

If there is one concept that transforms the quality of conflict work more than any other, it is the distinction between positions and interests. Understanding this difference — and learning to work below the surface of what people say they want — is the foundation of durable agreements and genuine resolution.

THE CORE DISTINCTION

POSITIONS	INTERESTS
What someone says they want	Why they want it — the need, value, or concern underneath
Fixed and stated	Often unstated and sometimes unknown even to the person holding them
Often incompatible with the other side's position	Often compatible — or at least workable — once surfaced
Where most arguments happen	Where most agreements are actually built

A SIMPLE EXAMPLE

Two colleagues are arguing over who gets the corner office. That is the position. One wants the office because clients visit and they want to project seniority. The other wants it because they need quiet to concentrate. Once the interests are surfaced, solutions become available that neither could see when they were arguing over the office itself — a client meeting room, a quiet workspace elsewhere, a schedule.

HOW TO MOVE FROM POSITIONS TO INTERESTS

1. Listen for positions first

Don't try to skip past what people say they want. Let them state their position fully — being heard at the position level is often what makes it possible to go deeper.

2. Ask 'Why does that matter to you?'

This single question, asked with genuine curiosity, begins the movement below the surface. Ask it more than once — the first answer is often still a position.

3. Ask 'What would that give you?'

Another route to the interest underneath. 'What would getting that give you that you don't have now?' surfaces the actual need.

4. Name what you hear

Reflect the interest back: 'So what really matters here is that you feel recognized in front of clients — is that right?' Naming creates shared understanding.

5. Look for overlap

Once both parties' interests are on the table, look for the territory where they are compatible. That is where agreements are built.

THE TRAP TO AVOID

The most common mistake is assuming you already know what someone's interest is. Interests are not always obvious — and they are frequently surprising. A position that looks like stubbornness often turns out to be a need for dignity. Stay curious longer than feels necessary.

Develop your interest-exploration skills with personalized coaching at conflictmanagementspace.com