unpassed hand? Are weak jump shifts played only in competition?
- ♠ You and your partner should discuss your bidding style. Do you ever open a weak two with five or seven cards? Does your opening preempt vary with vulnerability? What response system do you use after Unusual vs. Unusual?
- ♠ General Chart conventions are usually allowed in all events, but the same does not apply for Mid-chart and Superchart conventions. Are you allowed to play your wonderful new convention in the event? Check with the director!

An opponent asked for an explanation of an alerted bid. Unless you're playing on line or behind screens, only the partner of the bidder alerts and, if asked, gives an explanation of the alerted bid. You do not alert or explain your own bid.

- ♠ Disclose all special information conveyed through the partnership agreement.
- ♠ If there is no partnership agreement, or the bidding style or sequence has not been discussed, do not reply, "I think it means" The correct response is, "We have no agreement" Note that the opponents may call the director, who will determine if the auction is such that they are entitled to more information.
- ♠ "Standard" or "Bergen" are examples of inappropriate responses to an opponent's request for information on your partnership agreements.

Partner forgot to alert your bid or gave the wrong explanation of the bid. What are your responsibilities? First, you must not alert partner by any word, motion, or facial expression. Second, you must base your actions only on your own hand and the available *authorized* information, not on partner's misalert. Finally, you must inform the opponents of the problem, *at the first legal opportunity*, and the opponents may choose to call the director.

- ♠ If your side is declaring the hand, inform the opponents *before the opening lead is made*. Saying anything during the auction gives unauthorized information to your partner. Leaving the table to talk to the director tells partner there is a problem, so don't do it!
- ♠ If your side is defending the hand, inform the opponents *at the conclusion of the play*. Saying anything when your side is defending gives unauthorized information to your partner. Leaving the table to talk to the director tells partner there is a problem, so don't do it!

The opponents alerted a bid. The best way to ask for an explanation is, “Please explain.” There are several schools of thought on whether or not to ask for an explanation of an alert during the auction.

Warning! The annotations following each quote denote the author’s personal opinion.

- ♠ “I never ask for an explanation. It might give the opponents a chance to uncover a miscommunication.” First, there are ample protections in place to keep the opponents from benefiting from your question. Second, in contested auctions, many bids change meanings depending on the conventions used by the opponents. If I don’t know what the opponents’ bids mean, I might misalert, misexplain, or misuse my side’s bids – and I’m responsible for those errors. Finally, this attitude doesn’t seem very sportsmanlike to me.
- ♠ “I only ask for an explanation if I’m thinking of bidding.” This puts my partnership in a very awkward position. If I ask for an explanation, but pass, partner knows that I was thinking of bidding something. His subconscious cannot help mulling over the possibilities. If I don’t ask for an explanation, partner knows that I had nothing to think about. In other words, my action, or lack thereof, has given my partner unauthorized information.
- ♠ “My partner and I routinely ask for an explanation of all alerts.” This is my action of choice. I am able to build a complete picture of the opponents’ hands as the auction progresses, I’m never in the dark as to the appropriate meaning of my side’s bids, and I’m in no danger of giving partner unauthorized information.

MISINFORMATION VS. MISTAKEN BID

You open the bidding, “2D,” and you hear partner say, “Alert!” What?! Your partnership agreement is that the opening 2D bid is weak, isn’t it? The next player asks for an explanation of the alert, and partner says, “We play Flannery. The bid shows 11-15 high card points, exactly four spades, and five hearts.” You look at your 2-2-6-3 eight-count, you don’t flinch, and you prepare to bid in accord with the *authorized* information. Which of these scenarios describes the situation?

