Interests and positions

Imagine you're a teacher. You assign five complicated math problems for homework each Tuesday. One year, a student tells you he will not complete the Tuesday math homework assignments.

Or imagine you're a librarian. One of the teachers tells you she'll be bringing her class to the library next Thursday morning, but eek! ... That's when you were planning to pack up the reading fair.

Or imagine you're a district curriculum coordinator. At a recent school board meeting, community members demand you purchase one particular science curriculum. You try to tell them that the district doesn't have the equipment to support the curriculum they're demanding, but they won't listen. They want that one program and they're not changing their mind.

All of these situations could create a *conflict*, and in conflict, effective decision-making is paramount. One part of making effective decisions in the midst of conflict is to understand the difference between *interests* and *positions*.

Positions are what is presented to you: They are the stated desired outcomes (the student won't do the homework, the teacher brings her class to the library Thursday morning, and the XYZ curriculum).

Positions are important, but they are only the tip of iceberg. They're the part we can see.

Beneath the positions are the interests. The interests are what is driving the position.

For example: Perhaps the student who refuses to do math homework has a big family commitment every Tuesday. He wants (or needs) to be fully present for that family engagement. That is his *interest*. *How that interest manifests itself* is by saying "I'm not doing the homework." But "I'm not doing the homework" is the *position*. The underlying *interest* is the family commitment.

Maybe the teacher is planning to bring her class to the library next Thursday because she's being observed that day, and she really wants her principal to see an amazing lesson she has planned in the library. *Position:* "I'm bringing my class next Thursday." *Interest:* "I want my principal to see my amazing library lesson."

Maybe the parents demanding the particular curriculum are doing so because it includes some facet that they're really interested in. *Position:* The specific curriculum. *Interest:* Whatever product feature they're after.

Now: It sort of seems simple when spelled out like this. But here's a huge warning: *These situations rarely present themselves so neatly.* Often, even the people themselves don't realize they have interests that undergird the stated positions. It often takes detective work to decipher: *What is really going on here?*

But doing so is worth the work. Why? Because often distinguishing the interests from the positions leads to *creative solutions*.

The student can't do math homework on Tuesday afternoons? What if he gave up his lunch on Tuesdays and did the math homework then?

The teacher wants the principal to observe her teaching a library lesson, but perhaps the principal is available on Friday instead.

The parents want a particular curriculum program, but perhaps there is another curriculum program that meets their demands.

I want to be careful not to overpromise. Sometimes you'll know someone's interests and there will still be a conflict. But sometimes not. Sometimes creative solutions really can be found that meet *both* of your interests (for example: your interest to ensure students get extra practice in math, and your student's interest to attend family events). When we're only talking positions, we could miss opportunities for us *both* to win.

It isn't a perfect solution, but - generally speaking - taking the time to understand interests (your own and the other person's), and not simply to focus on positions, is a happier, more creatively-fulling, and effective approach.

Make good choices, -Kevin

Bad decision of the week: Teacher chugs booze, calls students "little s****s," and repeatedly forces them to dance the Macarena.