



## Focus On Interests: Conflict and Collaboration

WESTERN RESOURCE ISSUES  
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Loretta Singletary, Extension Educator

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## Working Through Conflict

Stakeholders who explore a natural resource issue supply different values and facts to the

process. In this atmosphere, conflicts surface readily.

Conflicts are generated when more than one party has a desire to appropriate the right to a property or resource. Most of the time conflicts result from:

- lack of established property rights
- ambiguities in the specification or structure of those rights, and
- lack of understanding of the existing property rights structure.

When a conflict arises in the process of exploring a public issue, it is human nature to avoid it, fear it, ignore it, repress it, or attack it. Few calmly look at a conflict with the idea in mind that oftentimes an issue can be resolved to our own satisfaction only by working through conflict. In determining why a conflict exists, stakeholders learn about their own and others' unique interest in the issue.

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To work through conflict requires stakeholders to:

- acknowledge that a conflict exists
- accept conflict, when it arises, as simply part of the process of addressing a complex issue, and
- find out why it exists.

## Focus on Interests

Resolving conflict necessitates that stakeholders focus on their interests in the issue. An interest reveals why one stakeholder disagrees with another on some aspect of an issue. Typically, disagreement stems from differences in feelings and thoughts about what each stakeholder wants and why.

In contrast, a position on an issue is how a stakeholder thinks the issue should be addressed. In a sense, a position is a premature advocacy of an alternative, choice or action to remedy the issue. It is premature because it lacks broad citizen participation required for a collaborative effort to choose the best alternative. Typically, a position is not owned jointly by a body of stakeholders, but instead, satisfies the interests of only one or a few individuals.

When stakeholders choose to focus on their interests rather than positions, they are less likely to see one another as losers or winners pertaining to the outcome of an issue dispute. Instead, they work collaboratively to resolve the issue. When stakeholders with varying interests collaborate to work through conflict to resolve an issue, several beneficial effects occur. These include:

- listening skills improve,
- more creativity emerges in the search for solutions,
- in developing a team spirit, stakeholders retain a higher level of commitment to see the issue through,
- group cohesiveness and collaboration lessen the chance for individuals to routinely vent frustrations and hostile emotions, and
- emotions are respected and outbursts are handled more effectively when they do occur.

## Collaborative Conflict Resolution

Collaborative Conflict Resolution is a steplike process designed to help stakeholders focus on interests to work through conflict and reach consensus. It is useful particularly when a public issue has reached a level of controversy to where interest groups and individual stakeholders feel at odds with one another as well as the issues evolution process.

Public discussion at this point may exhibit roughness, impatience, and suspicion. More time and energy is spent persuading others to agree to a position rather than listening to individual concerns and interests. Groups or individuals who do not agree with what appears to be a popular position on an issue may disappear from the process altogether. The issue evolution process appears either to digress or stall indefinitely. At this point, a collaborative conflict resolution process is appropriate.

Collaborative Conflict Resolution involves the following steps:

- Make certain all issues are clearly identified
- Identify how stakeholders will use the outcome of the process
- Identify all who have an interest in the outcome
- Make certain that decision making authority is at the table, especially with agencies
- Identify a process to address conflict, establish ground rules and agenda for meeting
- Define the problem in detail
- Identify what information about the issue is lacking or is misunderstood and acquire it or clarify it
- Clearly identify individual interests to build a standard or set of criteria on which alternatives are judged
- Create alternative solutions
- Create and evaluate an agreement based on mutual consensus of all stakeholders
- Commit to an agreement by stating provisions that must be followed

- Put the agreement in writing
- Have identified organizations formally accept agreement
- Bring agreement before official decisionmakers (local, state lawmakers)
- Follow implementation of the agreement to determine its effectiveness

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## Cooperative Problem Solving

In order to be able to collaborate to tackle complex problems and effectively address conflicts, there are behavioral barriers that must be recognized and overcome (Ury, 1993). Cooperative or joint problem solving, similar to collaborative conflict resolution, encourages stakeholders to focus on interests to work through conflict surrounding complex issues. In order to be able to collaborate to tackle complex problems and effectively address conflicts, there are behavioral barriers that must be recognized and overcome (Ury, 1993). These include:

- your reaction to confrontation and opposition,
- their negative emotions, which may be fueled by anger, fear, and distrust
- their position on an issue, which may be a habit of adopting a solution to a problem and then trying to get everyone else to agree to it,
- their dissatisfaction with an alternative, which may be based on not wanting to admit that the other side has a viable solution or not understanding how an outcome benefits them specifically, and
- their power to have their way, which is based on a win-lose attitude towards problem-solving.

*...all sides make mutual gains by making sure that your needs as well as your opponents' needs are satisfied at the lowest cost possible.*

Ury suggests a five-step strategy for overcoming these barriers to cooperative problem solving. "Breakthrough negotiation," as Ury describes it, allows negotiators to look to their opponents as partners who offer a chance to arrive at an agreement that is mutually acceptable.

The following five steps are:

- rather than reacting to opposition, regain and maintain your balance by staying focused on what you want.
- instead of behaving like an opponent, disperse hostile, angry and negative feelings by listening to

their side of the issue

- in an effort to collaboratively address the issue, momentarily take their position to better understand what they want and why
- to move past resistance and refocus on the issue at hand, ask the opposition to solve the problem so that all interests are satisfied and to examine the costs of no agreement,
- emphasize the benefits of agreeing on a solution and understand the consequences of not reaching an agreement, and
- to the extent possible, always use objective criteria, or the best knowledge of information available that can help separate emotions from objectivity This is critical when personal values are a major issue.

## What is My BATNA?

Whenever conflict is at a high level, intervention requires stakeholders to negotiate their interests or what they want and why. Both collaborative conflict resolution and cooperative problem solving require stakeholders to know their best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA). A BATNA is a set of criteria to remind stakeholders what negotiated outcomes they find satisfactory. It also serves to help negotiators determine whether they should refrain from negotiating until communications are improved or alternatives are improved.

It is helpful for negotiators to clearly understand their opponents' BATNA as well. Having a clear understanding of best alternatives to a negotiated agreement on all sides of an issues helps to open doors for collaboratively creating options that could result in mutual gains rather than losses.

## Is the Process Effective?

Stakeholders may evaluate the collaborative conflict resolution or cooperative problem solving process to determine if it is effective. Checkpoints to evaluate effectiveness include asking the following questions:

Have all relevant stakeholders been involved in negotiations?

Are all stakeholders better off?

- Is the resolution of conflict based on pertinent local, technical and scientific information?
- Have any mutual gains been overlooked?
- Does anyone feel they have been taken advantage of or "had?"
- Have stakeholder relationships been improved or at least main-tained?
- Has a process for addressing future conflicts been incorporated into the resulting agreement?

## Conflict and Collaboration

The idea behind either type of conflict resolution process is mutual gains rather than winlose outcomes. That is, rather than getting what you want by ensuring that your opponent does not get what s/he wants--all sides make mutual gains by making sure that your needs as well as your opponents' needs are satisfied at the lowest cost possible.

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