- ♠ You bid correctly, but your partner forgot the partnership agreement. This is a case of *misinformation*, a violation of law. Your opponents are entitled to a complete and accurate description of your partnership agreements. You must inform the opponents of the misinformation at the first legal opportunity, before the opening lead if your side is declaring, and at the conclusion of the play of the hand if your side is defending. If the opponents are directly damaged by the misinformation, the director will award them an adjusted score.
- ♠ Your partner’s explanation of your agreement was correct – and you forgot what you were playing. This is a case of *mistaken bid*. You are not required to inform the opponents that you forgot, and if the opponents are damaged on the board, they are not entitled to an adjusted score. However, many directors will record the event, because some players forget agreements frequently. If it happens too often, it creates a hidden partnership understanding.
- ♠ In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the director is instructed to rule mistaken information. Two identical copies of completely filled out convention cards serve to document your partnership agreements – so make sure you have them!

THE INFAMOUS HESITATION

Hesitation rulings are difficult for all directors and are often misunderstood by the players. Less-experienced players sometimes see these director calls as intimidation tactics by their opponents. Others equate a ruling against them with an accusation of unethical behavior. Both attitudes are wrong. Hesitations are simply irregularities, and if the opponents are damaged by them, they are entitled to

redress. If you or your partner do hesitate frequently, however, you should make a greater effort to bid or play in tempo. You do not want to be one of those players who unconsciously builds hesitations into your bidding system!

Example 1.

♠QJ873
♥K95
♦AQ6
♣65

Auction (North dealer):

1S – 3H – Pass– Pass
??? – – –

Do you really have anything more to say in this auction? Of course not. Your bare opening hand might actually be worse, with the 3H overcaller sitting over your ♥K. But what if your partner noticeably hesitated – beyond the expected 10 seconds – and then slowly passed?

Hesitations are noticeable breaks in tempo before a call or a play. Bridge is a thinking game, and sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you need extra time in which to think. There is nothing wrong with that, but you must realize that you may have provided your partner with unauthorized information. Subconsciously, he or she will realize that you had a problem with the hand. Your hand is not as simple as your call made it seem. *Your partner may not choose from among logical alternatives one that could demonstrably have been suggested by your break in tempo.*

If a hesitation occurs, and the director is called to the table at that point in time, the director will usually caution the partner to take no inference from the hesitation, tell the table to continue the auction with the assumption that the partner will bid his or hand only on the basis of the authorized information, and advise the opponents to call her back if they feel that the hesitation influenced the auction. If that call back occurs, the director will make a ruling based on these considerations.

1. Was there a break in tempo? In this example, all players agreed a hesitation occurred, so yes. →
2. Were the opponents damaged? Let's assume that North reopened with 3S, a successful contract, and 3H would have gone down one, non-vulnerable, so yes. →
3. Were there logical alternatives to the call chosen by the partner (North) of the slow bidder? Most players polled agreed that "Pass" was a logical alternative, so yes. →
4. Could the hesitation have demonstrably suggested the chosen call over a likely less successful logical alternative? The word "demonstrably" means that esoteric bridge knowledge was not required to interpret the suggestion. If the director's answer to this question is yes, then she will assign an adjusted score. If at any time in this process, the answer is no, she will let the result stand.

It is not always easy to determine the best action to take after partner hesitates. This involves bridge judgment, and bridge judgment is always subjective. Your opponents are entitled to disagree with your action, and you are entitled to justify it when the director is called. The ruling is also a judgment call on the part of the director(s). If you or the opponents disagree with the director's reasoning, either pair can appeal that ruling to a committee.

Side note: Players may tell you that you must always pass after partner's hesitation. *This is bad advice!* You are obligated to do your best to take the action suggested by your hand and the *authorized* information you have.

Procedural note: At one point, pairs were required to call the director when a hesitation occurred. Now, it is enough that all players at the table agree that the hesitation occurred and the director is called only if the opponents feel that hesitation influenced the outcome. If the players do not agree to the hesitation, *call the director immediately*.⁵

SLOW PLAY

Slow play is the bane of a director's existence. It is also a violation of the ACBL's Zero Tolerance policy, a violation of the Code of Active Ethics, and is subject to procedural penalties under Law 90.⁶ Here are some points habitually slow players may not have considered.

