Winner's Curse

Idea In Short

Treat a win as new information, not proof of superior judgment. In auctions, acquisitions, procurement contests and talent markets, the successful bidder often wins because it held the most optimistic estimate of an uncertain asset's value. That estimate may be wrong in precisely the direction that secured victory. Leaders should therefore set bids from the value conditional on winning, not from an unconstrained stand-alone estimate. Use independent valuation, scenario ranges, precommitted walk-away prices and governance that separates advocacy from challenge. The objective is not to win every contest. It is to win only when the price preserves value after accounting for uncertainty, competition, integration costs and the information embedded in the fact of victory

The winner's curse describes a paradox that appears wherever competitors bid for an asset whose underlying value is uncertain. The winner may feel vindicated by the result, yet victory can be evidence that its estimate was too high. In the standard common-value setting, all bidders ultimately care about the same underlying value, such as oil reserves beneath a tract, cash flows from a target company, or demand for a spectrum license. Each bidder sees imperfect signals. The highest bid often belongs to the bidder with the most optimistic error, not the bidder with the best insight.

Why a winning bid can be bad news

The logic of the winner's curse is statistical before it is psychological. Suppose several firms estimate the future cash flows of a target. Their estimates cluster around the true value, but each includes noise from assumptions, models and incomplete information. If every firm bids close to its estimate, the buyer that wins is likely to be the firm with the highest estimate. Conditional on winning, its estimate is no longer an average draw from the distribution. It is selected because it was unusually optimistic.

Research on auction behavior describes the same mechanism directly: when participants bid their estimates in a common-value auction, the winner tends to be the participant with

the most optimistic estimate, which is generally an overestimate of the true value1. The error does not require incompetence. It arises because the competitive process filters for optimism.

This distinction matters in corporate decisions. Leaders often treat a successful bid as validation of their model, diligence, or negotiating skill. In an uncertain competitive process, the opposite inference may be appropriate. The fact that every other informed participant declined to match the price is itself information. A disciplined bidder asks:

> "What must be true for us to be the only firm willing to pay this amount?" That question converts a celebratory moment into a necessary review of assumptions

Common value versus private value

The winner's curse is strongest when the object has a common or interdependent value. In a common-value auction, the asset has one true underlying value for everyone, but bidders observe different signals. Offshore oil and gas leases are the classic example. The volume of recoverable reserves does not change with the identity of the winner, but each bidder has different geological interpretations. The University of Chicago's research on U.S. offshore lease auctions finds evidence of common values, affiliated private information and unobserved heterogeneity in those auctions2.

Private-value auctions differ. A painting may genuinely be worth more to one collector than to another, or a technology acquisition may create distinctive synergies for one buyer. In those cases, paying more than rivals is not automatically a mistake. The danger emerges when decision makers mistake uncertain common value for unique private value. Acquirers frequently invoke synergies, brand fit, or strategic optionality without testing whether those benefits are distinctive, feasible and large enough to justify the premium.

Most business contests combine both elements. A target may have common stand-alone cash flows and bidder-specific synergies. A procurement contract may have a market value plus differences in delivery capability. The right response is not to declare the winner's curse irrelevant. It is to separate the shared component from the genuinely private component and discount the shared component for the information revealed by winning.

Why more competition raises exposure

The number of competitors matters because the highest estimate becomes more extreme as more estimates enter the process. With two bidders, the winning signal may be only modestly optimistic. With ten well-informed bidders, the winner is much more likely to hold a highly favorable view relative to the group. The Egonomics Lab explanation of the winner's curse makes this point plainly: its severity rises with the number of bidders because more bidders increase the likelihood that someone has overestimated the asset3.

This is why broad auction participation can produce both higher prices and higher bidder risk. Sellers welcome a larger field because competition pushes bids upward. Buyers should respond differently. When credible rivals multiply, a bid model should not merely retain the same valuation and add urgency. It should widen the adverse-selection adjustment. A price that made sense in a bilateral negotiation may destroy value in a crowded auction.

The same logic affects boards. A management team may report that many rivals are pursuing an asset and present that interest as proof of quality. Rival interest is relevant, but it is not unambiguously positive. It may signal strong demand, or it may mean the organization must correct more aggressively for the fact that winning requires being more optimistic than every other participant.

Auctions, acquisitions and tenders

The winner's curse extends beyond literal auctions. It appears whenever a selection process rewards the most aggressive forecast. In mergers and acquisitions, a buyer can overpay because its synergy model exceeds competitors' models. In public procurement, a supplier can win by underestimating delivery costs, schedule risks, or the complexity of requirements. In talent markets, a club or employer can pay for expected performance that reflects the most favorable projection rather than the most likely outcome.

