INTERESTS VERSUS POSITIONS

Collaboration is a pragmatic approach that centers on identifying and meeting each party’s key interests. Unfortunately, people in conflict situations tend to focus on positions, sometimes completely losing sight of their interests—and those of other involved parties. Understanding the difference between interests and positions can help parties focus on their and others’ key needs and goals and develop creative solutions that meet those interests, rather than getting stuck in a positional impasse.

**Interests: the “why”**

**Goals** that a party wants met
What **motivates** parties to seek a solution

**Positions: the “what” or “how”**

**Solutions** that parties put forward as a way of meeting their real or perceived interests

**Clarifying Interests Through Conversation**

A straightforward and effective way to avoid a positional impasse and to work toward interest-based problem solving is to uncover and clarify your and your collaborators’ interests. This can often be achieved through conversation, with carefully worded questions and effective listening.

When someone states a position, see it as an opportunity to explore and learn about their interests. Rather than ignoring the comment or countering with your own position, try asking the following questions, which are adapted from the Confluence Center for Mediation and Training’s Basic Plus Mediation Skills Training:

- “Why is that important to you?”
- “What would that solution accomplish?”
- “What if that did happen?”
- “How would that affect you?”
- “How would you experience that?”
- “What changes would that solution make in your life?”

Adapted from Massachusetts Institute of Technology “Negotiation Basics”