

**Focus on Interests, not Positions (Interests)** “Positions” are conclusions that we believe we need to defend and are specific solutions to interests. “Interests” are reasons that underlie positions and are varied and diffuse. One way to view positions and interests is to assume that a position is “just one solution” and interests are “the reasons why we have come to a specific solution.” Arguing about positions or specific solutions can endanger relationships because individuals engaged in conflict may find themselves in a contest of

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will. On the other hand, focusing on the interests or the reasons that underlie solutions can result in creative options that enable both parties in conflict to achieve their goals. For example, when we return to the conflict situation about moving to a new house, we can see that wanting to move to a larger home is a position, or “just one solution.” We may therefore feel compelled to defend our one position or solution. Similarly, our partner may believe that she or he must defend the position of wanting to stay put. However, if partners

focus on interests, or the reasons why they have come to a specific solution, they may find that they both can reach their goals.

In this stage of the collaborative conflict resolution method, we can ask our partner:

- “Why do you want to . . . (*buy a new car*); believe that . . . (*we should punish our child*); hope that . . . (*we’ll get married soon*)?”
- What is it that you are trying to achieve by wanting to . . . (*change schools*); believing that . . . (*we should break up*); hoping that . . . (*I’ll sell some stock*)?”
- “Why do you feel so strongly about this?”
- “What exact problems are we trying to solve?”

The answers to these questions are the interests or the reasons why we have come to a specific solution. In the case of the partner who wants to move to a larger house, we may discover that she or he has run out of closet space and feels penned in. The partner may feel overwhelmed with all the possessions that have accumulated in the house yet not want to part with them. Wanting more room but not wanting to get rid of possessions is the interest or reason why the partner arrived at a specific solution. The partner who wants to

stay put may not want to leave friends in the neighborhood and force the kids to attend different schools. After obtaining the reasons that underlie the specific positions, the partners can then focus on points of agreement and work toward a mutually satisfying solution.