



INTERESTS & POSITIONS

Interests and Positions

On one uncommonly common day in 2005, a day perhaps best described as non-descript rather than un- or indescribable, DeeJ asked Stu if he had a large screwdriver that he might be able to borrow, understandably prompting Stu to enquire, “Philips or flat head?” The question was unwelcome in DeeJ’s mind even though it had to be a flathead now that he’d gone down this path. And he answered “flathead”, causing poor Stu to search in vain for one in his desk drawer...

But DeeJ had only gone down this path because he’d failed to do the same thing that so many people fail to do when they ask questions or make statements... He’d assumed a position, specifically in this case that he needed a screwdriver when he did not need one, but failed to state his interest in asking for a screwdriver in the first place! Screwdrivers? Needs? Positions? Interests? What the devil’s all this about and what on earth has it got to do with creativity?

In Negotiation and Communication...

...an interest is what you really want or need to get out of any situation. A position is what you assume or say you need in order to achieve that interest. So for example, you might tell your boss that you want to go home at 4.00 in the afternoon. In your head, you might be thinking that gives you time to get the train home, wash & change and get out again by six in order that you can meet a friend for dinner in town at seven... So the interest of meeting someone at 7.00 is protected by the position of leaving at 4.00!

But wait! The same interest – meeting someone at 7.00 – might also be protected by getting a cab instead of the train, or by the other person leaving at 4:00, or both people leaving at 5:00 and travelling to a central location, or by taking the whole day off, or carrying a change of clothes to the office and leaving from there, or driving directly into town, or hiring a helicopter – whatever! In creative terms, leaving the office at 4.00 is a just one position; it’s one possible solution...

If you get this, you’ll see it’s a little like the old sales adage that says, “People don’t buy drills. They buy holes!” In fact, all great sales and marketing persuades you that a particular product or service looks after your interests... And in any honest situation, declaring interests cleans up communication no end. In our opening scenario, during which DeeJ asked Stuart for a large screwdriver, it turns out it was only needed to prise the lid off a tin of paint... DeeJ said large screwdriver but he didn’t actually need a screwdriver; any one of a dozen other objects would have protected the interest of opening paint!

Indeed, while specifically searching for a screwdriver, Stu – unseen by DeeJ – found and dismissed several objects in his desk drawer that would have easily done just that if he’d known the interest! You can see how much more effective the communication would have been if DeeJ had said, “Stu, I’m trying to open a can of paint. Do you have something that would prise off the lid?”

“The end result has exceeded expectations and reaffirmed DMI’s standing as a professional, high-end production company with outstanding values.” Leslie Singleton, Playtime PR

When it comes to creativity, it's important to understand that all practical problem solving, brief writing, and innovation depends on a clear understanding of the interests behind them... Being too prescriptive early in the creative process stops others contributing solutions. Somehow, though, it's a very rare thing to be presented with an interest at the beginning of a creative process! In fact, the people asking for ideas have usually made a lot of quite limiting assumptions before they share their thoughts at all...

So now, before we get into the nuts and bolts of declaring or asking for interests, a word of warning: a lot of people balk when given this advice! Indeed, many reject it out of hand. Perhaps they feel it sounds stilted, wordy or unnecessary. And yes, it takes a bit more care and a few more words at the start of the communication... But you only need to try it a few times to discover the astonishing amount of time, energy, and effort that it saves throughout the rest of the communication!

How to Declare Interests

Be honest about what you're feeling and hoping to achieve. For example, let's imagine someone is arranging delivery of a USB key with an essential presentation. When discussing a delivery deadline, many people – quite naturally – have an internal thought process that goes something like this: Well, the presentation's Tuesday afternoon. But I'll be nervous if it isn't with me by the end of play Monday. If I say Monday, I know I'll start to get itchy around lunchtime. Really, I need a safety day... Truth be told, I'll be happier if it's with me first thing Monday. Realistically, though, that makes me nervous in case something goes wrong with the post over the weekend. There'd be no time to put it right. I'll be happier if I have it Friday afternoon... Right: "I need it by Friday afternoon, latest!"

So that process of chunking backwards to protect the interest – being confident about the deadline – loses, in real terms, part of Friday, all of Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and most of Tuesday! Now, how much more effective would the communication be if the recipient declared the interest in their thinking? "Well, the presentation is Tuesday afternoon but I'd feel nervous if I haven't seen it before the weekend in case it's lost in the post..." That allows for the sender in our scenario to be creative with the problem, perhaps saying, "Yes, I'd be nervous about the weekend post, too. We'd need to work through the night to get it to you by Friday, though – how about we take the weekend on it and I'll drive it to you myself on Monday morning?"

Do you see how this addresses the real interest of being confident about the delivery?! As soon as you start talking in terms of interests over positions, the opportunity for creative problem solving multiplies exponentially. But it's a two-way street! What about when others are position orientated and have yet to hear all this great wisdom?!

Asking for Interests

There are a couple of ways to handle it. If you get on well with the other person, by all means raise the subject with them! Show them this Info Sheet; invite them to try it with you for a few weeks. That being the case, further invite them – if you fail to declare an interest – to say, “What’s your interest in that?” or some variation thereof – and vice versa, of course.

With people that you don’t know so well, it’s a little harder because they’d need to know all this in order to fully understand where you’re coming from. “What’s your interest?” can sound a little blunt. Some choose to soften it by answering the other person’s question, then saying, “What makes you ask that?”

Alternatively, another way to handle it is to say something to the effect of, “I’d really like to communicate as openly as possible with you so that there are always plenty of options...” Then simply ask a relevant question that gently bypasses an assumed position.

Creative Interests

There are plenty of stories that show how declaring interests drives creativity. That’s because successful innovation addresses real problems rather than people’s assumptions. One example that illustrates it beautifully is that of the man who invented the ‘Automated Transaction Machine’, John Shepherd-Barron. This fella wasn’t even in banking! Rather, he’d had the frustrating experience of arriving at his bank just as they shut the doors at closing time... The incident caused Shepherd-Barron to focus his attention on an unaddressed interest: allowing people to get their money anytime they wanted. They banks had, for years, been comfortably maintaining an unhelpful position: we can’t open 24 hours a day!

Coincidentally...

As an addendum, we can happily report that, during the writing of this Info Sheet, DeeJ had reason to ask Stu for a set square. He said, “Stu, I need something like a set square; I want to scoop some tiles into place and make sure they line up neatly in one move...”

Stu answered, “I don’t have a set square. Could you use the inside edges of a broken picture frame?”... And because the answer to that question was yes, the declared interests and explained positions worked like a charm: problem solved!



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