

ChRONicles of Cardplay

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Basic signaling #1 – Attitude and Count

The famous football coach Bear Bryant was reported to have said, “Good offense begins with good defense”. On any four random bridge hands, you’re declarer once, dummy once and on defense twice. Bottom line: You’d better learn how to defend if you expect to win consistently. Good defense starts with accurate signaling. Signaling is also very important when you’re declarer, but more on that later. I’m going to devote the next couple of articles to signaling. First I’m going to discuss basic attitude and count signals.

There are several different signaling systems. This article describes *standard* signals. If you’re new to signaling, learn standard signaling and when you’re completely comfortable with that, you might investigate other systems and decide to change. That said, many top players continue to use standard signaling methods quite successfully.

So, what’s the biggest problem with signaling? You have to pay attention! If partner dutifully plays spot cards to help you defend accurately and you’re not watching, all his efforts are wasted. The second biggest problem with signaling is the old Chinese proverb, “Be careful what you ask for, you might get it.” Believe it or not, learning the mechanics of signaling is the easy part. Figuring out what to ask for and when is much more difficult. So, if I haven’t scared you off yet....

There are three different signals in bridge: *In priority order* they are:

1. **Attitude** – do you like this suit or hate it?
2. Once attitude in a particular suit is known, **Count**
3. Once count in a particular suit is known, **Suit Preference**

WARNING: Some of the below examples and exceptions are simplified due to space limitations.

When partner leads a suit

Leading honors is a form of signaling. Whenever you *lead* an honor, most of the time you *promise* the honor below it and *deny* the honor above it. If you lead the Queen, you promise the Jack and deny the King. Older literature suggests leading the King from both the King/Queen combination *and* the Ace/King combination. Unfortunately, this creates problems for your partner since they often cannot tell which of the two possible holdings you have. The modern style is to lead “Ace from Ace/King” at trick one. Note the caveat “*at trick one*”. **Exceptions:** In the *middle* of the hand, lead the *King* from *both* Ace/King and King/Queen. If the King wins the trick, partner knows you have the Ace. If declarer wins the Ace, partner places you with the Queen. When you or your partner lead an Ace in the middle of the hand, it may just be cash out time – you don’t promise the King – in fact you deny it. Another exception is that partner may lead an Ace without the King at trick one against a small slam since that may be the last opportunity to cash it. Another standard honor lead is an *interior sequence*. Holding KJ10, lead the Jack. Note that you still promise the one below and deny the one above. However, holding AJ10, NEVER underlead an Ace at trick one against a suit contract! It’s fine to lead the Jack from this holding against a NT contract.

When partner leads the top of a sequence, your obligation is to tell partner your attitude about that suit (i.e., do you like the suit or do you hate the suit). You usually make this decision based on whether or not you hold a *fitting card*. **Example:** partner leads the King (promising the Queen). You hold J83. Your correct play is the 8, *encouraging*. Since you hold the Jack, it’s perfectly safe for partner to lead the suit again even if declarer ducks. However, if you hold say the 1083, your correct card is the 3, *discouraging*. You need to warn partner NOT to lead the suit again because declarer may duck holding AJx. If you play an encouraging attitude card and declarer ducks, partner may lead the suit again directly into declarer’s AJ holding giving declarer an undeserved trick (declarer’s duck is known as the “Bath Coup”). Of course, even if you discourage, if partner started with the KQJ, he knows it’s safe to lead the suit again. Signals are *suggestions*, not *demands*.

When partner leads small in a suit, your first obligation in 3rd seat is to try to win the trick (third seat high). You should play the lowest card that will do the job. **Example:** partner leads a small card and dummy hits with Q108. If you hold the KJ9, the card you play depends on the card played by declarer from dummy. If declarer plays the Q, you cover with the K. If declarer plays the 10, you play the J. If declarer plays the 8, you play the 9. DO NOT arbitrarily play the King! Now, when declarer wins the Ace in his hand, your partner can work out that you hold all the intervening cards – else, why didn't declarer win with a smaller card? The same holds true if you hold something like the KQJ. On lead, you'd lead the King, but in third seat, you play the Jack (the smallest card that will do the job). **Exception:** If you cannot cover the card played by dummy, you cannot win the trick. Partner knows your attitude (you hate the suit), so give **count** instead (see below).

