Interest Based Problem Solving

A Primer by the Montgomery County Education Association
What is Interest Based Problem Solving?

“A problem solving process conducted in a principled way that creates effective solutions while improving the relationship”

Outcomes

✓ Creative solutions that benefit the organization as a whole

✓ Durable solutions that everyone is motivated to uphold

✓ An improved relationship between the parties
Definition of Terms

**Issue** - a subject of discussion. The “what; the problem to be solved.

**Interest** – one party’s concern, need or desire behind an issue. The “why” the issue is being raised. *(Interests can be shared or separate)*

**Position** – one party’s preferred solution to an issue. The “how”.

**Option** – a potential, often partial, solution to meet one or more interests.

**Standard** – agreed upon qualities of an acceptable solution.
The Interest Based Problem Solving Process

1. Identify and define the issue

2. Discuss all interests behind the issue
   *Seek to understand, not to judge*

3. Establish standards

4. Generate options
   *Brainstorm, do not evaluate*

5. Evaluate each option against the standards

6. Develop a solution that satisfies both sides interests
An interest-based strategy for problem solving, negotiations and communications involves the six components in the inner hexagons plus the Convening and Assessing components, and relies on the ten key attitudes and behaviors identified in the outer hexagons. Relationships are the context in which all problem solving, negotiations and communications takes place.
Interest-Based Strategy: Problem Solving, Negotiations, Communications

Key principles:
- Focus on issues not on individuals
- Use reason rather than power
- Focus on interests not on positions.

Critical assumptions:
- The most effective solutions to problems are reached with all affected parties involved in making the decision — and in determining the implementation of the solution.
- The parties are in a relationship with each other and will continue in such a relationship. Therefore, group decisions must consider the relationship aspect of a problem and its solutions just as much as the content aspect.

An interest-based strategy seeks a good solution, not just an agreement.

Interest-Based Strategy: Components

Story
- **Describe problems and issues in detail**
- Honor perceptions of others
- Clarify
- Seek perceptions, texture, background
- Describe, don’t characterize or blame
- Record for group memory

**Key Point:** In an interest-based strategy the parties always have the ability to say “no,” but they have the responsibility to explain their objection in terms of their interests.

Options: Brainstorming possible solutions
- Build on others’ ideas.
- Reserve judgment.
- Aim for quantity.
- Imagine wildly.
- May be partial solution

Evaluation
- Analyze Options in light of Interests
- Similar Options can be combined
- Many techniques available
- Identify tentative solutions

Commitment: Consensus
- A decision in which all members of a group can agree on the result
  - I believe that you understand me

- I believe that I understand you
- Whether or not I prefer this decision, I support it because...
  - It was reached openly and fairly and
  - It’s the best solution for us at this time

Implementation
- What will be done?
- Who will do each action step?
- When will each action be done?
- Where will the action be done?
- How will the actions be monitored?
- How will progress be verified?
- How will the plan be adjusted if needed?
Principles of Conflict Resolution

Separate the people from the problem

*Be soft on the people and hard on the problem*

Focus on interests, not positions

*When positions look incompatible, look at interests.*

Generate options for mutual gain

*Work for a win/win solution*

Assure a fair process

*Process is just as important as the outcome*

Practice direct communication

*Talk with others, not about them*
## Conflict Resolution Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soft Positional</th>
<th>Hard Positional</th>
<th>Interest Based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants are friends</td>
<td>Participants are adversaries</td>
<td>Participants are problem-solvers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The goal is an agreement</td>
<td>The goal is victory</td>
<td>The goal is a wise outcome, reached efficiently and amicably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make concessions to cultivate the relationship</td>
<td>Demand concessions as a condition for relationship</td>
<td>Separate the people from the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be soft on the people and the problem</td>
<td>Be hard on the people and the problem</td>
<td>Be soft on the people, hard on the problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust others</td>
<td>Distrust others</td>
<td>Proceed independently of trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change your position easily</td>
<td>Dig into your position</td>
<td>Focus on interests, not positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make offers</td>
<td>Make threats</td>
<td>Explore interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disclose your bottom line</td>
<td>Mislead as to your bottom line</td>
<td>Avoid having a bottom line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept one-sided losses to reach agreement</td>
<td>Demand one-sided gains as the price of agreement</td>
<td>Invent options for mutual gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for the single answer: the one they will accept</td>
<td>Search for the single answer: the one you will accept</td>
<td>Develop multiple options to choose from, decide later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insist on agreement</td>
<td>Insist on your position</td>
<td>Insist on using objective criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to avoid a contest of wills</td>
<td>Try to win a contest of wills</td>
<td>Try to reach a result based on standards, independent of will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yield to pressure</td>
<td>Apply pressure</td>
<td>Reason and be open to reason: yield to principle, not to pressure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Perceptions Exercise

