

Playing Poker Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Casey Kingsley** (May 22, 2025)

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.

While law and poker may seem worlds apart, they actually have a lot in common. Both are high-stakes fields, involve substantial risk and reward, and demand a sharp mind for reading people, thinking strategically and, above all, being patient.

These same skills have made me an effective and better lawyer. Here's a closer look at how those skills from poker correlate to the practice of law.

Being Patient and Considering Timing

In poker, patience is a requirement. A strong poker player knows not to rush into every hand or get emotionally invested in bad plays. A poker player has to wait for the right hand and the right moment to strike — a principle I've found equally relevant in my legal practice.



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As lawyers, we can't pursue every lead or argument that we find. Instead, we must patiently build a case, pick our battles, and carefully analyze when to push forward and when to step back. Whether I'm reviewing evidence, assessing new information or deciding when to make that pivotal argument in a case, poker has taught me that timing can make all the difference.

Assessing Risk and Managing Uncertainty

Poker is fundamentally about managing risk and uncertainty. You must play each hand based on the information you have and weigh your odds against the unknown. Similarly, lawyers deal with an array of uncertainties, such as how a witness might perform or what opposing counsel will be presenting. Knowing how to assess risks and decide whether to press forward or fold is an invaluable skill that has a direct impact on achieving the best outcomes for clients.

A smart lawyer, like a good poker player, needs to evaluate the potential outcomes of each decision. Sometimes, it's wise to settle a case if the odds are stacked against you, much like folding in poker. Other times, a calculated risk can lead to a breakthrough. Having practiced this discipline at the card table, I believe those skills have made me better at making informed, strategic decisions when advising my clients.

Reading Body Language and Subtle Cues

One of the most thrilling aspects of poker is reading people. While players hold cards, they also give away subtle cues through their body language, facial expressions and even the speed with which they make decisions. Every poker player develops a knack for recognizing

tells, which are the small, often subconscious actions that reveal a lot about someone's intentions. This skill is also invaluable in the practice of law, especially in the courtroom or when taking a deposition.

Whether I'm cross-examining a witness, negotiating with opposing counsel or observing a jury, my experience at the poker table has taught me to look for subtle signs. These could be as small as a shift in posture, prolonged eye contact or hesitation when answering a question. You can gain a significant advantage in building your case and anticipating the opposition's next move by recognizing these cues.

Knowing How to Use Strategic Bluffing

Bluffing is an essential part of poker, and while honesty is paramount in law, the concept of strategically presenting your case holds true. In poker, a player can bluff, making his opponent fold even if the player's hand isn't amazing. In a similar way, in the courtroom, a well-timed demonstration of confidence in one's case can sway perception, making opposing counsel reconsider tactics or a jury more likely to side with you.

Knowing when to present a position with unwavering confidence can sometimes be as valuable as actually holding the best hand. Poker has taught me that confidence, combined with the right amount of pressure, can influence the outcome. As a lawyer, I don't bluff with the facts; instead, I use well-crafted arguments, confidence, and strategic positioning to communicate the strength of my client's case and let the chips fall where they may.

Staying Calm Under Pressure

Playing poker can take you on a roller coaster ride of emotions, especially when the stakes are high. Losing a big hand or watching your carefully executed strategy unravel can be frustrating, but poker players know that emotional control is everything.

This is one area where poker has had a profound impact on my approach to law. In court, emotions can run high, but maintaining composure is vital.

As a personal injury lawyer, I sometimes face hostile cross-examinations, difficult clients or complex negotiations. Staying calm, thinking clearly and responding strategically without letting emotions cloud my judgment is essential.

Just as I've learned to tilt-proof myself in poker, I've cultivated an ability to remain calm, even in the most heated legal battles. This sort of resilience enables you to keep a clear head and focus on the end goal, making a solid recovery for your client.

Anticipating Opponents' Moves

In poker, every decision is informed not just by what's in your hand, but by anticipating what cards your opponents might hold and how they're likely to bet. This level of foresight is important in law as well. Preparing for a case involves analyzing every possible angle, including what an opposing counsel might argue, what the witnesses might say, and how a judge or jury might react.

Poker trains you to look two or three moves ahead, constantly calculating probabilities and playing out potential scenarios. In law, this translates to anticipating opposing arguments, preparing counterpoints and planning for unexpected turns. This mindset allows you to be better prepared, often staying a step ahead of the competition.

Learning to Lose Gracefully

Even the best poker players lose hands. What matters is not how often you lose, but how you handle those losses and adjust your strategy.

Poker teaches you to move on quickly, learn from mistakes and avoid letting a loss disrupt your next hand. This resilience is the same in the law. Not every motion will succeed, not every argument will sway the jury and you will not win every case. The key is to accept the outcome, analyze what went wrong and apply those lessons to future cases.

In poker, as in law, perseverance is critical. Losing gracefully and bouncing back with determination makes you a stronger, more adaptive player and lawyer. This lesson has been instrumental in my career, allowing me to keep pushing forward, refining my approach and remaining focused on achieving successful outcomes for my clients.

Embracing the Art of Pivoting

Poker is a dynamic game where the circumstances change rapidly, and you often need to adapt on the fly. Sometimes, the game changes drastically based on one card or an opponent's unexpected play. This adaptability has helped me as a lawyer, especially in the unpredictable environment of a courtroom or during negotiations.

In legal practice, new evidence might emerge, or a witness might provide unexpected testimony. Being able to pivot and adapt to these changes without losing sight of the bigger picture is a skill honed by years of playing poker. It's about staying flexible, evaluating new information quickly and making snap decisions that fit your overall strategy.

Conclusion

Poker is more than just a game to me — it's a master class in psychology, risk management and strategic thinking. The lessons I've learned from playing poker have directly affected my effectiveness as a lawyer, whether it's through my ability to maintain patience, read people or anticipate next moves. It requires skills that directly correlate to practicing law.

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