

Creating a Problem Statement

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the importance of problem statements in the conflict resolution process.

The specific areas of focus include:

1. Crafting a Problem Statement
2. Addressing Interests in Conflict

1. Crafting a Problem Statement

As you've learned, the goal of conflict resolution is to help parties reach a resolution that is mutually satisfying to both sides.

One of the critical points in the process occurs when the parties come together to collaborate on a **problem statement**, or a formal written statement of the problem that needs to be solved by the parties.

This statement incorporates **joint interests** that have been identified through the process; these are the interests that both parties hold.

We want to phrase this statement as a question in order to invite an answer. The statement should include:

- Party A's listed needs
- Party B's listed needs
- Their listed shared needs

➦ **EXAMPLE** You might phrase a problem statement like the following: "How can we meet Eileen's listed needs, Bahs listed needs, and the listed shared needs of both parties at the same time?"

The goal of the problem statement is to put this question into writing as a way to allow the parties to collaborate on a solution.

The parties are going to write this statement with the help of an intervener; the process of writing the statement ensures that the parties

- Own it
- Agree to it
- Realize that it reflects their interests

They can then come together to find a way to meet those interests.



TERMS TO KNOW

Problem Statement

A written description of the objectives of a solution to a conflict, generally phrased as a question.

Joint Interests

Interests held by all parties to a conflict.

2. Addressing Interests in Conflict

The resolution process doesn't start with the problem statement; it often takes a while to reach this step.

This is because the conflicting parties often come in with opposing positions, or particular ways of getting their needs met. Underneath those positions are interests, or the reasons why the parties have taken their particular positions.

As you know, positions are not the only ways of getting needs met, and interests are what the resolution process aims to uncover.

After the parties come together and share their positions, or the way they view the problem, the issues underneath the positions can be revealed. The interests are what must be met in order for the parties to feel satisfied.

Both parties will then list their interests, as the goal in conflict resolution is to get those interests out in the open so that each side can hear them.

When the parties sit down to share and discuss their listed interests, they may find that there are some interests they have in common.

IN CONTEXT

Let's say Party A is a landlord, and Party B is a tenant. They are in the conflict resolution process because the landlord has raised the rent, and the tenant is refusing to pay this raised rent. The landlord is saying, "You have to either pay the rent or leave." Both parties are coming in with strong positions

Underneath his position, you, as the intervener, find that the landlord has a number of interests. One of his main interests is to keep good tenants, but he needs to raise the rent because repairs need to be done on the building. He can't afford these repairs without raising the rent, and he knows he's not going to attract good tenants to the building unless he does the repairs. On the other side, the tenant has recently lost hours at his job, so he is making less money. He can't afford to pay the raised rent, so his interest here is also financial. Additionally, he's upset because there are repairs that need to be done.

As they begin to discuss these things, they uncover that the landlord has enjoyed having this tenant in the building. He's been a good tenant up until now, and the tenant enjoys living there. The tenant realizes that this has been a good place to live; he doesn't really want to look for another place.

However, he doesn't want to stay there without the repairs being done, and he won't pay the higher rent. Underneath their opposing positions, what they both really want is to maintain their business relationship.

They now have to come up with a way to phrase a problem statement that makes sense to them and fits the situation. This statement would be something like, "How can we meet the landlord's need to fund new repairs and keep good tenants (including the current tenant), and how can we meet this tenant's need to be able to pay the rent, yet still have the repairs done?"

The statement aims to find a solution that meets both their financial needs. Together, the two parties can think of possible solutions that allow the tenant to continue to live there, allow the tenant and the landlord to maintain this relationship, and allow the repairs to get done in a way that is financially feasible for both parties.



HINT

It's important to keep in mind that when parties are crafting a problem statement, the exact wording may not come out right the very first time they try, and that's okay. The process of coming up with the wording, of being able to state the problem in a way that each side can own, is a critical part of putting the problem statement together.

If the parties don't get it right the first time, the conflict intervener will help the parties write or rewrite the statement. Still, the statement will reflect the mutual needs, or the joint interests, that the parties share.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **crafting a problem statement** is a crucial part of the conflict resolution process because it allows the parties to own the problem and collaborate on a solution. The problem statement is often phrased as a question and must address the parties' joint interests, along with their individual needs. You now understand that before a problem statement can be written, the parties must **address interests during the conflict resolution process**. Once the parties uncover and list the individual interests behind their positions, they may discover that they have some interests in common. They can then work on creating a problem statement. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

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