How old is the woman in this portrait?
The Concept of Partisan Perceptions

People tend unconsciously to interpret information pertaining to their own side in a strongly self-serving way...

While we systematically err in processing information critical to our own side, we are even worse at assessing the other side...

Extensive research has documented an unconscious mechanism that enhances one’s own side, "portraying it as more talented, honest, and morally upright," while simultaneously vilifying the opposition. This often leads to exaggerated perceptions of the other side's position and overestimates of the actual substantive conflict.

To an outsider, those caught up in disintegrating partnerships or marriages often appear to hold exaggerated views of each other. Such partisan perceptions can become even more virulent among people on each side of divides, such as Israelis and Palestinians, Bosnian Muslims and the Serbs, or Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

Partisan perceptions can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies. Experiments testing the effects of teachers' expectations of students, psychiatrists' diagnoses of mental patients, and platoon leaders' expectations of their trainees confirm the notion that partisan perceptions often shape behavior. At the negotiating table, clinging firmly to the idea that one's counterpart is stubborn or extreme, for example, is likely to trigger just that behavior, sharply reducing the possibility of reaching a constructive agreement.

Conducting a Learning Conversation

Think Honestly
- Recognize partisan perceptions (yours and theirs)
- Separate impact from intent

Act Openly
- Frame the conversation constructively
- Explore each other’s stories and reasoning
- Listen actively

Problem Solve Jointly
- Separate relationship issues from substantive ones, and deal with both on parallel tracks
- Explore interests
- Generate many options
- Settle differences on the basis of legitimate standards

Opening Behaviors:
To Get from Positions to Interests
- “Tell me more about the situation from your perspective.”
- “So if I understand what you are saying...”
- “Can you tell me what you are most concerned about in this situation?”
- “If I’ve got it right, you are concerned that...”
- “If we could do ____, would that help?”
- “What is it that is important to you about ____?”

Excerpted from Conflict Management Inc. 1997

Excerpted from Conflict Resolution: Strategies for Collaborative Problem Solving, by Raider and Coleman.
Active Listening Techniques

1. Finding out more information
   Examples:
   - “What are you concerned about?”
   - “When did this begin?”
   - “How long have you known each other?”
   - Where did you last see your books?
   - “How much money do you think it was worth?”

2. Repeating back the information
   Examples:
   - “So you would like her to stop giving you dirty looks.”
   - “You’re saying that you don’t know when you first noticed it happening.”
   - “So you feel like he owes you $9.00.”
   - “So you would still like to be her friend if she wants to be yours.”

3. Repeating back the feelings
   Examples:
   - “You seem angry about all of this.”
   - “I get the feeling that you are sad about what has taken place.”
   - “You see frightened about what is going to happen.”
   - “You seem mad about the situation.”

4. Encourage the other party to speak
   Examples:
   - “Please go on.”
   - “Thanks for taking the time to explain this. I appreciate your patience.”
   - “Tell me more, I really want to make sure that I understand what you want.”
   - “You are really working hard to resolve this. Thanks.”

5. Summarize what the other party says
   Examples:
   - “So you are saying you are concerned about these three things: the money, your friendship, and getting your books back.”
   - “So overall you seem to be saying that you like her, but you don’t really want to be friends anymore…”
   - “The things you want from him are…”
   - “You’re saying that the problems you want to talk about here today are…”

# Practice Sheet

**Issue:**

| Traditional Positions: |  |
|------------------------|--|---|
| **Yours:**           | **Theirs:**  |

| Interests: |  |
|-----------|--|---|
| **Yours:** | **Theirs:**  |

| Options: |  |
|----------|--|---|