



# The Advisory Alliance 60-Second Email™

## ***What You Learn by Playing Poker*** ***March 25, 2009***

*In this month's 60-Second Email™, my friend and colleague Bob Silverstein (organizational crisis and change consultant), discusses the practical applications of studying and playing No Limit Texas Hold 'em poker.*

### **Bob, please tell us about your professional background.**

I'm a clinical social worker and consultant with over 25 years of experience as a crisis manager, organizational change consultant, employee counselor and executive coach. Currently I work primarily in a private coaching and counseling practice and secondarily as a troubleshooter for management and employees before, during, and after a disruption that traumatically affects members of the workforce.

### **Why the move into poker?**

I've always been a recreational poker player. A few years ago I took a training course on psychological trauma. The course taught me how trauma, crisis, and stress affect our brain and our body, and how they can overwhelm our ability to function normally and cause our thinking, emotions and reactions to become distorted. I learned to identify the signs and symptoms of a stress-based response and those of an "in-the-zone" response. I also learned techniques for adjusting these responses.

In addition to helping me assist my clients to deal with their exposure to excessive stress and trauma, I began to apply what I had learned to my poker playing with increasingly profitable results. Last year I won a tournament that paid the \$10,000 entry fee and all my expenses for the Main Event at the 2008 World Series of Poker in Las Vegas. Of the 6900 plus entrants in Vegas, I finished in 780th place or in the top 12%.

### **What version of poker do you play?**

I play tournament No Limit Texas Hold 'em. It is the poker game that has sparked the recent poker craze. It is all over television and is the game that receives the most attention at each year's World Series of Poker and gets hours of coverage on ESPN. No

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Limit Texas Hold 'em is considered a betting game as much as a card game, and can put extraordinary pressure on a player to think clearly under very stressful circumstances.

### **Why do you think poker has drawn such an interest by so many people?**

Poker is social, intellectually challenging, and offers the allure of making a nice profit. Sound poker play draws on mathematical ability, gamesmanship, and the ability to read your competitors, understand oneself, and manage risk. While poker is certainly imbued with all of the risks and problems associated with gambling, it has proven to be a game of great skill as well. In fact, a major part of the appeal of poker is that as one's skill improves, poker is less like gambling and more like any other activity that we master, in that results become more predictable. For many poker players, poker is not only a measuring stick for how well we manage and learn from the challenges of the game, but how we manage and learn from life's challenges as well.

### **What has studying and playing poker taught you about assessing risk, making decisions and confronting fear and uncertainty?**

For me, playing poker is as much a grand experiment as an avocation. The game provides me with the opportunity to regularly recognize and separate optimal from less than optimal states of being and to gauge the results of doing so. Recently, for example, I was on a long streak where I was coming very close, but just missing "the money." My knowledge and skill were working, in that I was finishing ahead of 80 to 90% of my competitors in almost every game, but I was still missing all my paydays. (I usually play tournament style Texas Hold 'em where only the top 10% of finishers typically get paid). Playing poker has taught me that if something bad is happening regularly, then I need to figure out what I am doing wrong, and take responsibility for making it stop.

In this specific case, with a lot of introspection and help from my coach, I was able to identify that I was tightening up and playing too cautiously as I got down to crunch time. I learned I was afraid of making the wrong decision and of feeling I was the cause for screwing up. By playing too cautiously I was making my card playing decisions too easy for my competitors to read, and I was assuming too little risk in my hands. Once I accepted that making the wrong decision wasn't half as bad as dooming me to mediocrity, I loosened up and won five of my next seven games.



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### **What else have you learned from playing poker?**

I have learned so much about myself, my life and my work from playing poker. Among the more important lessons have been:

- Pay more attention to the cards in front of you (your reality) than to any fears or speculations you may have about your competitors, your colleagues, etc.
- Focus on the game; don't get distracted by feelings or concerns unrelated to the game.
- Notice when your attention, focus, comfort and calmness (state of mind and body) are not what they should be; adjust and correct them accordingly.
- If you focus on the game, get the right influence over your body & mind, and make the necessary adjustments when needed, your performance and your results will improve.

Have a comment on using experience and rules of thumb to further your growth? Share your thoughts with other readers on our blog: <http://www.advisoryalliance.com/blog>

And you can access all of our 60-Second Emails (TM), including last month's issue, "Experience is Teaching, Now" via this link:

<http://www.advisoryalliance.com/newsletter.php>

Best regards,

*David*

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