Find the Need Behind the Disagreement

Leader Rebellion · Interests and positions

You have heard what each person wants. There may be more to understand before choosing a side.

Use this when: Two reasonable people keep returning to incompatible demands.

Leave with: A map of stated positions, interests to check, and an option worth discussing.

Open the interactive tool — free to use, no login needed.

Start here

Write the requests as each person would recognize them. Keep their position separate from your story about it.

Ask what the request makes possible or protects. Treat an inferred interest as a question until checked.

Explore options and a fair way to compare them. An unresolved disagreement can remain visible.

Your situation

What needs to be worked out?

Name the decision or shared work.

One stated position

What is the actual request?

What might it protect?

Mark whether this is heard directly or still a hypothesis.

The other stated position

Use language the other person could recognize.

What might that protect?

Do not turn a guess into a fact about their motives.

What could you ask to check your understanding?

Invite correction, not a confession.

What different arrangements might serve both interests?

Try more than splitting the difference.

How could you compare the options fairly?

Agree a relevant standard or evidence together.

What remains unresolved, and who can decide?

Make authority and boundaries visible. Do not manufacture agreement.

A question to keep

Which explanation am I tempted to assign to the other person without asking?

Worked example — fictional

What needs to be worked out?

Choosing when to release a revised customer form.

One stated position

Launch it on Friday.

What might it protect?

Heard directly: sales wants the new offer available for Monday's campaign.

The other stated position

Wait two weeks.

What might that protect?

Hypothesis: support may need time to prepare. I have not asked yet.

What could you ask to check your understanding?

What would the extra two weeks make possible? What would be risky if we launched on Friday?

What different arrangements might serve both interests?

Pilot with one customer group. Keep the old route available. Launch the offer with the old form while support tests the new one.

How could you compare the options fairly?

Compare customer access, support readiness, and the campaign's actual dependency on the form.

What remains unresolved, and who can decide?

We have not heard support's constraints. The product owner will decide after both teams review the options.

Where this tool comes from

The Harvard Negotiation Project developed principled negotiation, presented in Getting to Yes, first published in 1981. One of its central distinctions is between positions and the interests beneath them. This exercise adapts that distinction; it does not reproduce the book or provide a complete negotiation method.

Harvard Program on Negotiation: project and approach

The thinking behind it

A person's objection may contain knowledge your role does not give you. Shared language helps only when you let their explanation change the picture.

Stop Chasing Psychological Safety — by Nic Payne

Understanding an interest does not require agreeing to the request.

The web tool contains the interactive lesson and calculations. Use this worksheet for written notes.

Get Nic's notes — optional.

Hope is rebellious.