

FAQ: How can differences in interests be dealt with?

Bringing together a diverse group of researchers and stakeholders to tackle a complex societal or environmental problem inevitably means that multiple interests come into play and need to be understood and managed.

Interests arise when a person has a stake in something and stands to gain or lose depending on what happens to that something:

- researchers commonly have an interest in advancing their work and careers,
- stakeholders affected by a societal problem generally have a stake in improving the problem, and
- stakeholders in a position to do something about a problem generally have a stake in improving outcomes for the problem through their sphere of influence.

Interests relate not only to personal conditions or stakes (self-interest), but also to principles such as cooperative social actions and justice.

A useful way of managing different, including conflicting, interests is principled negotiation, also known as negotiation on the merits or ‘getting to yes.’ The aim is to find a mutually agreeable fair solution through a problem solving approach. It can also be seen as a way to integrate different interests.

Principled negotiation is appropriate to finding a fair solution that best accommodates various interests in a problem (for example, among stakeholders who want different outcomes from the research, such as protection of fisheries versus protection of tourism). It is also useful for finding a fair solution among the different interests driving involvement in the research (for example, authorship order on publications, or who gets to speak publicly on behalf of the project). Using a trained facilitator to steer the process may be helpful.

Principled negotiation

Principled negotiation has four steps:

1. separate the people from the problem
2. focus on interests, not positions
3. generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do
4. look for a fair solution, based on the merits.

Separate the people from the problem

Three ‘people’ factors—emotion, perception and communication—need to be managed separately from the negotiation on the substantive issue. The dialogue process needs to separately deal with emotions, such as anger, enthusiasm and sympathy, to ensure they do not get in the way of dealing with the problem. For example, enthusiasm and optimism can blind people to signals from others that they have concerns, sympathy can lead people to excuse bad behaviour, and liking can lead partners to overlook significant weaknesses. The aim of principled negotiation is to channel emotions into a productive vision of working side by side to bridge differences.

No two people perceive the world or any particular problem in exactly the same way. In principled negotiation the aim is to encourage understanding of the points of view of the other research partners in order to avoid misinterpreting their intentions. Understanding is not the same as agreeing.

Communication founders when people do not listen, do not hear, misunderstand, or misinterpret. Listening actively, which involves checking that the listener is hearing and interpreting correctly, is a key ingredient for improved communication. Speakers can also pay more attention to what they say, particularly to think about what they want to get across and how this can best be achieved. It also helps if both sides are tolerant and slow to take offence.

Focus on interests, not positions

The position a person takes on a problem usually results from the combination of a number of interests. In essence, a position is a 'summary statement' and usually reflects only one way of meeting all the underlying interests. Within the range of interests that make up opposing positions, some are likely to be shared and compatible, while others are likely to continue to be in conflict. The process of identifying interests therefore usually clarifies where real disagreements lie, and, because some interests will be shared or complementary, the areas for conflict will generally be smaller than first thought. It is essential for all sides to listen with respect, show courtesy, and emphasise concern to meet the basic needs of the other parties. In addition, each partner must be specific about their interests and their importance. The aim is to be able to frame a joint attack on the differences in interests.

Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do

The aim is to be creative in generating a variety of potential solutions to the conflicting interests that have been identified. There are four primary barriers to be avoided:

1. Premature judgment, in other words leaping to a solution before considering the options.
2. Searching for a single answer. This results from an assumption that there is only one "right" answer, rather than an appreciation that there are generally many ways in which interests can be met.
3. Assuming the problem is embedded in a set of rigid constraints. Lateral thinking is encouraged, including identifying additional resources that can be brought to bear.
4. Thinking that one or more involved parties have no role in solving the problem. Instead, seeing areas of conflict as shared problems requiring shared solutions is more likely to lead to mutually satisfactory outcomes.

Look for a fair solution, based on the merits

Once options have been generated, the next step is to evaluate them and to find a fair solution, based on objective criteria. Different criteria will be useful in different situations and can include moral standards, equal treatment, scientific judgment, efficiency, cost, or what a court would decide.

Finding a fair solution is also helped when each partner has worked out their BATNA (Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement). This requires each partner to work out the best outcome they could achieve without the negotiation. In conditions where a perfect solution for each partner cannot be reached (which will be most negotiations), the aim is for everyone to be better off than their BATNA.

References:

For more on interests see: Bammer, G. (2022). Understanding diversity primer: 6. Interests Integration and implementation Insights (May). (Online).

<https://i2insights.org/2022/05/26/diversity-in-interests/>

The key reference on principled negotiation is: Fisher, R., Ury, W. and Patton, B. (1991). *Getting to yes. Negotiating an agreement without giving in*. 2nd ed. Random House Business Books: London, United Kingdom.

Principled negotiation was originally developed by Roger Fisher and William Ury at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States of America.

Origin:

This is one of four FAQ resources produced by Gabriele Bammer in 2022 for the Integration and Implementation Sciences (i2S) website. The information on that website has been transferred and is now available at <https://i2insights.org/i2s/>. The FAQ are listed under “Historical notes” on <https://i2insights.org/i2s/i2s-publications/>, which provides more information about them.