

Understanding the Distinction Between Positions and Interests

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how positions and interests differ from one another even though they are very often confused in conflict situations. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Positions vs. Interests
2. Positions and Interests in Conflict Resolution

1. Positions vs. Interests

When people are in conflict, they are typically on opposite sides of an issue. In order to bridge that gap, it's important to understand the distinction between the parties' positions and their interests.

Positions are typically how people describe what they want when first coming into a conflict because they mistakenly see these positions as the only way their interests will be met. If you're on a particular side of a conflict, your position is a stance you've taken.

An **interest**, however, is really why you want what you do; it's the reason why you are saying you want something in particular.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Ingrid is experiencing conflict with her son because he doesn't do the chores that she has asked him to do. She states that she wants her son to empty the dishwasher and take on the trash without being asked many times for each task. This is her position.

However, her interest is not the exact same thing; her interest is to have her son help lighten the housework load for her and to begin learning the skills that will allow him to keep his own home as an adult. Ultimately, a different position—such as requesting different specific chores—could satisfy the same interest.

In other words, an interest:

- An action
- A belief
- An outcome

that you need in order to feel satisfied.



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.

2. Positions and Interests in Conflict Resolution

It's very easy to confuse positions and interests, and this often happens when people come into conflict. They fight for a particular position because they think that's the only way they're going to get their interests met.

However, when you actually consider the interest, you will find that many times there is another way of meeting that interest, not just the one way in which you originally thought you needed to have it met.

➡ **EXAMPLE** While at work, your boss tells you that you have to work overtime this week. That's your boss's position. Your position is that you have to leave by 5:00. While these two opposing positions may seem impossible to bridge, it's important to look at the interests underneath the positions.

Perhaps your boss says, "We've got people out sick, and I need coverage for those people. The client moved the deadline up; we have to meet the deadline with less people, so I'm going to have to have you stay late to do that."

Your position is, "I can't stay after 5:00 because I'm part of a carpool, and I need to get back to pick the kids up from daycare. It doesn't work for me to stay late."

So you need to pick up your kids, and you need to leave by 5:00 to do that. Your boss needs to meet this deadline, so she needs coverage for the people that are out.

However, there are shared interests here: you both want to meet the deadline. You want to satisfy this client. When you realize that you both ultimately want the same thing, you can talk about whether there's a way for you to put in extra time while still meeting the needs of the carpool arrangement.

Perhaps you could come in early. You're willing to drive in early as long as you can leave at 5:00 to pick up your kids. Or you'll do some work from home. You can ask your boss, "Is it possible for me to do some telecommuting to help meet this deadline?"

There may be other options you can brainstorm that would help get this project done to meet the deadline and satisfy the client. You open up a whole host of possibilities when you look at interests and not just positions.

➡ **EXAMPLE** You live in a condominium, and there are two sides in conflict about pets. There are people who say there should be absolutely no pets in this condo, and there's a group that really wants to have pets. Two totally different positions.

Again, it's important to look at the underlying interests: perhaps the people who are taking the position of no pets are saying, "We don't want to take the risk of damage to the lawns from dogs. Pets are a danger for the property. We also don't want noise from barking dogs; we're trying to protect the environment we live in and our investment."

People who want pets are saying, "Pets are family. We can't imagine living here without having a pet. We've always lived with a pet. We're good owners, and we take care of our pets." In terms of common interests, both sides do have an investment in the property; they both want a comfortable living environment,

Thus they can perhaps try to compromise on:

- The number of pets
- The types of pets
- The guidelines for pet ownership
- Penalties for property damage

Thinking about the interests allows the parties to approach the conflict in ways other than simply taking two sides.



BIG IDEA

Whenever you begin to discuss interests in a conflict, you open up a number of options that you can put on the table. At least one of these options may be satisfactory to both sides, allowing you to meet mutual interests and move away from the positional back and forth.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **difference between positions and interests** lies in the fact that positions are what the parties come in thinking they need in order to get what they want, while interests are why the parties want certain things. You now understand the important role of **positions and interests in the conflict resolution process**. Even if people come in with opposing positions, uncovering the interests underneath those positions provides a good chance of finding a solution to bridge the gap and satisfy both parties. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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