

Zero Tolerance

Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick

Every club has a certain player, a really wonderful, witty, intelligent man or woman. Everybody enjoys conversing with him or her about the stock market, the latest novel, a recent vacation or any other topic. . . except bridge. Red Alert! Do not discuss bridge with this person. As the first board hits the table that wonderful, witty player morphs into a pathological narcissist with megalomania. Snarling ensues, the partner quivers, players are coming to you in tears, threats of a walk-out are being muttered. And finally a trembling hand is raised at Mr. Pathological's table.

No club is required to adopt the Zero Tolerance Policy as written by ACBL. There simply is no mandate that clubs adhere to it, but no club director should feel handicapped if such a policy is not in effect. Everything you need to administer effective disciplinary action resides in the Laws of Duplicate Bridge. The ACBL *does* mandate that clubs apply each and every Law within.

The Laws

Law 74:

A. Proper Attitude

1. A player should maintain a courteous attitude at all times.
2. A player should carefully avoid any remark or action that might cause annoyance or embarrassment to another player or might interfere with the enjoyment of the game.

Law 81, Paraphrased in Duplicate Decisions.

The Director should never tolerate improper behavior in his game. He should not allow his authority to run the game to be challenged, or he will lose control of his game. Since he has absolute authority during the game, such challenges may be dealt with politely but very firmly. Laws 90 and 91 outline the Director's powers to penalize or suspend a player during the course of the game.

Law 90.A

The director, in addition to implementing the rectifications in these Laws, may also 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.

Law 91.A

In performing his duty to maintain order and discipline, the Director is empowered to assess disciplinary penalties in points or to suspend a contestant for the current session or any part thereof. The Director's decision under this clause is final and may not be overruled by an appeals committee.

ACBL Handbook Excerpt (Chapter IV):

The club manager can handle many behavior problems by discussing them with the offenders, by issuing a warning, or declaring a period of probation.

In extreme cases or cases of repeat offenses, the manager can bar an ACBL member from the club game for a stipulated period of time, or permanently. (See handbook for process.)

The Policy

The Zero Tolerance Policy was board-approved and adopted by ACBL in 1998 for NABC Tournaments. In 2014 ACBL made an effort to “reboot” our attention to this policy. The Z-T policy is regularly adopted and publicized for Regionals, Sectionals, and by many clubs. Some clubs choose to write their own policies in this area. The original policy states:

The ultimate purpose of the Z-T policy is to create a much more pleasant atmosphere in our NABCs. We are attempting to eradicate unacceptable behavior in order to make the game of bridge more enjoyable for all. Below are some examples of commendable behavior, which, while not required, will significantly contribute to the improved atmosphere:

- Being a good ‘host’ or ‘guest’ at the table.
- Greeting others in a friendly manner.
- Praising the bidding and/or play of the opponents.
- Having two clearly completed convention cards readily available to the opponents. (This one is a regulation, not just a nicety.)

The following are examples of behavior that will not be tolerated:

- Badgering, rudeness, insinuations, intimidation, profanity, threats or violence.
- Negative comments concerning opponents’ or partner’s play or bidding.
- Constant and gratuitous lessons and analyses at the table.
- Loud and disruptive arguing with a director’s ruling.

If a player at the table behaves in an unacceptable manner, the director should be called immediately. Annoying behavior, embarrassing remarks, or any other conduct which might interfere with the enjoyment of the game are specifically prohibited by Law 74A. Law 91A gives the director the authority to assess disciplinary penalties.

The Procedures

The following procedures have been given to the Tournament Directors for implementation. Suggestions for implementation at clubs are in italics.

