

Playing Bid Whist Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Keyonn Pope** (September 24, 2026, 1:54 PM EDT)

*In this **Expert Analysis series**, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.*

Growing up, game nights were a family ritual, and no game carried more significance than bid whist. Learning to play was a rite of passage.

You did not simply sit down at the table. You observed, listened and learned the vernacular, strategies and subtle nuances that separated novices from seasoned players.

Today, my wife and I carry that tradition forward with our family and friends. Around the bid whist table, stories are shared, relationships are strengthened and rivalries are renewed.

Over time, I've come to appreciate that bid whist offers more than fellowship and competition. The lessons I first learned at the card table, from strategic thinking to risk assessment to teamwork, are the same skills that help me serve clients, navigate complex situations and practice law effectively today.

In many ways, playing bid whist makes me a better lawyer.



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A Brief History and Basic Rules of Bid Whist

Bid whist evolved from traditional whist, a trick-taking card game with roots in England, but the modern game found its cultural home within African American communities in the U.S., where it became a vehicle for fellowship, competition, storytelling and community building.

For those unfamiliar with the game, bid whist shares DNA with other trick-taking card games such as spades, hearts, bridge and euchre. Four players compete in two partnerships, with each player receiving 12 cards from a standard deck. The remaining six cards form the kitty, a reserve hand that adds a strategic wrinkle unique to bid whist.

Players bid on the number of books (tricks) they believe their partnership can win. The winning bidder determines the trump suit or whether the hand is played without a trump suit (no trump), and decides whether the hand will be played uptown (high cards win) or downtown (low cards win). The winning bidder also picks up the six-card kitty and discards any six cards before play begins.

Partners then work together to make their bid while preventing their opponents from making theirs. If a partnership fails to achieve its bid — commonly referred to as being set — it results in losing the hand and possibly the entire game.

One of the game's most difficult feats is a Boston, where one partnership captures every book in the hand. Bidding and running a Boston requires skill, audacity and often fortuitousness.[1]

At its core, bid whist is a game of information, inference, communication, risk assessment and

strategy. Those same elements are central to the practice of law.

The Lawyer's Card Game

While every card game teaches something, bid whist develops a unique combination of skills that closely mirror the skills required for effective lawyering. The parallels are striking.

Strategic Thinking: Planning Several Moves Ahead

The best bid whist players are never focused solely on the current book. Before the first card is played, they're evaluating whether the hand is best suited for uptown, downtown or no trump; considering what cards might be hidden in the kitty; and planning several books ahead.

Every card played affects the range of possibilities that remain. A player must think about endgame scenarios long before they arrive. The strongest players know that avoiding getting set often begins with decisions made several books earlier.

Lawyers operate in much the same way.

An effective attorney does not focus exclusively on today's motion, deposition or negotiation. Every decision must be evaluated in light of the broader strategy. Will this argument preserve an issue for appeal? Will this discovery request generate leverage for settlement? Will this concession strengthen credibility later?

In both bid whist and law, success often goes to the person who can see around corners. Strategic vision, not merely tactical execution, separates good practitioners from great ones. The ability to map a path to victory before others even recognize the battlefield is as valuable in a courtroom as it is at a card table.

Reading People and Information

Contrary to popular belief, bid whist is not simply about the cards in your hand. It is about interpreting the information revealed through bidding patterns and card play. Each decision by an opponent communicates valuable information. A player who confidently bids "five low" is communicating something very different from one who cautiously bids "four uptown."

Every lead, discard and decision provides additional clues. A hesitation may suggest uncertainty. A player who unexpectedly ducks a book — i.e., strategically chooses not to win a book despite possessing the winning card — may be signaling a larger strategy. An experienced player is constantly gathering information and updating assumptions.

The same concepts are true in legal practice.

During a negotiation, an attorney evaluates not only what is being said, but also what is not being said. For example, the way clauses are worded in an agreement or how certain terms are defined can be telling. During a deposition, a witness's choice of words, demeanor and reactions can be just as revealing as the substantive answer. In litigation, opposing counsel's filings, timing and tactics often provide clues about their strengths, weaknesses and objectives.

Neither cardplayers nor lawyers enjoy perfect information. Neither knows what's in the other side's hand. The challenge is drawing sound conclusions from incomplete information and making decisions before all the facts are available.

Partnership and Teamwork

One of bid whist's defining characteristics is that it is a partnership game. You cannot win, or even play, alone.

A strong player understands that success depends on maximizing the effectiveness of a teammate. Sometimes your role is leading the hand. Sometimes your role is helping your partner make the books they need. The objective isn't individual glory; it's helping the team win by making its bid or

setting the opponents.

