

<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/problem/intpos-p.htm>

Confusing Interests (What You Really Want) with Positions (What You Say You Want)

Disputants often describe a conflict in very simple terms. These often take the form "We want this, but they want that," or "I want this, and he wants it too (but we can't both have it)." These simple statements about what people do and do not want are what conflict professionals call "positions." (The term relates to the political notion that a politician will have a "position" on a particular issue--he will favor it, or he will be against it.) When people define the conflict in terms of positions, the conflicts often appear to be highly intractable, since one side wants something the other completely opposes, or both sides want something that cannot be shared. In democratic politics, this problem is "resolved" with a vote. But when voting is not possible, or appropriate, arguing over positions can be very ineffective, and even destructive. Parties can get more and more entrenched in their positions, and positions will often move farther and farther apart, as disputants make ever-more extreme statements in an effort to win support for their side.

While some conflicts are really structured a win-lose way, many conflicts which are thought to be unavoidable win-lose situations are more manageable when redefined (or "reframed") in terms of underlying interests. Unlike positions, interests are the reasons why people want things.

In U.S. conflict resolution training programs, a story is commonly told about two children fighting over an orange. Both children take the position that they need (and deserve) the whole orange. If the mother listens to the two children's' positions, she will likely decide that one child deserves the orange more than the other--giving the whole orange to one--or she will cut the orange in half, giving each a part.

But the story goes on to explain that one child actually wanted the orange to eat, while the other wanted the rind for a science project. Had the children explained their underlying reasons for wanting the orange--that is, had they explained their interests--a win-win solution could have been found that would have given both children everything they wanted.

Although this is a simple story, people in conflict confuse positions and interests all the time. They define what they want in all-or-nothing terms, take overly simple views of the problem, and seek solutions that meet their positions one hundred percent, without considering the views of the other side as important or legitimate. When people focus on one-dimensional positions--I want this or I don't want that-- conflicts tend to appear to be unavoidably win-lose in nature, since the opponent almost always holds the opposite position. If the parties work to clarify WHY they want or do not want something, however, it often turns out that the parties' interests are, at least in part, compatible. This makes negotiating a solution--or at least a partial solution--much easier.