

FACING THE UNKNOWN

What does a partnership do in the bidding or play when something unusual comes up? The majority of players throw their hands up in defeat, which often leads to bad results. It's worth developing a plan for when something unusual occurs.

1. During the Bidding and Play, Trust Partner Has a Plan

This is one of only a few bridge maxims that stand without exception. Partnership trust is the key to successful bridge. It makes the definitions of bids and carding signals 100% clear, in addition to all the tiny negative inferences. When this clarity is dulled, its effects compound upon each other. For instance, if partner forgets New Minor Forcing once, how likely are you to believe that if it comes up again, they will remember it? How about if partner forgets it twice?

In the long run, it is better to trust partner and be failed endlessly than to not trust partner and get good results. With a partner that cannot ever remember NMF, for example, it's better to not play the convention or get a new partner. There's no assurance of "guessing partner" every time correctly. When you "play partner", you're demonstrating that you think partner isn't capable of something in your agreements. That partner will leave you, and you will gain a bad reputation for future partners.

2. Consider What Partner Didn't Do

Bridge players often miss the inferences of inaction – the fact that partner did not take an action suggests that he does not have a hand suitable for that action. If partner opens 1♦, you know through negative inference that he should not have 5♥ or 5♠, 15-17 HCP and a balanced hand, a 23+ HCP hand... and so on. Don't try to play partner's bid for something he could have shown earlier.

In the play, this kind of inference usually occurs with discarding. If partner didn't encourage or discourage a particular suit, trust that he doesn't have a hand that would fit that category. If you are defending a 4♠ contract and partner discards a discouraging club, understand that he does not have an encouraging holding in ♣ OR a discouraging holding in ♥ or ♦. This is important because sometimes, partner may be restricted in his choices, or perhaps wants to convey one message before another because it is more important.

3. Think Outside the Box

Given the first two principles, all that is left is to consider what is left. Sometimes, this takes a lot more creativity than the average person. Consider the following auction:

N	E	S	W
1♠	P	P	2♥
P	P	2N	P
?			

Without any agreement on this auction, what should North be thinking?

North knows that South could not make a response, so he doesn't have 6 HCP. North also knows that South didn't reopen with a double, raise spades, or bid another suit directly. South cannot have a hand that wanted to give partner a chance to leave in a penalty of 2♥ (as a balancing takeout double would have). South also does not want to play in ♠ (he could give North the option to do so by doubling or bidding 2♠).

It seems equally unlikely that South will want to play in NT given that North did not double or bid after the 2♥ balancing overcall. South probably has the minor suits with a sub-minimum hand - ♠ - ♥x ♦Qxxxx ♣JTxxxx. While it seems that E/W should have enough HCP for game if North has a minimum opener, this reasoning does not invalidate the hand South has for the bid. South may reason that the hands are balanced around the table, and 3m rates to make.

Thoughts like "EW should have enough points for game" assume something about the strategy of our opponents. In general, it is difficult to estimate this precisely, so it is not recommended as a primary basis for inferring partner's action in a time of crisis. With proper discussion, your partnership's strategy should be very transparent to each of you. It is much better to use this as a source of information for figuring odd bids out.

During the play of the hand, the same kind of thinking applies. It does become important to realize that a good declarer is capable of muddying partner's signals with falsecards of his own. However, tangling yourself into a guessing game of "is declarer being mischievous" will be exhausting and, generally, counter-productive. Try as hard as possible to get inferences from concrete information. If you *must* resort to muddy inferences, then do so. Part of the reason defense is so difficult is that it is necessary at times to use "fuzzy" information.

4. Develop Meta Agreements

This is simple upon hearing it, but many players do not have agreements on what to do if something odd arises. It helps to have a rule or two saying something like "Absent agreement, a bid is natural and non-forcing. Doubles and redoubles are penalty oriented". Now, any time a situation arises that is unclear, the partnership can fall back upon the "meta-rule". Take five minutes and develop a meta rule with your regular partner(s) – you will not regret it.