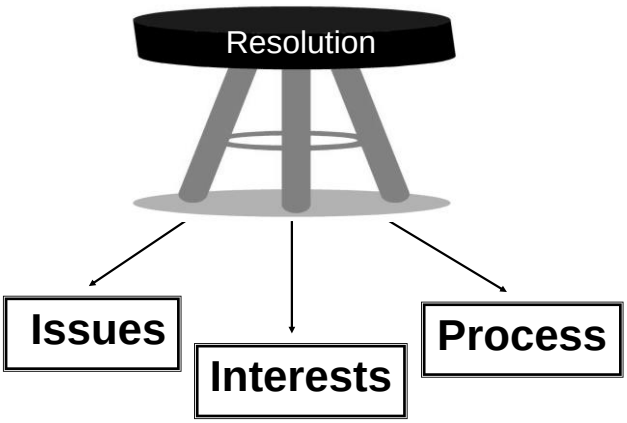
IN ACCORD
Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Keys to Unlocking Conflict: Understanding Interests

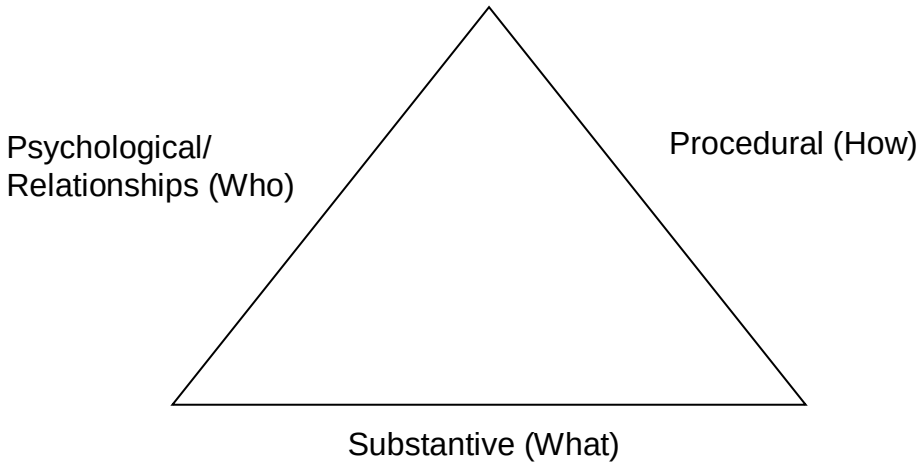
One way of looking at constructive conflict resolution is to think of it as a three-legged stool. Each leg must be in place for the solution to be legitimate and lasting. People must feel equally satisfied that the issues were dealt with, their interests were met and the process was positive.



More about Interests

A person's interests are what motivate her to seek a solution to a problem or conflict. Interest-based negotiation allows disputants to work together to solve the problem in a way that meets their most important, underlying needs. Although there are usually many ways to satisfy a person's interests, often that person has come to believe that her particular position or solution is the only way her interests can be met. To discover underlying needs, it is helpful to find out why the person wants the solution she originally proposed. Once we understand the advantages that solution has for her, we have discovered her "need." When people discover and talk about their underlying interests, they will be able to move away from their entrenched positions and open up possibilities for new options and mutual gains.

In any given situation, each person will usually have many interests. Interests can be substantive (concerning the content or substance of the dispute), procedural (concerning the process by which a decision was made, how a dispute is handled or how a settlement will be implemented) or psychological (concerning the relationships and/or the emotional aspects of a situation). This concept is depicted below.



Focus on Interests, Not Positions

People often end up in conflict because they hold different positions on a particular issue. The more they believe their position is the only way their interests will be met, the more firmly they hold to it.

This principle provides us with the leverage to resolve position-based conflict. It advises us to move beneath the positions so we can focus on real needs. When people begin to focus on their underlying interests – what they really want or need – rather than their stated, declared position, they often find they have at least some interests in common with their perceived opponent. This is a key first step to finding a mutually acceptable resolution.

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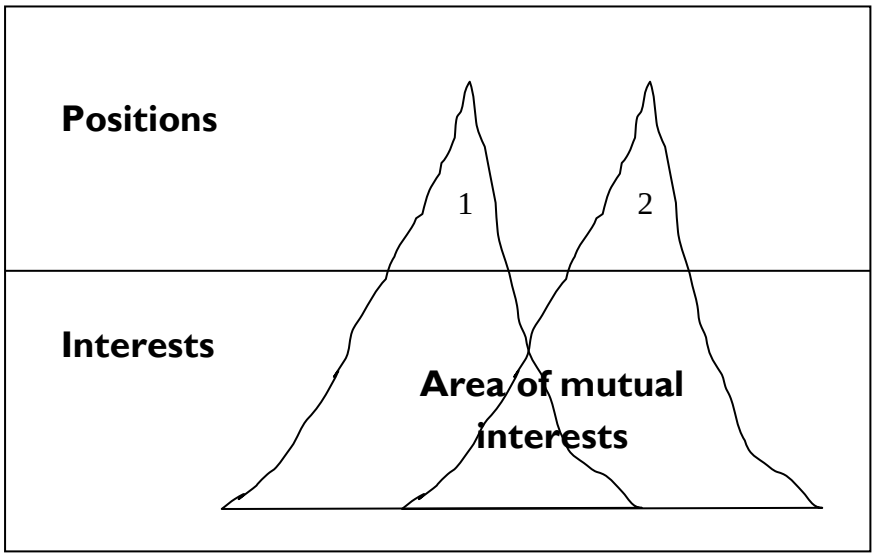
The strategy of focusing on interests rather than positions is inspired by the work of Roger Fisher and Bill Ury in the field of Principled Negotiation, which is discussed in their book *Getting to Yes*. Fisher and Ury distinguish *positional bargaining*, where parties are essentially bargaining for their firmly held positions, from *principled negotiation*, where the parties stand back from positions, look at underlying interests and begin to find common ground and build consensus.



Power of Interests

- Constructive conflict resolution is not about compromise. It is about meeting all parties' interests.
- There are only a few paths to issue settlement, but many routes to interest satisfaction.
- Effective conflict managers attempt to discover what is truly important to each disputant.

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Mining for Interests in Conflict

In interest-based negotiation, parties focus on their interests, not their positions. For example, I may be opposed to my co-worker's frequent use of email. My position is not that I don't like email. Rather, it is because I prefer direct and honest communication, and feel that my colleague is using email in a way that undermines our good working relationship. My real interest is in maintaining a positive, communicative workplace. Rather than belittling her use of email, a preferred strategy in this case is to help my co-worker understand my interest in direct communication.

Equally, if I can understand that her reasons for using email are also valid (e.g., to be efficient, to be polite rather than confrontational, to share information with many people at once, etc.) then we might gain insight into each other's points of view. Further, I may even change my position and support the use of email in certain situations. If I had simply argued with my co-worker, calling her use of email insensitive and lazy, she may never have understood my legitimate, positive interests. As it was, by focusing on interests, we have a chance to address the real issues and make email useful for both of us.

The deeper magic of exploring interests is that we may also discover that we hold several interests in common. For example, we might find that we both want to be polite, be respectful and share a passion for the mission of the organization. Taking positions prematurely prevents open and creative dialogue. It also stands in the way of effective listening. By focusing on interests, people can develop agreements that meet everyone's needs.

Think of a dispute you have been involved in or know about. List the positions taken by different sides. Then list what might be some underlying interests that inspired the positions.

	Positions	Interests
Side A		
Side B		