

## Chapter 16

# Helping Group Members Focus on Interests Rather Than Positions

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IN THE CLASSIC STORY that illustrates the difference between positions and interests, two children, holding one orange, bring it to an adult and state that they both want it. The adult asks each of them to describe why they need the orange. One child is hungry and wants to eat it; the other needs the grated rind for a cake recipe. Problem solved: by focusing on the interests rather than the position, both children get 100 percent of what they want.

Although not all organizational problems are as easily solved as this one, Ground Rule Five, “Focus on interests, not positions,” is an extremely useful way to approach many of the issues we face daily at work. A *position* is a single answer or solution to a problem; an *interest* is a need, hope, or concern that frequently can be met by more than one solution (Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 1991).

Because people tend to move quickly from thinking about their own interests to advocating a position that meets their interests, it is easy for parties in conflict to argue and bargain over different solutions instead of generating a solution that meets the underlying interests.

Whether formulating a policy, making choices about allocating scarce resources, or mediating a dispute between coworkers, focusing on identifying and meeting shared interests is a key technique for resolving a problem in a way that stays resolved.

Here are ways to help people focus on interests rather than positions.

### START WITH A SENTENCE PROMPT

A useful technique for getting the discussion started on the right foot is to give people an opportunity to identify interests before any positions have been stated. For example, if a group has the task of designing a new pay-for-performance plan for the organization, you can write, “The pay-for-performance plan needs to be

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designed in a way that . . .” at the top of a flip chart pad. Group members then complete this sentence with as many statements as they can, each stated in the form of an interest. Typical interests may include “rewards high performers,” “retains good employees,” and “allows good budget projections.” The group can then look at the entire list and share ideas for pay-for-performance plans that meet the set (or a portion of the set) of interests.

This approach helps frame a discussion around interests from the very beginning, avoiding the common scenario where group members offer proposals for various plans, based on their own interests, and other group members point out flaws in the plan, based on their interests not being met.

### **GENERATE ONE COMMON LIST OF INTERESTS RATHER THAN A TWO-COLUMN PRO-CON FORMAT**

In the example, the group will create one list of interests and can then use this list to identify which interests are shared by most members, which ones are considered highest priority to meet, and other parameters. Avoid a two-column format at this stage of generating interests—sometimes referred to as pro-con or cost-benefit analysis. The usual process for a two-column format involves naming a solution and then listing the pros and cons of this solution. Although the intent is to help groups reach a decision based on a rational weighing of the merits of a particular solution, this format frequently results in group members’ fixating on a position and then using the two columns to justify it (the pro) or object to it (the con). The tool doesn’t appear to help groups identify all their interests when solving a problem and then search creatively for a position that meets all, or most of, the interests.

### **ARRANGE THE ROOM SO PEOPLE CAN SEE EACH OTHER AND THE LIST OF INTERESTS**

This is related to Fisher, Ury, and Patton’s idea (1991) of separating the people from the problem. If group members can see and contribute to a growing list of shared interests, it helps counter the tendency to see other members of the group as opposition, or people who are standing in the way of achieving a preferred solution.

### **USE QUESTIONS THROUGHOUT THE DISCUSSION TO HELP PEOPLE UNCOVER INTERESTS**

Identifying the interests underlying positions is often like peeling an onion: you get through the initial position only to find another position under it. This is seldom due to intentional resistance from the group member; instead, it reflects how deeply ingrained is our tendency to think in terms of positions.



For example, picture a group discussion in a company's training and organization development department about when to offer a series of leadership workshops. One group member, Sarah, may propose the third Tuesday of each month (a *position*). If I were facilitating this discussion and using the ground rule of focusing on interests rather than positions, I may ask, "What is it about the third Tuesday of the month that works well, in your view?" If Sarah responds, "If we follow that schedule, it won't conflict with Tony's time management classes," then the group has learned something about her interests. However, "not conflicting with Tony's time management classes" is still a position, although Sarah's interests are beginning to emerge. So I may ask a follow-up question: "And can you say some more about why it would be good to avoid scheduling at the same time as Tony's time management classes?" It may turn out that Tony is needed to teach in both workshops or that Sarah believes there is a similar audience for both types of classes.

This process of peeling the onion with questions that help group members focus on their interests is similar to the Total Quality concept of asking "Why?" five times in order to get to the root cause of a problem. The key is asking the questions in a way that reflects compassion and curiosity, not cross-examination. It is rare, in my experience, to have people hold tightly to their interests as a hidden agenda, revealing them only under duress. It is much more common to see multiple interests emerge throughout the conversation because people are so accustomed to talking—and thinking—in terms of positions that it takes some time to recognize and articulate their interests.

Note that none of these questions requires the use of the word *position* or *interest*. It's fine to use these terms if the group is familiar with them; in fact, in a developmental facilitation context, where group members are learning to use the ground rules themselves, it can be helpful to draw their attention to the distinction by using the words. However, if you are working in or with a group that views the words *position* and *interest* as jargon, it's quite possible to use your facilitative skills to help people focus on the interests underlying their positions without ever using these words.

Whether I'm facilitating a half-day retreat for a city council or teaching facilitation skills to an organization over a period of months, I continue to be struck by the power of Ground Rule Five. Helping group members focus on interests can change the entire tone and direction of the conversation from its outset. Exploring interests before moving on to positions frequently shifts the focus from what divides us to what unites us, enabling people to build on commonalities and create innovative solutions.

## Reference

Fisher, R., Ury, W., and Patton, B. *Getting to Yes*. (2nd ed.) New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

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### Interest-Eliciting Questions



- "What is it about X [the position] that makes it a good solution, in your view?"
  - "Can you say some more about why X is important to you?"
  - "I heard you propose that the group do X, but I didn't hear you say how this would meet the needs the group has identified. Can you say more about the needs X would address?"
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