- I. At the start of each event, the director shall make an announcement that the tournament will be observing ZERO TOLERANCE for unacceptable behavior. It is requested that the director be called whenever behavior is not consistent with the guidelines outlined above. *A reminder before every club game can be very effective.*
- II. The director, when called, shall make an assessment of the situation. If it is established that there was unacceptable behavior, an immediate 1/4 board minimum disciplinary penalty (3 IMP in team games) shall be assigned to all offenders. This may involve any one or all four players at the table irrespective of who initiated the unacceptable behavior. If both members of a partnership are guilty, the penalties are additive (1/4 board EACH = 1/2 board!). The Board of Directors strongly believes that assignment of disciplinary penalties will improve the overall behavior at our tournaments. *Talk with your club management or owner. Work together to find the appropriate, consistent response and penalties to unacceptable behavior.*
- III. If it is determined that the same offender is responsible for a second offense in the same event, then the offender(s) shall be ejected from future competition in that event. An offender removed from an event shall be deemed to have not played in the event, no masterpoints will be awarded and no refunds will be made. All previously-obtained results shall, however, remain valid as to their effect upon other competitors. In the case of a serious offense and in the case of multiple offenses (three) during a tournament, a disciplinary committee may be convened to determine whether the offender(s) should be allowed to play in other events at the tournament and/or whether additional sanctions may be appropriate. *Again, consistent responses to infractions should be implemented.*
- IV. Warnings are strongly discouraged and will be given only when there is no clear violation or in cases where the facts cannot be determined. Offenders are to receive immediate penalties. Regardless of who may have initiated unacceptable behavior, ALL offenses are punishable. Retaliatory behavior is a punishable offense. Frivolous accusations will also be considered as offenses under this policy.
- V. In accordance with the Laws of Duplicate Bridge, a director's decision to impose a disciplinary penalty is final; however, all such decisions may be appealed. An appeals committee may not overturn the director's decision, but could recommend that the director reconsider the imposition of a penalty. It should be noted that the committee may feel that the penalty assessed was not severe enough and may refer the matter to a disciplinary committee. *No club is expected to have a committee in this area. Some larger clubs have standing Conduct and Ethics Committees or such items may be heard a by a board. A club should also be aware of procedures applicable to Club Discipline Issues as spelled out*

in Chapter IV of the ACBL Handbook, especially in regards to probation or suspension from the club.

- VI. The DIC shall provide a summary report of all behavioral penalties to the Tournament Chairman and/or Recorder. *Keep a log of all infractions at your club. Make sure all directors who share the space are kept informed.*

Style Matters

How you handle a Zero Tolerance Call matters. Your professionalism in putting a fire out and returning the entire game to a pleasant atmosphere is important. Believe it or not players may not think in terms of playing at the “Metro Bridge Club,” but instead think in terms of playing in *your* game. You’ve heard it multiple times: “I love playing in Nancy’s games! Everybody is so nice!” or “George’s games are no fun anymore. Everybody is so grumpy.” Your adeptness in dealing with unacceptable behaviors can go a long way toward building the reputation you seek.

Much of our work in the area of Zero Tolerance involves using concepts of Conflict Resolution. An art and science to itself, there are some key elements to consider in addressing your own role in solving tense situations. Experts in Conflict Resolution recognize that individuals have their own style in this matter, and many of us adopt differing styles as the level of conflict rises.

The following descriptions come from the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, a recognized set of tools in this field. <http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/catalog/thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument>

Competitive: People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast; when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.

Collaborative: People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution; when there have been previous conflicts in the group; or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off.

Compromising: People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, and the compromiser him- or herself also expects to relinquish something.

Accommodating: This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is highly cooperative. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning. Overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

Avoiding: People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. However in many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take.

Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you're in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary.

Customer Service

With ACBL's continued focus on Customer Service there are relevant tools from this concept we can also implement in this arena. The steps of "LEAP" can guide a director to methodically solve the problem, to work through the steps of making decisions when faced with heightened player emotions, rather than leaping to a quick punishment and swift escape.

- Listen and Hear Them Out
 - Keep it brief
 - Keep it polite
 - Keep it professional
- Empathize
 - The injured partner wants to know you care
 - The injured party wants to know you understand
 - The angry party wants the very same consideration
- Assert Yourself
 - Address the behavior that must not continue
 - Assess the penalty
 - Keep the personal out of it
 - Follow up if necessary
- Provide Options or Prepare to Take Action
 - If the concern has not been fully addressed communicate how this will happen and at what time.

- Clarify any unmet needs

The Personal Attack

One of the most difficult situations you will face is the direct attack on you:

“Get me a real director!”

“That’s the most idiotic ruling by an idiotic director I’ve ever seen!”

“You people are the laziest, most incompetent bunch of nincompoops! I’m calling the President of the Club tonight”

Working through LEAP concepts the response to this last question, a clear threat of “I think you should be fired” might simply go:

“I understand you’re upset by the ruling and I have offered you the opportunity to discuss it calmly following the game. We can take time to go through the Laws together. What is not allowed by our Laws is loud and continuous arguing about the ruling. Your behavior has disrupted several tables in play. Based on your behavior, our policy requires an assessment of a ¼ board penalty. If there is some new evidence not previously shared I’d be happy to listen, but if this is not the case it’s time to get back to play. Please keep your voice down, return to your table and finish this round. If you wish to discuss this further I will be available immediately after the game.”