- ♣ Bridge is a timed game. If you and your partner consistently use 23-24 minutes to play a three-board round, it's the equivalent of giving one baseball team four outs an inning to the opposing team's two. How would you feel if that shorted team was your favorite team? You'd be screaming, "Not fair!"
- ♣ Bridge is a thinking game. Some hands do take longer than others to play. If you take nine minutes to play a difficult hand, you and your partner are obligated to make up that time. You no longer have the luxury of 7-7½ minutes per board remaining in the round – and you may have taken time away from your opponents.
- ♣ Directors know who the slow players are. There is no need to say, "It wasn't our fault," when a director reminds everyone at the table that they are behind and need to make an effort to catch up. It *will* be your fault, if you don't make an effort to catch up during the next round.
- ♣ Directors know that working out a difficult hand is not the cause of most slow play. It is the result of many players' habit of discussing each hand after it is played. Save your post mortem for the end of the round – if there is still time on the clock. Better yet, save it for after the game. Post mortems during the game when feelings are high may cost you a partner. If your post mortem is overheard by other players, who are then unable to play the board, you will receive a procedural penalty, as detailed in Law 90.

MAKING A CLAIM

Remember the hand you took nine minutes to play? Declarer play on the next hand you pick up is much easier. In fact, once the opponents take their only remaining trick, you can *claim* the rest. Why waste everyone's time? Claim!

There is a proper way to make a claim, and using that procedure will help you avoid mistakes – or director calls. Here is a claim process that might be helpful.

1. Put your cards down on the table face up.
2. **State your line of play.** Do not make nebulous statements, such as, "The rest are mine."
 - a. If you are in a trump contract, your first statement should relate to the trump suit. "There are no more trumps out." "I'm going to keep playing good cards until you take your high trump; and then" "I'm going to pull the last trump"

⁵ "Hesitations, Failures to Alert and Misinformation," *American Contract Bridge League* (http://www.acbl.org/clubs_page/club-administration/club-directors/rulings-faq/hesitations-failures-to-alert-and-misinformation/ : 2013). This article gives a good example case and discusses procedure, considerations, and misconceptions.

⁶ *Laws*, 107, Chapter X, "Tournament Director." This law states that the director may assess procedural penalties for any offense "that unduly delays or obstructs the game, inconveniences other contestants, violates correct procedure or requires the award of an adjusted score at another table."

- b. If you are on lead from your hand or dummy's, clearly state the order in which you are going to take your winning cards.
- c. It is usually safest to make your claim when you are on lead, but if you decide to make a claim with an opponent on lead, your claim statement must take into account any suit that opponent might lead.
- d. Always include transportation to and from the dummy in your statement, if relevant.
- e. If the opponents will win a trick or tricks, state exactly when you will give them those tricks and what you will do afterwards.

Suppose your opponent makes a claim you feel is incorrect – or one you don't understand. What should you do? **Call the director.** The director will ask your opponent to repeat his original claim, and will then examine the hands in light of that claim. If you or your partner are entitled to any of the remaining tricks, allowing declarer to play carelessly, but not irrationally, you will get them.

Will you ever make an incorrect claim that costs your side some tricks? Yes. Will you say to yourself, "I'm never going to claim again"? Yes. Will you later make a mistake carelessly playing out a hand you should have claimed – or kick yourself for wasting time playing out an easy hand when the next hand is difficult and the director is breathing down your neck? Yes – and then you will realize that claiming correctly is an essential bridge skill.

THE COMMITTEE

If a director ruling requires bridge judgment, as in an unauthorized information situation or damage after a hesitation, or a fact was disputed, you may appeal the director's decision by asking for a committee hearing. These rulings are seldom cut and dried, and additional points of view may help determine a more equitable ruling. As the appellants, you will be asked to explain the grounds on which you think the director's ruling should be overturned, so be prepared. Technically, a player may ask for an appeal after a director's ruling in any situation, but note these important points.