Great bid whist players understand that success depends on maximizing the effectiveness of their partner. They communicate through legal play, recognize one another's strengths and stay focused on the shared objective.

The same principle applies to practicing law. Even the most talented attorney relies on a team. Colleagues, associates, paralegals, experts, clients and co-counsel all play critical roles in achieving successful outcomes. Great lawyers understand how to collaborate, delegate and leverage the strengths of others.

Too often, people romanticize the image of the lone legal genius. In reality, the most successful matters are usually won by coordinated teams working toward a common goal, just like successful bid whist partnerships.

Risk Assessment and Decision-Making Under Uncertainty

Every bid in bid whist reflects a judgment about risk.

A player staring at a promising hand must decide whether to push for a higher bid, bid a no trump or pass. Bid too conservatively and you leave valuable points on the table. Bid too aggressively and you risk getting set. Every decision involves balancing confidence against uncertainty.

And, occasionally, a player sees a hand that looks capable of running a Boston. Bidding it requires courage, and making it requires skill, preparation and some fortuitousness. The reward is enormous; so is the risk.

Lawyers are professional risk managers.

Whether advising a client on a settlement, assessing litigation exposure, evaluating a business transaction or recommending a trial strategy, attorneys rarely have complete certainty. They must weigh the likelihood of various outcomes and help clients make informed decisions despite imperfect information.

The goal in both environments is not to eliminate risk, but to understand, manage and intelligently deploy it. Sometimes prudence wins the day. Other times, success requires the confidence to take a calculated shot at something bigger.

Discipline and Emotional Control

Every bid whist player has experienced the frustration of a bad hand, an unexpected play from an opponent or a costly mistake by a partner. The players who consistently succeed are those who maintain composure and continue executing their strategy.

Emotional reactions are expensive in bid whist, as well as in law.

Lawyers regularly encounter difficult judges, unreasonable adversaries, demanding clients and unfavorable rulings. Effective advocacy requires the ability to remain calm under pressure, think clearly, and avoid decisions driven by ego or emotion.

The ability to stay disciplined when circumstances become challenging is often the difference between success and failure, both at the card table and in legal practice.

Enjoying the Game and Enjoying the Work

For all its strategizing and competition, bid whist is supposed to be fun.

The laughter, storytelling, friendly rivalries and debates over whether someone should have gone uptown instead of downtown are as important as the cards themselves. The game's enduring appeal comes from the people around the table.

Over the years, I've learned that not everyone belongs at every bid whist table. The best games require players who are competitive but respectful, confident but humble, and serious enough to play well without taking themselves too seriously. Put the right group together, and a game that starts after dinner can stretch happily into the wee hours of the morning.

The practice of law is similar in some ways.

Law is a demanding profession. It requires long hours, difficult decisions and significant responsibility. Yet for many lawyers, professional satisfaction has less to do with the specific matter they are handling than with the people alongside whom they are handling it. The right colleagues challenge you, support you, celebrate your successes and help carry the burden of inevitable setbacks. They make the work more enjoyable and the difficult moments more manageable.

Too often, lawyers focus exclusively on finding the right cases, clients or opportunities. Those things matter. But finding the right colleagues is just as important. The best legal careers, like the best bid whist games, are built around trusted partners, healthy competition, shared values and genuine camaraderie.

In both endeavors, success is sweeter when shared with people whose company you truly enjoy. After all, whether you're trying to make a bid or make a case, who you're sitting at the table with matters.

Lessons Beyond the Cards

What makes bid whist special is that its lessons extend far beyond the game itself. It teaches patience, humility, adaptability and critical thinking. It rewards preparation and punishes complacency. It reminds us that every decision has consequences and that success often depends on balancing confidence with caution.

As a child, I viewed bid whist as a family tradition and a source of friendly competition. As a lawyer, I now see it differently. The game cultivated skills that I use every day: strategy, analysis, communication, teamwork, risk assessment and composure.

The cards are different. The stakes are different. But the principles remain remarkably similar.

And so, when I take a seat at a conference table, prepare for a negotiation or develop a trial strategy, part of me is still sitting at that family card table, learning lessons from the game that has shaped generations before me.

Bid whist may be a card game, but for me, it has also been a road map in how to think, how to partner and ultimately, how to practice law while also having fun.

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[1] For those interested in learning more about bid whist, its rules and rich history, I recommend "The Gist of Bid Whist: The Culturally-Rich Card Game from Black America" by Lamont Jones.

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