

# The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders (July 2005)

In his 1990 book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey described seven "habits" that successful people follow to improve their individual skills and their interaction with others. As bridge players, we deal with the same two issues. Our success depends on how we perform as individuals and as partnerships, and the best players excel in both areas.

The main decisions we make as partnerships concern our bidding system. All experienced players have their own philosophies about what works and what doesn't, but some basic principles apply to all good systems. One habit that successful pairs have in common is:

## 1. They play a system that emphasizes constructive bidding.

We all know players whose convention cards are filled with sub-minimum opening bids, ultra-weak notrumps and 20 ways to preempt. An aggressive style is fine, but **if you load your system with too many agreements for showing weak hands, your accuracy can suffer when you hold stronger hands.** Those will be half the deals you play, so it's important to find a middle ground between a system that's too stodgy and one that's too maniacal.

In the long run, the **most effective systems are those that emphasize constructive bidding.** Constructive doesn't mean conservative. It means that when you're deciding on meanings for your system bids, **agreements that help you investigate games and slams should take precedence over those designed to find sacrifices or disrupt the opponents' auction.** Your main goal should be to enlighten partner, not confuse the opponents.

A good system will accommodate your preempting style without sacrificing your ability to accurately describe your good hands. Problems can occur when you replace a constructive bid with a new convention or assign a weaker meaning to it. If you don't have a good alternative for showing the stronger hand, your preempting agreements can interfere more with your auctions than with the opponents'.

### Some common problem areas include:

**10-12 notrumps.** Unless you play a strong club system, the 10-12 1NT opening can do a lot of damage to your other auctions. Since you have to open one of a suit with balanced hands of 13 to 19 points, you're left with an awkward range for your rebids. If you rebid 1NT with 13-16 and 2NT with 17-19, you'll often end up in contracts that are a level higher or lower than the rest of the field is playing.

**Preemptive raises.** The BERGEN RAISE and INVERTED MINOR conventions use responder's jump raise to the three-level as a preempt, showing extra trumps but little defensive strength. This can be quite effective, but there's always the danger that you're preempting partner instead of the opponents.

Some pairs play that the raise can be made with absolutely nothing -- 0-5 or 6 points, with or without distributional values. This essentially turns the raise into a shutout bid because opener cannot safely bid on, even when he holds a monster.

**If you like preemptive raises,** but don't want to miss games (or go minus 200 more often than necessary), build a semi-constructive element into them. Narrow the range and require at least a particle of potentially useful values. **A workable range is around 5-7 playing points (3-7 high-card points), and you may want to promise a near-maximum when vulnerable.** This agreement allows opener to make an intelligent decision when he has a strong hand, and it gives him a chance to actually make the partscore when he has a minimum.

**"Nuisance" overcalls.** Super-light overcalls and takeout doubles create similar problems because they widen the point range for your actions. If you agree to make one-level overcalls with garbage hands, partner will never know whether you have four points or 14. That uncertainty may scare him into passing when he should be competing, or even bidding game.

**Weak jump shifts in competition.** This is a useful treatment, but it can interfere with more valuable bidding tools in some auctions. For example:

You	LHO	Partner
1S	2D	4C

Pairs who agree that weak jump-shifts are "always on" would play partner's 4C as preemptive. Those who limit their use ("on" only through 3H, for example) define 4C as a splinter, showing a slam-try with spade support and club shortness.

Which is more valuable? When in doubt about the best use for a bid, choose the more constructive meaning if partner has opened. You rate to win more IMPs and matchpoints for making good slam decisions than for preempting the opponents out of games they may or may not make (or even want to bid).

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