- ♣ If the exact procedure after an irregularity is specified in the *Laws of Duplicate Bridge*, such as the procedure after a lead or call out of turn, the appeals committee does not have the power to overrule the director. Asking for a committee in these instances is a waste of everyone's time.
- ♣ The appeals committee may not overrule a disciplinary penalty, but may recommend that a director change it.
- ♣ An appeals committee may deem that the appeal had no merit, and it has the power to sanction the appellant pair or team.
- ♣ No appeal will be heard unless both members of a pair, or the captain of a team, concur.

A club game will not always have three players willing or able to sit on the committee, so it may not be possible for a club director to field an appeals committee, nor does the ACBL require a club director to do so.

IS IT CHEATING?

Cheating in the bridge world is a very serious offense, and an open accusation of cheating must be accompanied by strong evidence, or the accuser himself may be facing a conduct and ethics committee hearing. The words, "You're cheating!" or "He cheats!" should *never* be said publicly. Whispered rumors of cheating should *never* occur, but they do, far too often. If you've been guilty of this in the past, stop – and don't ever do it again. If you believe a pair is cheating, take your suspicions privately to the director. Trust the director to handle the situation after that.

- ♣ Cheating in the bridge world is a partnership offense. It is not a single player offense. It is a hidden agreement between partners that a certain action not allowed by the laws carries a special meaning.
- ♣ Many players get into the habit of committing improprieties that *might* convey information to a partner. Fiddling with the bid box before making a call, slapping down a card when playing to a trick, or asking a question about the bidding or play at an inappropriate time are all examples of this type of impropriety. *These are not examples of cheating!* If an opponent does any of these things, **call the director**. Many players are unaware of this behavior, and it gives the director a chance for education. There will also be a caution to the partner against taking inference from unauthorized information, a possible adjusted score – and the director will monitor the players for future improprieties.
- ♣ “Guess what the director just told me. We’re not allowed to use the “Stop!” card only when we have a strong hand. We must use it all the time, or not at all.” This was an actual comment overheard in the restroom. Yes, this is an example of cheating – but it’s *unknowing* cheating, and like improprieties, is best handled by a statement from the director.

Again, **call the director** if you feel that an impropriety has occurred at your table. If you are concerned that a pair is cheating, *take your suspicions privately to the director*. Do not voice them to anyone else.

SUMMARY

When an irregularity occurs at your table, or whenever a question about proprieties arises, a polite “Director, please,” and the raise of your hand will summon the director to the table. The director is there to ensure that the game runs smoothly, to make sure that everyone has an enjoyable time, and to make sure that all players’ results are based on their respective skill and a little bit of luck – not on a failure to act with propriety. Remember, it is not rude to **call the director**, it is the proper action to take.

Resources

- American Contract Bridge League. *Laws of Duplicate Bridge*. 2008. <http://cdn.acbl.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Laws-of-Duplicate-Bridge.pdf> : 2016 Revised Authorized Edition.
- . *Duplicate Decisions: A Club Director’s Guide for Ruling at the Table*. 2008. <http://web2.acbl.org/documentLibrary/clubs/Duplicate-Decisions-2008.pdf> : accessed 2016. A more user-friendly version of the Laws; PDF version is also every word searchable.
- . *Alert Chart*. <http://web2.acbl.org/documentLibrary/play/AlertChart.pdf> : accessed 2016.
- . *Alert Procedures*. <http://web2.acbl.org/documentLibrary/play/AlertProcedures.pdf> : accessed 2016.
- . *Convention Chart*. <http://web2.acbl.org/documentLibrary/play/Convention-Chart.pdf> : 2015. Includes the General, Mid-chart, Superchart, and Limited convention charts.
- . *Rulings FAQ*. http://www.acbl.org/clubs_page/club-administration/club-directors/rulings-faq/ : accessed 2016.