

Negotiate For Needs & Interests, Not Positions Reading 25

[Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)

It is important that, when we are preparing to resolve a conflict, we negotiate and problem-solve for needs rather than positions. Below is an example demonstrating the difference between interests/needs and positions. This example and the explanation were slightly modified from *Working It Out: A Handbook on Negotiation for High School Students* by Roger Fisher and Douglas Stone from The Harvard Negotiation Project.

The Situation: Two people (Paul and Derek) are sitting at the same library table. Paul gets up and opens the window. After a minute, Derek gets up and closes the window. Paul, in a loud voice, confronts Derek. The librarian overhears the conversation and comes over. He asks Paul what is going on. “What does it look like?” snaps Paul. “I want the window open”. “Well, I want it closed,” says Derek. The librarian then asks Paul why he wants it open. “I need fresh air,” says Paul. He then asks Derek why he wants it closed. “I don’t like the air blowing in my face,” responds Derek. The librarian then walks several tables down and opens another window, bringing in the fresh air without a draft.

Paul and Derek were arguing over their positions. A position is the stand we take in an argument or negotiation. “I want this!” “I want that!” It’s what we demand from the other side. When Paul says he wants the window open, he states his position. Interests are different. Interests are what we really want: our true needs, desires, and concerns. Paul’s position was that he wanted the window open: his interest, what he really wanted, was fresh air. Derek’s position was that he wanted the window closed; his interest was only in avoiding a draft. When Paul and Derek focused on positions, their real problem was obscured, and they would never arrive at a creative solution that met both of their needs. The librarian was able to determine their real needs, and there was an easy solution that met both of their real needs. If Paul and Derek had focused on what they really needed and each other’s needs, they probably would have been able to easily negotiate a solution that met both of their needs.

Here is another example of position versus needs, suggested by one of my students. A parent and their adolescent daughter are fighting over whether the daughter can go to a party. The parents’ position is that she cannot go because they don’t know her new friend or his parents. The daughter’s position is that she wants to go to the party. If they focus only on their respective positions, their real needs are overlooked, and the daughter will not go to the party because demanding things of her parents usually doesn’t work. It is much more effective to negotiate and problem-solve over each other’s needs rather than their positions. In this situation, the parents’ needs are their daughter’s safety. If the daughter has a conversation with her parents and shares why this party is so important to her and helps the parent identify their needs behind their position (her safety) they may be able to jointly negotiate and problem solve and find a solution that meets both of their needs: the daughter is allowed to go to the party but certain conditions must be met beforehand and during the party so that the parents are confident she will be safe.

Another problem that both of these examples illustrate is that when we argue over positions, we take a stand, and the actual conflict may become one over control: who gets to make decisions and who is in control. If a conflict is over who decides, both sides argue from a win/lose or what eventually becomes lose/lose: “I get to decide, not you.” The person with the most power usually wins. Jointly negotiating and problem-solving to find solutions that meet both people’s needs is a win/win. The conflict is not over control, but how can we arrive at a solution that meets both of our needs and maintains the quality of the relationship?

Adolescence can be very trying for them and their parents because there are often what appear to be conflicting needs. If both sides recognize that each of their needs is legitimate, they may be better able to negotiate in ways that meet both of their needs. Here is a list of adolescent and parent needs (from Self-Discovery: by Gilda Gussin:

Adolescents Often	Their Parents Often
Want to make their own decisions	Want to offer guidance
Want to be accepted by their friends	Worry about their adolescent’s choice of friends
Are most concerned about today, this minute	Think about the future
Are tempted to take risks	Worry about the consequences of risks
Shift from wanting freedom to wanting to be taken care of	Can’t figure out whether their adolescents are asking for freedom or protection
Want to learn from their own mistakes	Remember their mistakes and the mistakes of their friends and want to protect their adolescents from harm
Want privacy	Want to be included

It is almost impossible to successfully resolve interpersonal conflicts (win/win) if one or both parties focus on positions, or if the conflict becomes about who gets to decide (control). If both individuals focus on their own needs and the other person’s, they can negotiate and problem-solve to find a solution that meets both of their needs and strengthens the relationship.