

Conflict Resolution and Problem Solving Using an Interest-Based Approach

Jeremy Kautza
Office of Interest-Based Problem Solving, Director
Madison Area Technical College
Madison, WI

Topic Overview

Conflict is a part of our everyday lives. And, while many people have an adverse reaction to conflict, it isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it tells us that attention is needed around whatever is causing the conflict. How you react to conflict determines the success you have in resolving the underlying issue.

Different people have different ways of handling conflict. Some chose to ignore it. Others tackle it head-on. Sometimes people try to exert their power to resolve conflict. Other times, people rely on rules, laws, or policies to provide guidance. A person's values can have a profound impact on how they address conflict. The impact, in turn, goes a long way in determining how effectively that conflict is resolved.

The interest-based approach to resolving conflict is a collaborative approach, which gained force as a negotiation strategy through the Harvard Negotiation Project in Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton's 2011 best-selling book *Getting to Yes*. Also sometimes referred to as Interest-Based Negotiation (IBN), Interest-Based Problem Solving (IBPS) involves listening to different stakeholder interests on an issue; looking for shared interests among those interests; brainstorming options prior to evaluation of those options, and utilizing objective criteria to come to consensus on the option(s) that provide the best possible solution(s) to the issue at hand. (*What is Interest-Based Problem Solving?*, 2016)

One of the essential assumptions of IBPS is that interests must come first in the problem-solving process. It is only when participants understand underlying hopes, worries, concerns or needs that the process of exploring many different potential solutions will function at its best. Contrast this with more traditional ways of negotiation, where participants begin with positions in mind leading to, many times, at best, a compromise.

This compromise may feel like a win in the short term. However, it usually isn't too long until participants begin to feel like they *gave something up* simply to get to an agreement.

Worse yet, are situations where some of the participants exercise their power or authority over others to get what they want and/or some participants simply secede to the proposed resolution out of fear or avoidance. These solutions will not be sustainable and, worse yet, could damage the relationships of the parties involved.

Imagine you are meeting with your supervisor to discuss a raise you feel you deserve. If you enter into the conversation with the position that you deserve a 3% raise while your boss enters into the conversation with the position that the company isn't able to afford raises right now, you've got a stalemate waiting to happen. Worse yet, the employee may feel as if their work isn't valued while the boss might feel as if he's letting his employee down.

If instead, the individuals start by expressing their interests, it is much more likely that the parties will better understand each other's perspectives and be more open to looking for solutions that move them toward a win-win resolution. The employee's interest might be that he or she feels valued for the work that they do for the organization, while the supervisor might have an interest of recognizing employee contributions while also being financially prudent. Sharing these interests puts the two in a state where they can work together, rather than against each other, in finding a mutually acceptable option.

The ability to differentiate between interests and positions is an essential component of the process. An interest is a hope, worry, concern, or need. A position is one option that attempts to meet the interests collected from all stakeholders. As the above example illustrates, a position is usually a "what" while an interest is more of a "why." Interests are often rooted in a person's values and beliefs. Therefore, it is fundamentally important to

understand these interests so that work on developing mutually agreeable options is well-informed.

There are many different scenarios beyond resolving conflict that can benefit from using an interest-based approach. Planning a strategic direction in an organization, choosing the steps to follow in a business process, and allocating resources are but a few examples. Outside of the world of work, interest-based principles can be utilized in many decision-making scenarios from planning a week-long vacation to deciding where to go out for dinner.

Session Overview

In this session, participants will experience the elements of an interest-based approach to problem solving that can be used in addressing conflicts in any work situation. They will leave with a new-found appreciation for the process – its ease and effectiveness – along with materials they can take back to their college to spark their own transformation from more traditional methods to interest-based approaches.

Participants will also benefit from learning about the transformation that has occurred at Madison College. As a result of Act 10, passed in 2011, a need for a different type of decision-making process arose. With the hiring of a new President in 2013, the College began a shift toward a more collaborative and inclusive model of shared governance. The College's purposeful insistence on utilizing the philosophies and principles of inclusivity, transparency, shared responsibility, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, collegiality, innovation, fairness and coherence, and continual assessment (*Madison College Assembly Bylaws*, 2014) made the interest-based approach a natural fit. Lessons learned from the

yet-to-be-completed transformation will be discussed in an effort to learn from everyone in the room.

Certainly, the principles behind an interest-based approach do not necessitate a complete culture shift. But in the vacuum left by the passage of Wisconsin's Act 10, Madison College chose to engage in efforts to embed these interest-based principles into our culture. As an alternative, participants may simply take these principles and utilize them in department or unit meetings to give team members a collaborative voice and shared accountability for the decisions that are made. The outcomes of sustainable decisions with stakeholder buy-in and improved relationships often found in interest-based approaches are desirable no matter the application.

Conclusion

Interest-based approaches to resolving conflict and making decisions provide all stakeholders with a voice and responsibility for the end result. If the hopes, worries, concerns, and needs of every participant are understood by the group, the process of finding a solution that everyone can support is greatly enhanced. Sharing interests before the more natural offering of solutions leads to a greater number of potential solutions that are better informed and therefore more likely to lead to a win for all parties involved. Relationships will be preserved and possibly enhanced as the power struggle often found in traditional conflict resolution is avoided. The result is a more sustainable resolution that, while requiring more time and effort up-front, will save time, effort, and relationships in the end.

Bibliography

Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. New York: Penguin.

Madison College Assembly Bylaws [Pamphlet]. 2014. Madison, WI: Madison College.

What is interest-based problem solving? [Brochure]. 2016. Madison, WI: Madison College.

About the Author

Jeremy Kautza has over 20 years of facilitation experience in a wide variety of settings. Starting as a high school mathematics teacher in 1996, he quickly realized that teaching was much more than just delivering content. It was building relationships, solving problems, resolving conflicts, helping students change their mindset about mathematics, and reflecting on lessons with an eye toward continuous improvement. Jeremy quickly grew fond of mathematics as he cultivated an interest in and then passion for the field. Along that journey Jeremy coached a varsity basketball team for five years where, again, he realized success was much more than simply having talent. It was about team building and developing leaders who understand their role—their value to the team—and encouraging them to step up when the time was right. After coaching, Jeremy moved into officiating the sports of football, basketball, and baseball which provided a crash-course in conflict resolution, fairness, neutrality, and effective communication skills.

Jeremy was trained in the collective bargaining process and served as a lead negotiator for four years. Subsequently, he became curious about interest-based negotiation, completed training, and now serves as the director of the Interest-Based Problem Solving unit at Madison College. This unit supports the shared governance structure under which Madison College operates, while also supporting individuals, teams, and entire departments in conflict resolution, strategic planning, process improvement, and issue analysis. He leads a team of facilitators to successfully complete the work that is needed and to embed the culture of shared-decision making that has led to stronger relationships, long-lasting solutions, and a deep commitment to the Madison College mission.

Jeremy has a B.S. in Mathematics, M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction, and an M.S. in Education Leadership and Policy Analysis, all from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is a strong believer in ongoing professional development and life-long learning.

While not at work, Jeremy continues to officiate three-sports, serves as the social media coordinator for Little League Baseball and Softball in south-central Wisconsin, and is a self-proclaimed weather geek. He has seen a baseball game in 29 of the 30 active Major League ballparks and will challenge you to a *Seinfeld* trivia contest any time.