

Agreement and Resolution (Problem Solving & Developing Alternatives)

1. A Starting Place

Remember first you have to *clarify* the underlying interests, and then you can think about possible options for meeting those interests.

- Try to:
 - Focus more on the problem than on the person.
 - Prioritize your interests.
 - Consider what the other side wants, too. An agreement that would meet only your interests is useless if it doesn't also meet the other person's interests sufficiently and to the extent that they are willing to accept it.
- Identify Interests:
 - What is it that I really care about?
 - If I were in their shoes, what would I care about?
 - What are the concerns of others who might be affected?
- Prioritizing Interests:
 - What are my most important interests?
 - What other interests do I have?
 - What are their most important interests?
 - What other interests do they have?

2. Some Ways of Developing Options

- Brainstorm
 - Anything goes. No judging or evaluating ideas.
 - Keep at it. One idea often sparks another.
 - The more the merrier. New people bring new ideas.
- Create an Ideal Vision
 - Consider: *"If you could have things work out exactly as you'd like, what would the outcome look like?"*
- Ask Solution-Oriented Questions (to help identify specific needs)
 - Exception Finding Questions: *"Is there a time when the problem doesn't occur? What's different during those times? What has to happen for that to continue?"*
"What would have to be different for you to _____"
 - Miracle Questions: *"Suppose a miracle happens and all these problems are resolved. What will be different that will tell you a miracle has happened?"*
 - Scaling Questions: *"On a scale of 1 to 10, where are you today with this problem?"*

- Fractionate
 - Break the problem down into specific parts, tasks, behaviors, etc.
 - Tackle pieces one at a time.
- Prioritize
 - What is most/least important to each?
 - What is most/least urgent to each, etc.?
- Ask “What ifs” (make suggestions based on what you’ve heard)
 - What if I did _____? Would that help with the problem you described?”
 - “If _____ happened, would that change things for you?”
- Trade-offs
 - Giving, but not necessarily “giving up” by suggesting trading things less important to you for those that are more important.

3. **Approaching Problem-Solving with Flexibility (and Perseverance)**

Use whatever tools and processes you have available to engage in a creative and productive process. You may want to consider an external facilitator or mediator.

If more than one issue is at stake, start by discussing one issue at a time, rather than the “whole enchilada.”

Generate several possible solutions to the problem. Brainstorm ideas for solutions. Defer judgments and evaluations of potential solutions during this stage.

Good solutions to problems emerge from mutually acceptable criteria being applied in a clear, decision-making process.

As you reach agreement on solutions to problems under discussion, think about whether to summarize them in writing for future reference.

4. **Building Agreements that Work**

Remember that for a solution to have any lasting power it must be perceived as fair and reasonable to all parties. Think about how to make the agreement:

- As balanced and equitable to all parties as the situation allows.
- Realistic (“do we really have the time, energy, skills and resources to follow-through?”)
- Specific enough to allow everyone to proceed (“does everyone understand what we need to do and when we need to do it?”)
- Incorporate a sense of proportional “give and take,” so that no one feels as though they got the “bad deal.”

- Clearly state the points of agreements between parties.
- Concise and understandable.
- Incorporate expressions of apology or gratitude as appropriate but not fix blame.
- Future-oriented (“Have we considered what we will do if there are other problems or conflicts in the future?”)

Give your agreement every chance of survival and success. If unexpected problems come up (for example, someone gets sick or unexpected workload changes make it difficult to pay attention to the agreement for a few days), be honest with one another about these challenges.

As appropriate, make time to renegotiate solutions on the basis of new information. Try not to assume that if something doesn’t happen when you expected it to occur it means that the other person has abandoned the agreement or is intentionally sabotaging the process.

Sometimes it’s useful to agree to check back with one other to evaluate progress towards implementation. In this way, any concerns about the agreement can be uncovered in a timely way, rather than waiting for problems to escalate. This may allow you also to recognize progress and success.