

by Boyd Byers

From the Poker Table to the Boardroom Table — Avoid Tilt to Make Good Decisions

HR and poker don't have much in common. After the cards are fairly dealt in poker, bluffing, deception, and lying are part of the game. In HR, though, honesty is always the best policy. There is one lesson HR pros can learn from poker pros: Recognize and fight the instinct to tilt.

No 'loco' emotion

Emotional control and mental equilibrium are essential for good poker judgment. In poker parlance, "tilting" or "going on tilt" describes a state of mental confusion or frustration that causes a player to make poor decisions. Tilt is usually brought on by losing, particularly as a result of a "bad beat" like having an opponent draw an unlikely winning card late in the hand or being defeated in humiliating fashion. Poker players also can be put on tilt because of another player's erratic play or irritating behavior.

Poker players must learn to keep bad beats from influencing the way they play the next hand. The cards have no memory, of course, and each hand is an independent event. Good players win by playing each hand correctly, on its own terms, without attempting to make up for an earlier bad hand or loss.

How can managers and HR pros go on tilt? Consider the following examples (all from real-life cases and experiences):

- Your company promotes an up-and-coming employee to become its first female senior vice president. A year later, she announces she's pregnant and misses work because of pregnancy complications. After the baby is born, she takes a six-week maternity leave. She then returns to work part-time for several weeks before deciding to become a stay-at-home mom. When the process to find a replacement begins, the company president complains about being "burned" and makes it clear he's never going to allow another woman, at least one of child-bearing age, into senior management. *Tilt.*
- An employee hurts his back and files a workers' compensation claim. Three months later, the doctor releases him to work with minor restrictions. You can accommodate his restrictions but find an excuse to lay him off because you're steamed about his workers' comp claim or you're worried he might get hurt again and file another claim. *Tilt.*

- You find one of your subordinates extremely annoying. One day, you receive a report that she has engaged in misconduct, so you call her into your office. She makes a smart-aleck comment, and you blow a gasket and fire her on the spot. *Tilt*.

Strategies for overcoming tilt-a-whirl

How can you avoid going on tilt when making employment decisions? The strategies used by poker players translate well to the HR world.

First, be aware that it's human tendency to tilt, and have enough self-awareness to recognize when it begins to happen. As poker pro Andy Bellin quipped, "I pride myself on never tilting, but I tilt all the time." The only way to deal with a problem is to admit it exists.

Second, if you find yourself going on tilt, take steps to defuse the situation. A poker player often will leave the table to clear her head and come back when her emotions have subsided. You can do the same thing. If an investigation interview or a disciplinary meeting seems to be getting out of hand, politely call time out until everyone has cooled down. Rather than immediately firing an insubordinate or uncooperative employee, consider suspending him with pay so you can conduct an investigation and make a rational, well-reasoned disciplinary decision. Review his file, applicable policies, and your previous actions in similar situations, and make your decision after running it by your lawyer and others on the HR or management team.

Finally, understand that HR management, like poker, is about making the right decisions over a long period of time. Bad beats are the result of variance, not bad strategy, so don't let them unduly influence your future decisions. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try to learn from and correct your mistakes. The key is to analyze each bad outcome and determine whether it was the result of a bad decision or simply a bad beat. Talk to an employment lawyer or HR pro if you need help assessing which one it was.

He said it

"The mark of a top player is not how much he wins when he's winning but how he handles his losses."

— Bobby Baldwin (1978 World Poker Champion)