Forest Service
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Interest-Based Problem Solving

Aerial view of the Walatowa Timber Industries (WTI) mill where the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, Santa Fe National Forest and the Pueblo of Jemez have worked together to utilize the timbers harvested from USDA restoration work. (USDA photo by Lance Cheung with permission of the Pueblo of Jemez)

Imagine you are in a community meeting discussing planned future projects by the Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). A young woman strides resolutely up to the district ranger and proclaims, "No way should there be any logging in Mink Creek. I am absolutely opposed to it." How should the ranger respond? The woman's statement seems to have little room for compromise or negotiation. But the ranger asks why the woman thinks that and learns that she lives right along the road that goes up Mink Creek, has dogs and small children, and is worried about the logging truck traffic and the safety of her family. Now that the ranger understands what motivated her statement, there are many tactics that might address her very reasonable concerns: finding a different truck route, posting hazard signage near her property, or reducing the speed limit there. Many possibilities can creatively move the situation forward. Ensuring the safety of people living along the road is, in fact, a goal that she and the ranger completely share.

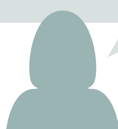
This illustration serves to differentiate between *positions* and *interests*. Positions are typically publicly stated outcomes that someone seeks and may be fairly extreme or absolute. Interests, by contrast, are reasons behind the positions, are initially not openly expressed, and may be far more nuanced than positions. Moving a dialogue beyond merely exchanging positions and into the realm of exploring interests lays at the core of mutual gains problem solving. In their best-selling book, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Roger Fisher and William Ury explain that "the basic problem in a negotiation lies not in conflicting positions, but in the conflict between each side's needs, desires, concerns, and fears." These terms, as well as hopes, aspirations, and apprehensions, can be viewed collectively as "interests."

This paper is based on lessons learned and written by the USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre. They worked with national forests, collaborative groups, and interested stakeholders helping them to engage in effective collaboration. For more information on collaboration processes, contact Sharon Timko, Ecosystem Management Coordination Public Engagement Specialist, Washington Office, at sharon.timko@usda.gov.

Learning To Distinguish Interests From Positions

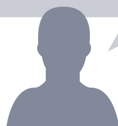
A planning team on a western national forest invited public comments as part of its forest plan revision process. One citizen's comment letter, included the following statements:

"More and more people are moving to the [national forest]. This means more people are recreating on all lands available.... Imagine that you rode a snowmobile, dirt bike and/or pedal bike in these areas and have now been barred from using these lands.... Now you continue to have these [national forest] revisions as to public land and personal use. Not one of the proposals contain(s) opening up lands that have been closed to motorized recreation or having more lands available for motorized recreation.... Do you realize how much revenue is generated by motorized recreation in this area alone?.... You already closed parts of [the national forest] due to a 'wildlife corridor'—stop shutting motorized recreation out of our lands. We are a growing community who have a huge impact on the community."



And another citizen wrote a single sentence:

"I strongly support the No Action Alternative."



Are these citizens stating a position or communicating an interest—or both?

When people state what they want or plan to do, they are typically stating a position. Positions may be communicated via rigid statements, offers, demands, bumper sticker slogans, or ultimatums; they are "closed" statements that do not invite negotiation or collaborative interaction. "I strongly support the No Action Alternative" and "Stop shutting motorized recreation out of our lands" are both position statements.

In contrast, an interest may reveal **why** a person is taking a specific position—what it is they are trying to accomplish or protect. Viewed that way, the additional detail in the first comment explains that the concern arises from the tension between local population growth and a gradual reduction in the acreage where motorized recreation is allowed. This comes far closer to conveying an interest.

Finding Common Ground

When people state positions in a conflict or decision-making process, they are "staking out their turf," often framing the situation as "win-lose" or "zero-sum." If we view positions as essentially opening offers, it is easy to see why they appear to represent extreme viewpoints. If someone is unsure about how a process will unfold or has little trust in the other parties, it is actually a defensive move to start from a position that has some flexibility. But positional bargaining can produce little progress if people dig in their heels, defend their positions, and refuse to consider alternate views, actions, or outcomes. Positions reflect a competitive mindset, with each side determined to win.

