



WYSIWYG

What You Say Is What You Get

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Don't berate partner for not being the player you want them to be

Okay, so I am paraphrasing (or murdering), the original.

Over the course of a long, but not particularly illustrious, bridge career, I have noticed that people seldom say what they mean. At least, they seldom mean what their interlocutor thinks they meant. To take the most common example, "Why did you ...?", it is clear that this does not actually mean, "Why did you ...?" (More on this later).

This problem of miscommunication is compounded by humans' propensity to leap to their own defence when criticised in public. Any disagreement is likely to become acrimonious if one of the two parties feels humiliated by having their shortcomings exposed before their friends and peers, and even more so if the other party is grandstanding. Try as one might not to eavesdrop, it's really more or less impossible to avoid overhearing when one is sitting at an 85cm square card table, so any argument at the table is an argument conducted in public; and, worse, in front of a public whose opinion probably matters.

Clearly, it is possible for two evenly-matched, mutually respectful players in partnership to discuss system misunderstandings and signalling problems without stabbing each other to death. That is not, however, the situation most players find themselves

in. Most partnerships contain at least one player who thinks he is better than the other (occasionally he actually is), and often two. Comments about partner's discard of the four of diamonds rather than the two of diamonds or the decision to open two spades other than one spade therefore become an exercise in asserting superiority, a spur to defensive rebuttal, a contest for the approval of the onlooking opponents: in short, a battle of wills. (Alternatively, the underdog starts to feel ... well, underdoggy, which is never a recipe for success in bridge.)

Even discussions in the bar or over dinner are less likely to be productive if the parties don't say what they actually mean. To return to our example: "Why did you ...?", let us admit, freely and honestly, that we do not want to hear why our partner did what he/she did:

A: Why did you take the heart finesse?

B: Because I didn't think C would have opened the bidding without the king of hearts.

A: But you don't know where the queen of clubs is.

B: No, I know, but I couldn't see any way to find out, and if ...

A: It was obvious that, if D had had the queen of clubs, he would have played it at trick four.

B: But why? Why can't he have the queen of clubs and still return his partner's suit? Isn't it possible that ...?

A: Why are you arguing with me? Don't you want to get better? I don't know why I bother playing with you!

What did A actually mean here? Does he really want to understand why his partner took the doomed heart finesse? Of course not: about 99% of the time, he means, "You should not have taken the heart finesse," with the corollary, "And I want to hear you admit it." Better for him to say so, plainly, rather than lure his partner into the trap of trying to answer a question which hasn't, in reality, been asked.

Is B arguing? No, he's trying to answer what appears to be a genuine question. The poor chump doesn't understand that the answer his partner is seeking is, "You are right. I was wrong." Since, however, not only did A not really mean, "Why did you take the heart finesse?" but has, in his own mind, heard himself say, "Please admit that you shouldn't have taken the heart finesse," he perceives B's increasingly desperate answers as argument.

Here's a more weaselly example: "What did you think two notrump meant?" On the face of it, this is a genuine enquiry as to what partner believed he was saying when he bid two notrump. Gentle reader, do not be fooled: it is neither genuine nor an enquiry. The questioner is simply waiting for the opportunity to pounce:

A: What did you think two notrump meant?

B: I was trying to show that I had invitational points and a stopper in their suit.

A: That's ridiculous. Two notrump can't possibly be natural in this sequence.

Now if B is incautious enough to ask why, the conversation will continue:

B: Why?

A: Nobody – literally nobody – plays that as natural these days.

B: Well, some people do. Joe Bloggs does. Mrs. Featherstonehaugh does. I didn't think we'd discussed playing it as anything else.

A: Fine. If you want to argue with me, go ahead. But you're never going to improve if you won't listen to what I'm telling you.

If you recognise yourself or your partner in these exchanges, or any version of them, please stop. If you are A (I don't actually expect anyone to admit, even to themselves, to being A), stop asking questions the answer to which you do not wish to hear. Retrain yourself to say what you actually mean; or else to listen to the answer to the question you mistakenly asked aloud, and accept that your partner is doing as you requested: explaining why he did whatever he did. Recognise that explanation is not argument. If you are B, understand that no question has been asked, and that you are instead expected meekly to bow your head and intone, "Mea culpa." Ask A to reframe the question, or better still, to say what he really means.

Please also accept that if you play with someone who is not as good as you (or, more likely, not as good as you think you are), he will make more mistakes than you do. If you can't bear to witness his mistakes, stop playing with him. If, on the other hand, your partner is your wife and you like going to congresses in France with her, for the company, the sun, the food, and above all the wine, stop berating her for not being the player you want her to be.

And if you must discuss the deals – for without discussion there can surely be no improvement – do it out of earshot of everyone else, so that you are not tempted to show off and your partner is not forced onto the defensive. Once you are in that charming little bistro or sunning yourselves over breakfast on the balcony, at least try to pretend that you respect your partner's judgment: that you are discussing these deals as equals.

If partner doesn't understand, accept that this is not wilful obtuseness, it's lack of (the right kind of) intelligence, about which he can do nothing, or want of experience, which you can continue to provide if you choose. Explain kindly, rather than browbeating him for his ignorance.

Don't ask questions when you don't want to hear the answer. If all you want is compliance, get a dog.

