**(138) Bidding Philosophy: Steps vs. Specific Bids**

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**General**

When most of us learn to play bridge (and in particular, duplicate bridge) we find it overwhelming to learn and remember lots of conventions. Conventions are our first introduction to “artificial bids” – bids that mean something very different than what they sound like.

The first conventions we learn are those that are easy to understand, those that seem to accomplish something reasonable, like Stayman or Transfer bids to look for Major-suit fits. Next, we learn conventions that communicate some *specific information* about the suits that we actually bid, like shortness-showing bids -- Splinters or 3-level rebids after Jacoby 2N.

The main point of our discussion here is to examine these “specific” bidding situations, where we bid a suit because it is related to what we are communicating to partner, see how they are inefficient, and learn how many modern bidding systems use “step-based bidding” to improve upon them.

**Basic Step-Based Bidding Example**

Before we go too much further in our discussion of step-based bidding, let’s take a look an example that we all play, to help us better understand what we are talking about.

***Blackwood***

When 4N was first used to ask for aces, it was used to ask for specific Aces – “Bid your aces up the line.”

5♣ = No Aces

5♦ = ♦A (may have other Aces)

5♥ = ♥A (no ♦A, since we didn’t bid 5♦)

5♠ = ♠A (no red Ace, since we didn’t bid 5♦ or 5♥)

etc.

But it was quickly realized that this was not the best way to organize information when communicating with partner about Aces. The number of aces was more important and could be organized in a simple, “artificial” way.

5♣ = 0 Aces

5♦= 1 Ace

5♥ = 2 Aces

5♠ = 3 Aces

(Eventually 5♣ was adjusted to mean 0 Aces or 4 Aces – all or none!)

This is an early example of step-based bidding, an improvement on the “specific-bidding” approach.

***Keycard***

A similar step-based approach is used to organize our information when communicating with partner using Keycard. The invention of 1430 Keycard was a reorganization of this information with partner to put the most common answer as the first step – 1 Ace is the most common answer, and 5♣ is used for “1 or 4” in 1430 Keycard.

**Steps vs. Specific Bids**

If we are willing to invest the memory work into fully artificial bids, then we are free to organize our information (communicate with partner) in the way that we think will be most efficient or effective – we will not be hampered by a bid needing to mean something related to what the bid actually looks like.

Of course, we do not want to do this for every bid, we would go crazy if every bid was artificial, but when thinking about a way to improve some important parts of our bidding system we can look at the step-based approach for improvement.

***Advanced Example of Step-Based Bidding Improvement***

An example of step-based bidding improving our communication with partner is an upgraded approach to opener’s rebids after a Jacoby 2N response from partner.

Traditionally, a new suit at the 3-level shows shortness, but this leaves ambiguity about the values in opener’s hand. Imagine a different approach where we use the following step-based rebids:

3♣ = Minimum values, with or without shortness (next bid asks for shortness)

3♦ = Extra values with shortness

3♥ = Extra values without shortness

By organizing our information in steps we are able to communicate both our shortness (shape) as well as our strength (minimum or extra values). This is a good example of a step-based system being more powerful than a specific (or natural) one.

**Conclusion**

The major point of our discussion here is to reexamine our general approach to artificial bidding. Instead of organizing our information based on where it lies in the bidding box in relation to the cards in our hand, we can organize it based on what is the most useful and efficient ordering of information. When we consider changing our bidding system in the future we should consider these ideas.

As we add more complexity we will gain more efficiency. Efficiency in bidding means a better ability to communicate with partner, but with it comes with a price of complexity and that means more memory work and a greater chance for bidding disasters and mix-ups with partner.

As you adopt more gadgets into your bidding system, keep in mind this important concept (Complexity vs. Efficiency) and see how it can help you understand the design of some of the more complicated bidding conventions. Do not get too ambitious and try to change to a lot of step-based bids overnight, but as you develop a partnership think about auctions where you wish your communication with partner were better and consider if step-based bidding would help with the situation.