

Zero-sum vs. Win-Win Thinking

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss two different approaches that can affect the outcome and the satisfaction of the parties involved. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Ways of Thinking about Conflict
 - a. Zero-Sum Thinking
 - b. Win-Win Thinking
2. Meeting the Needs of Both Parties

1. Ways of Thinking about Conflict

The way we approach conflict can make a huge difference in the outcome and the satisfaction of both parties involved. There are two very different approaches to conflict.

1a. Zero-Sum Thinking

As you may remember from an earlier lesson, zero-sum means that for every gain, there's a corresponding loss. When somebody gains, somebody else has to lose; therefore, this approach is much like a battle. There's a clear winner and a clear loser.

Zero-sum thinking is a very common approach to conflict, and **distributive bargaining** is a form of negotiation based on zero-sum.



TERMS TO KNOW

Zero-Sum Thinking

An approach to negotiation or conflict resolution that assumes any gain for one party implies a corresponding loss for the other party.

Distributive Bargaining

A form of negotiation based on zero-sum thinking.

1b. Win-Win Thinking

Another approach to conflict is **win-win thinking**, sometimes known as **integrative bargaining**. The win-win approach is different because while one person can win, that doesn't mean the other person has to lose. The other person can also win.

Thus, integrative bargaining differs from distributive bargaining and zero-sum thinking because the focus is on

meeting each party's interests as fully as possible.

As we've discussed, there's a big difference between focusing on positions, which leads to gain and loss, and interests, where both parties can win.



TERMS TO KNOW

Win-Win Thinking

An approach to conflict resolution that sees the objective of a successful solution as meeting each party's interests as fully as possible, to the point of satisfaction with the solution.

Integrative Bargaining

A form of negotiation based on win-win thinking.

2. Meeting the Needs of Both Parties

Zero-sum thinking is based on the fact that there is a limited resource. There's only so much of something, and if one side's going to get it, the other side's going to lose. This resource could be money, land, or anything that can become limited.

Win-win thinking, however, is designed to really look at integrating the needs of the two parties in conflict in order to see what type of resolution is possible.

IN CONTEXT

Some years ago, a city on the West Coast had a surplus in its budget. There were two groups vying for these funds, which they saw as a limited resource. One group was a coalition of women's organizations that wanted the money to update and redo the daycare centers. The daycare facilities in the city were very inadequate, so there were a number of people who supported that cause.

The other group was made up of firefighters, as well as some homeowners on the side of the firefighters. This group wanted the money to upgrade firefighting equipment. This upgrade would not only better protect homes, but it would also lower insurance rates. This became a back and forth battle between positions.

If these groups came into a conflict resolution process, and moved away from this zero-sum way of thinking in which one group is going to win and one group is going to lose, they could begin to focus on their interests. Eventually, they did come up with a very creative solution in which some of the money was used to convert the old fire stations into daycare centers.

Doing this attracted some state and federal funding to help operate the daycares. Then, they used the rest of the money to build three new fire stations. After they built the fire stations, they were able to raise the city's fire rating from double A to triple A, and insurance rates went down while property values went up. This created a situation in which people won on all sides.

This is a great example of what can happen when you focus on the interests, and how to integrate them: you can think creatively, and come up with solutions that can really meet the needs of both sides.



BIG IDEA

There are two completely different approaches to conflict: zero-sum thinking, or distributive bargaining, and win-win thinking, or integrative bargaining.

The conflict resolution process is based on the win-win approach because the process aims to bring conflicting parties together in order to look at the conflict as a problem that they can jointly solve instead of a battle they have to fight.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about two separate **ways of thinking about conflict** zero-sum thinking, in which the parties are focused on positions, and win-win thinking, in which the parties are focused on interests. You now understand that in order to **meet the needs of both parties**, the conflict resolution process uses the win-win approach. When parties are able to move away from thinking in terms of positions, they can often discover common interests that can lead to a resolution. Good luck!



TERMS TO KNOW

Distributive Bargaining

A form of negotiation based on zero-sum thinking.

Integrative Bargaining

A form of negotiation based on win-win thinking.

Win-Win Thinking

An approach to conflict resolution that sees the objective of a successful solution as meeting each party's interests as fully as possible, to the point of satisfaction with the solution.

Zero-Sum Thinking

An approach to negotiation or conflict resolution that assumes any gain for one party implies a corresponding loss for the other party.