Robert Wilson's work on common-value auctions helped explain why firms that won auctions for oil leases sometimes earned unexpectedly low returns. The University of New South Wales account of the 2020 Nobel Prize notes that the highest bid reflected the most optimistic estimate of the oil contained in a lease, while the true value was likely closer to the average estimate4. The insight applies directly to corporate dealmaking. A valuation is not complete until it includes the information in the competitive outcome.

Sealed-bid processes can be especially demanding because they reveal little about rivals' views before commitment. Open or multi-round auctions may allow participants to learn from pricing and adjust their estimates. That does not eliminate overpayment risk, but it changes the information environment. Stanford's account of auction theory explains that in a common-value setting, bids can reveal information and bidders may adjust their estimates as the auction proceeds; sealed-bid tenders offer no comparable learning mechanism5.

How to bid conditionally on winning

The remedy is not simply to bid less. It is to estimate value conditionally on winning. A bidder begins with a base estimate of the asset's value, then asks how much the win itself should reduce confidence in that estimate. The adjustment depends on uncertainty in the signals, the number and quality of competitors, the auction format and the degree to which value is shared rather than private.

A practical decision process should include four explicit steps.

1. Build an independent stand-alone valuation before the team discusses price or competitor behavior
2. Separate common value from defensible private synergies, documenting the operational mechanism and owner for every synergy claim
3. Apply a winner's-curse adjustment that increases with estimation uncertainty and credible competition
4. Set and enforce a walk-away price before final bids, with changes requiring independent approval rather than sponsor advocacy

These steps matter because competitive pressure changes behavior. Teams start with a valuation, then gradually revise it to preserve a chance of winning. Each revision may sound small: a faster integration, a stronger growth rate, a lower cost of capital, a broader synergy category. Together they can transform an investment case into a narrative built to justify the price already desired.

Governance that prevents self-confirmation

Good governance protects decision makers from the natural tendency to interpret a contest as a test of resolve. The deal team or bid sponsor has strong incentives to frame every data

point as support for continued participation. A separate challenge function should therefore test the assumptions that make the bid viable. Its mandate is not to oppose transactions reflexively. It is to identify which assumptions need to be true for the deal to create value and quantify the consequence if they fail.

The most useful questions are concrete. Which cash-flow drivers differ from the median competitor view and why? Which synergy claims are truly unavailable to other buyers? What would the asset be worth if the most optimistic volume, margin, or timing assumption is wrong? How much of the return comes from the first two years versus a terminal-value assumption? At what price does the decision remain attractive after a downside case that is plausible rather than merely possible?

Postmortems close the loop. After an auction, acquisition, or tender, compare the ex ante model with realized performance and with the assumptions rejected during debate. The aim is not to punish a team for uncertainty. It is to find systematic optimism, identify where rival information was underweighted and improve the conditional adjustment for future contests.

Winning without overpaying

The winner's curse does not say that the winner must lose money. Sophisticated bidders recognize the selection effect and shade their bids accordingly. Some bidders also possess genuine private advantages that justify a higher price. A buyer with a superior distribution channel, a proprietary operating capability, or a credible regulatory pathway may create value that rivals cannot. The key is to prove that advantage rather than assume it.

The strongest organizations preserve discipline when competition becomes emotionally charged. They distinguish a strategic asset from a strategic price. They accept that a rival's willingness to pay does not establish intrinsic value. They structure decision rights so that the same person cannot both champion the opportunity and certify the valuation. And they make the walk-away decision as legitimate as the winning decision.

In competitive markets, losing an auction can be a sign of discipline rather than a failure of ambition. The goal is not to avoid every risk of being wrong. It is to avoid paying a price that depends on being more right than all other informed participants when the evidence suggests that winning itself may mean the estimate is too high.

- 1The Value Of Victory: Social Origins Of The Winner's Curse In Common Value Auctions
- 2Common Values, Unobserved Heterogeneity And Endogenous Entry In US Offshore Oil Lease Auctions
- 3Winner's Curse
- 4How Milgrom And Wilson Changed The Face Of Auctions
- 5The Bid Picture: Nobel Prize Winners Explain Auction Theory

Summary

The winner's curse is a useful discipline because it turns a familiar business emotion into a valuation question. A competitive process selects the most optimistic participant, so a win can signal that the winning estimate sits above the underlying value. This does not mean that bidding, acquisitions, or auctions are irrational. It means the valuation process must adjust for selection, uncertainty and the number of rivals. Organizations that build those corrections into decision rights, bid models and postmortems reduce the risk of paying for ambition rather than value. Winning remains desirable when the price reflects the probability that the market has revealed an error in the winning forecast