



# Mediation Stewardship Project

## Resource Catalog

Understanding Precedes Resolution

### Positions vs. Interests

**Estimated Reading Time:** 4–5 minutes

#### In This Article

By the end of this article, you will understand:

- the difference between a position and an interest,
- why people often argue over positions instead of discussing interests,
- one practical way to have more productive conversations.

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#### Why This Matters

Many conflicts become difficult not because people disagree, but because they become focused on defending their positions.

A position is the specific outcome someone says they want.

An interest is the underlying need, concern, value, or motivation that makes that outcome important.

When conversations remain focused only on positions, people often become stuck arguing over who is right. When interests are explored, new possibilities for understanding and problem-solving often emerge.

Learning to distinguish between positions and interests is a foundational conflict-literacy skill.

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## The Core Idea

People rarely argue simply because they enjoy disagreement.

More often, they are trying to protect or achieve something that matters to them.

For example, two people may both insist on different solutions to the same problem.

Their positions are different.

Their underlying interests, however, may be surprisingly similar.

One person may value security.

Another may value fairness.

Another may value flexibility.

Another may value being heard.

Understanding these underlying interests does not automatically resolve the disagreement, but it creates opportunities for conversations that are more thoughtful and collaborative.

Instead of asking,

*"Who is right?"*

Conflict-literate individuals learn to ask,

*"What is important to each person?"*

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## Everyday Example

Two coworkers disagree about working from home.

One insists that everyone should work in the office.

The other insists that remote work should remain an option.

These are their positions.

After talking further, they discover their interests.

One values teamwork, spontaneous collaboration, and mentoring newer employees.

The other values flexibility, reduced commuting time, and a better work-life balance.

Although they still disagree about the best solution, they now better understand what each person is trying to accomplish.

That understanding creates more opportunities to explore solutions that address both sets of interests.

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## Try This Today

The next time someone strongly disagrees with you, ask yourself:

**"What might be important to them beyond what they're asking for?"**

Looking beneath the position often reveals the interests driving the conversation.

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## Reflection Question

Think of a disagreement you've experienced recently.

Were you focused primarily on defending your position, or did you take time to understand what mattered most to the other person?

## Continue Exploring

### Next Articles

- **Separating Intent from Impact**
- **Understanding Escalation**
- **What Mediation Is—and Isn't**

### Looking for More Support?

Many mediation conversations help participants move beyond positions to better understand the interests, concerns, and priorities underlying the conflict. To continue learning, explore additional resources in the **Mediation Stewardship Project Resource Catalog** or consider participating in a **Conflict Literacy Workshop**.

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## Educational Use Notice

This resource is provided for educational and informational purposes only. It is not legal advice, mental-health treatment, crisis intervention, or a substitute for professional services. Every conflict is unique, and you remain responsible for determining the most appropriate course of action for your situation.