

FOCUS ON INTERESTS, NOT POSITIONS

Paul Simon has a lyric in one of his songs that goes “I want to sleep with the window open, you want to sleep with the window closed. So Goodbye, Goodbye, Goodbye.” It’s a catchy line that reveals the absurdity of holding onto positions to the death.

Consider the story of the husband and wife arguing in the sitting room. He wants the door open and she wants it closed. They bicker back and forth about how much to leave it open: a crack, halfway, three quarters. No solution satisfies them both. Enter their five-year-old daughter who has become upset at hearing them argue. She asks her dad why he wants the door open: “Because its too warm in here”. She asks her Mom why she wants it closed: “To avoid a draft from the hallway”. After thinking for a minute the little girl goes and opens wide a window at the end of the room, bringing in fresh air without the draft. “Now, will you stop fighting?” she asks

The story is typical of many disagreements between husband and wife or parents and children. Since the problem appears to be a conflict of positions, and since their goal is to agree on a position (whether the door should be open or closed), they naturally tend to think and talk about positions – and in the process often find it hard to solve the problems.

The little girl could not have come up with the solution if she had focused only on her parent’s positions and tried to decide which position was right. Instead she intuitively focused on their underlying interests in fresh air and no draft.

In everyday family disagreements this difference between positions and interests is crucial. What you need to be focused on in a family conflict is not the conflicting positions but in the conflict between each persons interests or needs. Your partner may argue a number of positions with you such as “I refuse to pay more than 5,000 for a second hand-car for our son”; “None of our children should be allowed out after 9:30”, “I am not calling over to your parents anymore”. “I am not going on any more sun-holidays”.

To solve these problems one needs to focus not on the defiant positions assumed but on the interests of the person. Reconciling interests rather than positions works because for every interest there usually exist several possible positions that could satisfy it. All too often in conflict people simply stick to their first stated position. When you do look behind this position for the motivating interests, you can often find an alternative position that meets not only their interests, but yours as well. Behind opposed positions lie many more interests than conflicting ones.

We tend to assume that because our partner or spouse’s position is opposed to ours, their interests may also be opposed. In many marital conflicts, however, a close examination of the underlying issues reveals the existence of many more interests that are shared than ones that are opposed. In a paradoxical way you will surely have noticed at times that you are arguing with your partner or children only to discover that ye are actually on the same side!

So how do you identify the interests that motivate both yourself and the loved one with whom you may be in conflict? Well, lets consider a situation where your teenage

son wants to be allowed go away on an overnight to a rock concert. Your position is to say no, and his position is to plead for yes feeling you are being cruel. To get at interests and pull back from positions do the following:

1. Ask why? Get at the underlying needs, hopes, fears, or desires that his position serves.

He may say, "I want to go because everyone else is going, because I am old enough to go, because I love the groups, and because I am responsible!"

2. Ask why he does not choose to just accept your decision?

He might say because you are wrong, because you don't understand him, because others will think he is a dork; because he has to stand up for what he thinks is right.

3. Realise that he has many interests.

4. Realise that his most powerful interests are in basic human needs.

The five basic human needs are for Certainty & Comfort; Novelty & Variety; Status & Significance; Connection & Love; Growth & Contribution. Your son in this instance is arguing primarily for his basic need for status and significance and to a lesser extent for growth and novelty. He wants to feel he is part of a group, that he is seen to be older, responsible, and entitled to freedom.

5. Make a list of the various interests each of you have.

Your basic interests may be in safety, protection, permissiveness, and not wanting to worry.

5. Talk about your interests and forget about your positions for a while.

So the next thing you would have to do is to talk not about your positions (whether he goes or not) but about our interests. You would need to be able to acknowledge his interests as much as he would need to be able to acknowledge yours. Explain your interests to your son, tease out his with him. You will find that when you are focused on these interests many different options begin to open up. When you begin to think about how each persons interests can be addressed you begin to think outside the box.

Try to remember that we tend to hold onto our positions more when we feel our interests go unrecognized.