

Moving from Positions to Interests

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll take a closer look at the role of interests and positions in conflict. In particular, we'll discuss:

1. Positional Bargaining
2. Shared Interests

1. Positional Bargaining

When people are in conflict, they have an **interest** that needs to be met. As you learned previously, an interest is an outcome that a party needs to feel satisfied; it's really why that party is present in the conflict.

However, in conflict, people often don't talk about their interests; they talk about **positions** instead. Positions are what they come in saying they need and are a way of getting the interest met.

Positions are not the only way to way to meet an interest, although we often mistakenly perceive them that way. The interest is underneath the position, and it explains why you've taken that position in the first place.

Thus, what often happens in conflict is that the parties engage in **positional or distributive bargaining** about certain parts of each other's positions.

This will most likely be very dissatisfying because the parties are trying to trade elements of their positions but can't meet all or even part of each party's position.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** This can happen in negotiating or bargaining over the price of something. One side says, "I'm going to drive a hard bargain. I'm not paying that top price. I'm going to see if I can drive it down." And the other side is saying, "I want to keep it at this price, but I'll come down a little."

With this positional bargaining going on around price, both parties might walk away feeling dissatisfied. One party thinks, "I didn't get what I really needed or wanted," and the other side says, "I paid too much."



TERMS TO KNOW

Interest

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

Position

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

Positional/Distributive Bargaining

A form of negotiation in which elements of each party's positions are seen as things to be traded back and forth in an effort to get needs partially met.

2. Shared Interests

This dissatisfaction in positional bargaining occurs because while positions often conflict, interests rarely do.

Thus, when two parties look beyond their positions, they can usually uncover **shared or mutual interests**.

These shared interests are what the parties want to focus on because they now have an opportunity to uncover some other ways to meet both of their needs.

IN CONTEXT

Perhaps there's a conflict between a tenant and a landlord, and they have two different positions. The landlord has decided to raise the rent, but the tenant won't pay the raised rent and will have to move.

Underneath these two opposing positions, it's likely that some shared interests exist: maybe the tenant has lived there a number of years, and he likes living there. The landlord has found the tenant to be a good tenant, and would like to keep him around. So they both have an interest in maintaining their business relationship.

However, the landlord is raising the rent because of repairs. There are things that need to be done in the building, such as painting and maintenance. Expenses have gone up, and the only way to fund this is by raising the rent. The tenant is having trouble paying that price because he has lost hours at work. He is only working part-time, so he can't afford a higher rent.

Both of their interests are around money, but underneath this is the need for the repairs. There could then be some creative problem solving here.

Perhaps the tenant might say, "Why don't I do some of the painting for you? Could I do some of the repairs? I'm a handyman, maybe I can help out that way in order to keep the rent the same." The minute they begin to talk about shared interests, or what it is they both really need in order to feel satisfied, there may be some other ways to satisfy those needs.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Perhaps your boss says you need to work overtime, but you can't because you need to leave at 5:00 to pick up your child. You then consider the interests underlying these two positions: obviously one of them is that you have to pick up your child; you want to be a good parent, and you don't have any other options.

The boss is saying, "We have to meet a deadline, and there are people who are out sick. We have less people, so the only way to meet the deadline is for you to work late." The shared interest here is that both

you and your boss want to meet the deadline in order to satisfy the client.

Perhaps if you begin to explore other ways to do this, you may come up with any number of alternatives:

- Coming in early to work
- Coming in on Saturday and bringing your child with you
- Doing some work from home

There could be several ways to satisfy the deadline, and thus meet both mutual needs.



TERM TO KNOW

Shared/Mutual (Joint) Interests

Interests held by all parties to a conflict.



BIG IDEA

When we move away from positional bargaining to explore the interests underneath, we can oftentimes come up with creative solutions that we weren't aware of originally.

When someone takes a stance that sounds firm, it's always good to use clarifying questions to better understand why the person feels that way. Doing this will allow you to get at the reasons underneath the position in order to uncover shared interests.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that in a conflict situation, we tend to engage in **positional bargaining**, trading portions of our positions back and forth. This often leaves both parties feeling dissatisfied because neither of their needs are truly met. You now understand that underneath these positions, there are often **shared or mutual interests**. By asking clarifying questions in order to understand the interests behind another party's position, you might find that you both ultimately desire the same outcome and can thus work together on a solution. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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