



FOCUS ON INTERESTS, NOT POSITIONS

People listen better if they feel that you have understood them. They tend to think that those who understand them are intelligent and sympathetic people whose own opinions may be worth listening to. So if you want the other side to appreciate your interests, begin by demonstrating that you appreciate theirs.

—Roger Fisher, *Getting to Yes*

We seem to have a societal sickness these days. We don't seem to have any room available to appreciate someone else's interest. Instead, when people find themselves in a decision-making setting with a group of other people, they walk in with their body armor on, sit down at their seats, and fire up their force-field generators. Then they try to make a decision. Unfortunately, the walls that are up in front of them, coupled with the fact that they're dug in because they have a certain position they need to defend, means we often get nowhere in terms of making decisions.

Here's an example: Our political "system" has devolved into a mechanism of *perfecting* the "who's right" dysfunction because it is virtually 100 percent related to defending positions rather than appreciating interests. How about we turn it upside down and start thinking about it a little bit differently? What if we started with questions like these: "What are *we* really focusing on here? What are *we* really interested in? Where are *our* common interests?" When we look at interests instead of positions, we start to discover that *all* people are concerned about

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safety, want predictability, are fearful about change, and thirst to be included, to be appreciated, and to have a genuine sense of belonging.

When we start with either-or thinking, we push people into defensiveness, and we begin to see “it’s my way or the highway” behaviors. We get stuck in binary choices—it’s this way, or it’s that way—that offer no in-between. We foster division and create (or accelerate) pain and anguish for people. What about creating “both-and” solutions? What about looking through the lens of “our common interests” instead of “I win; you lose” approaches?

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about. I volunteer for an organization called Building Bridges. Its mission is focused clearly on shifting the conversation around one of the most challenging and seemingly intractable issues anywhere on Earth: the historic conflict between Israel and Palestine. This group brings groups of high school girls together (Palestinians, Israelis, and Americans; Jews, Muslims, and Christians) for a two-year intensive program designed to change the conversation. It’s not about “normalizing” or “peacemaking”;

instead, it's about finding common ground, about driving the realization that the interests of teenage girls are *far* more common than uncommon. One of the first exercises these girls participate in—and remember, there are some *deep* divisions between and among the demographic categories here—is to put their fingers on one another's carotid arteries. To feel one another's heartbeat. To *feel* the humanity in “the other.” As the program progresses, the girls are invited to continue to deepen their understanding of what unites them (dating, body image, a sense of belonging, owning their femininity) as they deepen their appreciation of one another's individual situations. Words fail me in describing the *power* of this process. Let's just say the girls who participate, one person at a time, one family at a time, one street at a time, are beginning to shift the conversation toward “what's right” and away from “who's right.”

When we are genuine in our desire for “what's right, not who's right” and are authentically looking for a way to end the world's madness, we start looking at interests and not positions. We aren't defending turf; we're seeking solutions. When teams and

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organizations operate from this viewpoint, decisions improve, decisions last longer, decisions are easier and *faster* to implement, and satisfaction grows.

Doesn't that sound like a great formula? Let's build some bridges.

Questions, Insights, Implications

1. Describe a situation where you've found yourself in the midst of conflict because someone is defending a position as opposed to searching for deeper interests.
2. What has led up to our society's preference to *not* look for "both-and" answers and instead move toward "either-or" thinking?
3. What comes to mind when you consider the Building Bridges approach to get teenage girls to experience the heartbeat in one another?

Again, reflect on these questions, and allow yourself to be wrong and to be open to new perspectives. By doing so, you'll likely find new insights in the most unexpected places.