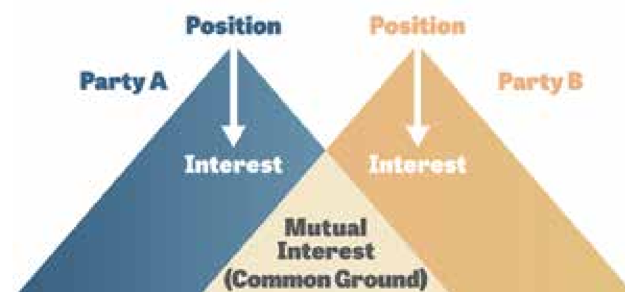


Figure 1. *The figure illustrates moving from positions to interests. (Adapted from Grzybowski and Morris, 1998)*

In contrast, by shifting the focus to the interests that underlie positions, parties can often find **common ground.** There is often more overlap in interests than in positions. By sharing their hopes, concerns, and fears, parties can look for mutual gain outcomes—decisions that benefit the parties in ways they could not have achieved if they had remained competitive, unilateral, and positional. The negotiations become interest-based, with parties working to achieve mutual gains and added value. Interest-based problem solving can be more creative than simply splitting the difference between the parties' opening offers.

A "Positions to Interests" Story—A Landscape Level Aspen Restoration Project

The Monroe Mountain Working Group (MMWG) is a collaborative group of stakeholders who began meeting in 2011 to develop and implement activities on Monroe Mountain in central Utah to restore aspen. The group includes State agencies, county commissioners, Utah Farm Bureau, hunting and fishing organizations, conservation groups, education/research organizations, and grazing permittees.

Aspen in full fall colors on Monroe Mountain on the Fishlake National Forest, UT. (USDA Forest Service photo by John Zapell)

The aspen forests on Monroe Mountain are clearly declining, covering less than one-fifth of their previous distribution on the mountain. The remaining aspen stands show obvious signs of stress, either in the form of little or no regeneration, death of the mature trees, or significant encroachment and overtopping by conifers. The question of what, if anything, could be done to restore the aspen was complicated by the large number of different constituencies that value their uses of Monroe Mountain most highly. Private landowners were unwilling to put their homes at risk, wildlife interests were unwilling to reduce the size of the deer and elk herds in the area, grazing permittees were unwilling to reduce their livestock use on the mountain, and environmental groups were unwilling to support additional roads or extensive logging. The county commissioners in this part of the State have been some of the most vocal critics of continued Federal ownership of land. A number of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species are in the project area, such as Bonneville cutthroat trout, boreal toad, and the northern goshawk, most notably. The initial positions of the various groups gave the appearance that there was no path forward.

The early days of the working group involved heated disagreement about whether the herbivory on aspen was caused by livestock (whom the hunters and environmentalists blamed) or by wildlife (whom the ranchers blamed). The working group implemented a browse transect protocol with trail cameras at either end, which over two seasons generated some 66,000 photos. Because the working group "owned" the method, the data gathering, and the analysis and interpretation of the data, it effectively ended the blame game. The photos showed that both domestic and wild animals were browsing on the aspen. This allowed the discussion to move beyond positions ("it is your fault") to shared interests—restoring aspen.

The strategy ultimately developed was to use landscape-level prescribed fire with mechanical treatments to create fuel breaks to protect other resource values, combined with a complex framework of monitoring post-treatment aspen regeneration and an agreed-to set of response options if excessive browsing was occurring. An environmental impact statement for landscape-scale implementation of this strategy was signed in November 2015. It was not formally objected to or litigated by any advocacy group and the local association of governments formally commented in support of the project, a huge accomplishment in the local political context. This strategy was a bold proposal for treating roughly 5,000 acres per year for 10 years. Beginning in 2016, on-the-ground projects began in earnest. By 2019, just under 15,000 acres had either been burned or mechanically treated.