Keep in Mind...

- You should be able to hear the tone of voice in the call alone. On the “strained” voice calls get there fast.
- Make any bickering, or on-going talking stop.
- Assure everyone will be heard if necessary, but you can’t hear in “stereo”
- Demand respect and politeness for the person speaking at the table.
- Do not allow “fighting” “threatening” “exaggerated” type diatribes.
- Assess quickly and quietly where the problem began, and PENALIZE.
- Remain calm and quiet, and expect them to do so as well. A reminder that they’re playing a card game, for goodness’ sake, is sometimes needed.

Ye Olde Wive’s Tales

“Well, you didn’t call me to the table when he did that. There’s nothing I can do about it now!”

NOWHERE does it say you must be called to the table at the time of the infraction to be able to assess a penalty. If a player comes to you three rounds later to complain about snarling and foul language at a certain table you can still apply the penalty. This is not puppy training where you have to catch them in the act.

“Nobody called me to the table. I can’t give a penalty if you don’t call me.”

NOWHERE does it say you must be called to the table by a player who complains. If you see an infraction address it immediately. Players can be afraid to call the director. They have to play against this person every day and they think it will be worse if they call the director. If you overhear the snarling take it upon yourself to take action without being called.

When It’s Really, Really Bad

- When you arrive at a table and everyone is talking and won’t stop, a belled ‘BE SILENT’ usually works, but is disruptive. Use a softer voice than the arguers. Believe it or not they will have to lower their voices to hear you!
- If two people are having at it, urgently tell one to come with you and take him 3-4 tables away. Tell him you will continue when he has control of himself. Go back to the table and tell the other the same. If he has gotten into it with someone else, take him away in a different direction. When you have the situation under control, tell them to take a deep breath and that you will hear from each in his turn. Then make sure you do. In this situation you have to keep a tight lid on or the altercation will flare up again and again.
- After you have dealt with an explosion, don't walk away! Don’t stand too close either. Your presence right at the table might provoke a quick temper. Ease yourself back a little and if the electricity wanes, back off a little more. If you can, stay a table or two away - without staring at the problem table - until they have moved for the next round.
- Be sensitive to the body language of everyone at the table. You will pick up information even in non-crisis situations.
- Evaluate yourself. After you have dealt with any difficult situation or one that left someone dissatisfied, examine your behavior. Ask yourself what you could have done better; how you could have avoided the traps you fell into.

Be Proactive

Create an environment where you are continually looking for ways to remind your players to behave appropriately. Better than punishing bad behavior is rewarding good behavior. Implement new activities or procedures in your club that remind everyone how important it is to be nice:

- Develop your own Goodwill Day or Week, give out free plays to a winner of “best example of goodwill” for each game. Post pictures on the wall of these goodwill ambassadors.
- Make an announcement about anniversaries, or new grandchildren, or something positive. Fill your club with friends, not adversaries and opponents.
- Remind, remind, remind. It can be as simple as “Smiles on, cell phones off!”
- Tell a short joke while they’re taking their places. A warm-up chuckle may help start the game on the right foot.
- Develop your very own Goodwill Honorees and Committee.
- Hold a Monthly Birthday Game.

It’s Just Another Ruling

Yeah. Sure. And bridge is *just* a game.

One respected, level-headed colleague does have the right spirit in approaching Z-T rulings. They are just that: a mere ruling. Determine the facts, listen to all sides, apply the appropriate rectification. Leave the table. Make the ruling just like you were dealing with an opening lead out of turn—professional manner and a concise ruling.

Keep it in Perspective

A respected player, easily in the top ten of all time masterpoint winners, approached the presenter of ZT workshop just prior to the presentation beginning. With a half grin on his face he shared a real concern that perhaps, just perhaps, we were heading down a path of becoming a little too intolerant of borderline behavior. He asked “Does a pair have to worry about being a bit surly with each other after reaching a 7 Club contract playing their two-one fit? Are they now subject also to a ZT penalty?”

The response was simple. “You and your partner being surly after playing your two-one fit at the 7 level and then bickering a bit with each other would hardly qualify as ‘interfering with my enjoyment of the game!’ In fact, it may be increasing my enjoyment of the game!”