

Contrasting and Common Beliefs, Positions, and Interests

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how to gather information about parties' beliefs, positions, and interests during the conflict analysis process. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Identifying Parties' Beliefs
2. Differentiating Between Positions and Interests
3. Beliefs, Positions, and Interests in the Resolution Process

1. Identifying Parties' Beliefs

When a conflict is particularly intense and complicated or involves multiple parties, the conflict-intervener will seek to gather information upfront by doing a conflict analysis.

They will gather that information from both parties separately, visually represent this information in a conflict map, and then bring the parties together. An important piece of information for the intervener to gather during this process is the beliefs held by each party. As you know, a **belief** is what each side sees as absolutely true, right, and correct.

The intervener will probably discover that there are some differences in terms of how each side sees the causes, consequences, and facts of the conflict. However, the intervener will probably also find that there are some similarities. Because each side is probably unaware of any similarities in beliefs, the mapping process is an excellent tool for revealing these similarities to the parties.



TERM TO KNOW

Belief

A person's mental sense of what is true, right, or correct in a situation.

2. Differentiating Between Positions and Interests

In addition to beliefs, the intervener will also want to gather information about the parties' positions and interests.

To review, a **position** is a particular way of getting an interest met. Each party will likely come into the resolution process with that solution already in mind; however, there might be other ways that the interest could be met.

Conversely, an **interest** is an item, action, or belief that the party views as absolutely essential to their satisfaction and happiness. This is why they have taken a particular position on how to meet that interest.

In creating a conflict map, the intervener will be looking at the parties' positions while also uncovering their interests.

IN CONTEXT

There's a conflict in a community over land use policy. Quite often, this type of conflict can be intense, involve multiple parties, and go on for some time. In terms of positions, the people living in the community want to see the land used for economic development in order to improve their state's economy.

An environmental group realizes what these residents are considering, and opposes them in favor of environmental preservation. Additionally, the people in the community want to preserve private property rights; the environmental group is interested in recreational access for the public. The conflict seems to evolve into an either/or situation of economic development versus environmental preservation.

The parties clearly have two opposing positions, but it's possible that they have something in common in terms of interests. In talking to the community members who want economic development, the intervener discovers that natural beauty, open air, clean space, and wildlife are all very important to the residents. They do want to preserve those things because those are some of the reasons why they love this area. Of course, the environmental group also shares those feelings. Once shared interests are identified, it can be easier for the parties to think about how they can work together.

The intervener actually mapping out the positions and interests of both sides can be enormously helpful, as the parties will have a visual representation of the areas in which they agree and disagree.



TERMS TO KNOW

Position

A particular way of getting an interest met, but not necessarily the only way of getting that interest met.

Interest

An action, belief, or physical item that a party perceives as important or essential to his/her satisfaction or happiness.

3. Beliefs, Positions, and Interests in the Resolution Process

Because intense or complicated conflicts usually involve each side looking at the other in an extreme way, perhaps involving labels or stereotypes, realizing that there are some interests or beliefs in common can cause cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance happens when the mind tries to hold two or more incompatible thoughts or beliefs; when the parties are made aware of shared beliefs/mutual interests, their minds have to make room for new views about one another.

This is where the conflict resolution process can be very helpful. Mapping the conflict is a great starting point because it allows each side to see exactly where the **shared beliefs/mutual interests** are.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Returning to the example of the land use conflict, which really did occur in a community on the West Coast: when the parties identified their common interests, they were able to identify over 100 alternative actions they could take to meet the interests of both sides. Both sides feeling heard, and realizing that they have these mutual interests, went a long way towards defusing the anger and personal accusations.

In terms of their position on private property rights, the residents may think, “Maybe we do need to think of some ways to limit this if we want to preserve natural beauty. Recreational access could help lead to the economic development we want by creating jobs.” The parties are now beginning to brainstorm some actions they could take to ensure that both sides’ interests are met.



BIG IDEA

For an intervener in the conflict resolution process, mapping is an excellent tool for uncovering beliefs, interests, and positions up front when gathering information from both sides. This way, when the parties come together for a joint meeting, there will already be a sense of where they have some common ground.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cognitive Dissonance

A state in which the mind holds two or more incompatible thoughts or beliefs.

Shared Belief/Mutual Interest

A belief or interest held by all parties to a conflict.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that when performing a conflict analysis, it’s important for the intervener to **identify the parties’ beliefs**, as well as **differentiate between parties’ positions and interests**. By creating a conflict map, the intervener can present the parties with a visual representation of where their interests overlap.

You now understand that because of their strongly held opposing positions, the parties may experience cognitive dissonance when they discover that they share some common ground. Again, this is why mapping out **beliefs, interests, and positions in the resolution process** is so helpful: When parties can easily see where exactly their shared beliefs and mutual interests lie, they have an easier time coming together to brainstorm alternative options. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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