The Monroe Mountain Working Group continues to meet to monitor implementation and the aspen response to treatments.

How To Build Trust and Learn About Each Other's Interests

Broadly speaking three things have to happen to allow the shift from a position-based approach to one that is interest-based:

1. The parties have to clearly understand their own interests.
2. There has to be sufficient trust created in the process for the participants to feel safe sharing their interests.
3. The participants have to accurately communicate their interests to one another.

Building trust takes time, effort, a neutral venue, and a transparent process. By focusing on being unconditionally constructive, relationships can become more cooperative and less defensive. Be curious about why other parties thinks the way they do.

There are a number of specific ways people can identify both their own interests and those of others.

1. **Spend time reflecting on your goals and interests.** What are your motivations in this situation? Are you operating out of fear or negative expectations? Are you sure that there are not ways to achieve your goals beyond what you have thought of? Are you being more competitive than perhaps you need to be because you want to be perceived as strong? Are you trying to protect your or your organization's turf?
2. **Engage in role reversal.** Try to imagine the situation from the other party's point of view. If you were in that person's role, what would your perspective be on matters of substance, procedure, relationship, and principle? What would be your values, needs, and concerns?
3. **Review relevant information from diverse sources** (including newspaper articles, letters to the editor, public comments, social media posts, websites, and documents). A stakeholder organization's website will typically include statements about mission and purpose that reveal the organization's core values and aspirations.
4. **Disclose your relevant interests** (your concerns, needs, hopes, and so on). Doing so models openness, information sharing, and trust-building behavior.
5. **Ask questions to discover a party's values, concerns, hopes, goals, and needs.** Questions can explore what is important and why. Questions can be direct ("What do you need out of this situation?") or subtle ("What will the people in your organization think of this approach?") or hypothetical ("What would you like this landscape to look like in 20 years, and what would we need to do to get there?"). These questions can be asked during informal conversations with individuals or small groups or as part of scheduled stakeholder meetings.
6. **Convene a "procedures" workshop.** In this workshop, people can share their views about what constitutes a good collaborative process. Procedural discussions are often less risky than negotiations on substance and can provide a way to bring to the surface both skepticism and optimism and their related interests. If possible, find a neutral venue, use an independent facilitator, and have participants create this workshop. Additionally, agreements on procedures such as ground rules, can build confidence that leads to disclosing interests.

In Summary

When the parties in a natural resource management situation focus on their positions (e.g., build this recreation facility, open that road, stop the timber sale, or no more grazing permits) and overlook their interests, "win-lose" strategies clash, and the entire process may slow or even shut down. Searching for common ground can seem impossible when people take extreme and mutually exclusive positions.

Communicating interests begins to reveal common ground and generates authentic collaboration. Moving from positions to interests takes time, effort, and trust, but it provides the seedbed for innovative ideas that move land management forward in creative ways that sometimes none of the participants had foreseen.

Worksheets

The worksheets featured on the following pages are examples that the National Collaboration Cadre members have used on field projects. They can be reproduced and used (and modified) to assist in identifying positions, interests, and how interests can be addressed.

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Identifying Interests and Concerns

Step One: Consider a situation that is important to you and another party and identify the issues that make it important.
Step Two: For each major issue, identify why it is important (interests and concerns) to you and the other party. Also include how you think the other party regards your interests and concerns.

Issue	My Interests and Concerns	Other Party's Interests and Concerns	Other Party's Views of My Interests and Concerns

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Interest-Based Decision Making: Understanding the Positions and Interests of Parties

Step One: Select and briefly describe a conflict or decision situation that is important to you.
Step Two: Identify key parties in this situation. Based on what you know about the parties and the issues in this situation, what are their likely positions and interests? What can be done to address those interests and improve relationships?

Party or Stakeholder	Issue Important to This Party	Party's Position on This Issue (and possible actions)	Party's Interests (hopes, fears, concerns, goals, values) Underlying This Position	How Can Interests be Addressed?

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