The attitude signal is used against both trump and notrump contracts. However, your attitude about a suit may vary based on the contract. Say you hold the 83 of a suit and partner leads the Ace at trick one promising the King. Against a suit contract, you should play the 8 to encourage partner to play his King and then give you a ruff. However, at a notrump contract, you have no fitting cards or length to help partner establish his suit, so you should play the 3, discouraging. Partner can decide for himself based on his holding and your signal whether or not to continue the suit.

Signals when you lead a suit

When you lead a suit, you signal your attitude and something about your holding in that suit to your partner. Lead the top of a sequence at trick one and throughout the hand. To indicate you **like** a suit, lead a **low** card from a broken holding. **Example:** From something like K1084, lead the 4. To indicate to partner you **don't like** a suit, lead a **high** card. From something like 10843, lead the 8, and then play the 10 next time. The 8 says you don't want it returned, the 10 says it wasn't a doubleton. **Exceptions:** at trick one you still lead 4th best. When leading a doubleton, you always lead high-low, even if you expect partner to win the trick, cash a second card and give you a ruff.

Signals when declarer leads a suit

When declarer leads a suit partner knows your attitude, you hate it! It cannot make sense to "like" a suit declarer leads. Going back to priority of rules above, since partner knows your attitude, the signal now becomes count. You play high-low to show an even number of cards remaining in your hand (**present count**) and low-high to show an odd number of cards. **Example:** Declarer starts running a long suit in dummy. If you hold 8532, play the 8 then the 2 to show partner you have an even number of cards. If you hold the 832, play the 2, then the 8 to show an odd number of cards. This count signal helps partner decide when to ruff or take his Ace to kill the dummy. If you decide to lead a doubleton, lead high then play low. If partner is watching the spots, he'll know you have only two cards in the suit. This is why leading "top of nothing" isn't best. Partner can never tell how many cards you hold when you lead the same card from any of these holdings 9 from 9, 93 and 973.

Signals when discarding

When you can no longer follow suit you must discard in another suit. To indicate you like a suit, discard a high card in that suit. To indicate you dislike a suit, discard a low card in that suit. If you discard an honor, you promise the honor below it and deny the honor above it. Once you've given partner an attitude signal in a suit, the second card you play in that same suit is **present count** – high-low for an even number remaining, low-high for an odd number remaining.

Last word

Usually your signals tell partner what you have, and by implication, what you'd like led. However, the true meaning of a signal is to **direct the defense**. **Example:** say dummy holds the Ace of one suit and you hold the King. You also hold the Ace in another suit. You should encourage the suit where you hold the King and discourage the suit where you hold the Ace. Why? You want partner to first lead the suit towards dummy's Ace to establish your King as a trick. Then when you get on lead with your Ace, you can cash your good King. Alternatively, if partner first leads the suit where you hold the Ace, now you'll be stuck on lead and likely cannot lead the suit where you hold the King without giving up a trick.

In general, your first signal should be a suit you would like to have led. It may be the only chance you get to signal and then partner will know what to lead. However, if you simply cannot afford to signal in the suit you want, signal low in a suit you don't want. Perhaps partner can work out what to do using a negative inference.

Example: you hold the AK2 of a suit. Discarding the 2 of this suit will give partner the wrong impression, that you don't want this suit led. You have to discourage in another suit to try to convey the message you want.

Don't be chintzy with your signals – signal with the highest card you can afford. If you hold the A987, signal with the 9 even though you may think, “Partner will surely realize the 8 or 7 is high.” Playing the 8 *denies* the 9 since they're both equal cards. If you play the 7, partner may see all the lower cards and be able to recognize the 7 as low.

Learn to concentrate on partner's signals and learn to signal correctly yourself. The first signal card you play is the most important – get that one right and you're 80% of the way there.

As declarer, you're entitled to know the signaling systems the opponents use. It's illegal for partners to have a secret signaling system. You can ask them and/or look at their convention card. When declaring, watch their signals to try to work out who has what.

Don't signal with the setting trick! When signaling, be careful not to signal with a card that may be winning a trick later in the hand.

You can read more on signaling in the following books available from Baron Barclay at an ACBL member's discount:

Modern Defensive Signaling – Kit Woolsey – ISBN 0-910791-40-6

Eddie Kantar teaches Modern Bridge Defense – ISBN 1-894154-02-9

How to Defend a Bridge Hand – William S. Root – ISBN 0-517883-93-7