



***NEGOTIATING LIFE:
UNDERSTANDING YOUR OWN INTERESTS***

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NEGOTIATING LIFE: Understanding Your Own Interests

A lot of people I know are currently re-thinking various fundamental aspects of their lives. Perhaps it is a natural part of the life flow – ranging from mid-life crises to the periodic reflection we all do from time to time. For some, the current economic anxiety and potential or actual job losses are a major factor. These can be very difficult decisions, particularly when they feel forced upon us by external factors.

Regardless of the reason, these seem to be times when many of us are considering fundamental changes in our lives. What does this have to do with “negotiation?” Aren’t we talking about *decision-making*?

Yes, we are. And the decisions many of us are considering these days – whether they are framed in the context of “strategic planning” or “life decisions” – will affect many people in our lives in addition to ourselves. Negotiation is at its core about sound decision-making that affects others. You cannot separate decision-making from negotiation and negotiation from decision-making.

So how do the two relate to each other? This is a key question.

The best negotiators and the strongest decision-makers *understand their own interests*. They realize that the key to setting appropriate objectives is ensuring that those objectives will satisfy their fundamental interests.

Let’s take a real life example. Let’s say you are considering a career change. Perhaps you have long worked for a large organization and you are thinking about going out on your own. You are tired of working for other people. Your boss has been getting on your nerves lately. You think the organization is headed in the wrong direction. Many of the reasons you joined the organization years ago seem less relevant today.

So how do you align decision-making and attendant negotiations with your interests? This is not always easy to do.

You should sit down and map out your interests and the interests of others you care about in making this decision, such as your family, friends, co-workers, and any other people involved in or affected by your decision. You should consider including your boss as a stakeholder as well! Start with yourself and think about what really matters to you. You might include issues like *cash flow*, *time with family*, *relations with boss*, *income*, *health care*, *job satisfaction*, and whatever else you care about as you make this important decision.

With each issue you identify, try to come up with one or two words to describe your interest on that issue. For example, you might say that you want to have sufficient *cash flow*, or that you want to increase *time with family*, or that you want to maintain *relations with your boss*. Think carefully about what you really want on each of these issues. The words you select to describe your core interests matter since they will drive your decision-making. Of all the interests you identify for yourself, underline those that you feel are critical to you. This will further refine your focus as you consider various options for satisfying your interests.

Once you have a good sense of your own interests, consider the interests of others on the issues you have identified. Think about what *they* want on those same interests. Do they have different interests from you on those issues? Do they have interests opposed to yours? Do they have the same interests? Try not to sugarcoat areas where your interests and the interests of others are opposed. By the same token, do not imagine differences where they do not exist. Put yourself in others' shoes and think carefully about what you would want if you were they. Then add any issues your other stakeholders care about that you did not already have on your chart.

After you have developed a chart showing your interests and the interests of other stakeholders, go back and re-evaluate your own interests. Be sure you have not forgotten any important issues.

This is a key moment in your decision-making process, as the identification of your core interests should drive your decisions. Even the most fundamental, life-changing, difficult decisions seem much easier and sound when they are grounded in clearly identified interests.

When you have some confidence in your assessment of your own interests and the interests of those involved in or affected by your decision, test your assumptions. Talk with those closest to you—friends and family—about your sense of your own interests. Also talk with them about your understanding of *their* interests. See what they have to say both about your interests and theirs. Although you are not “negotiating” at this point, you are in fact initiating a process of negotiation that can support not only your own sound decision-making but also can result in those closest to you supporting your decisions. And it is hard to overstate the importance of gaining the support of those closest to you for fundamental, life-changing decisions.

Although you may find twists and turns in the game of life, if you keep focused on your core interests and share your thoughts on those interests with those closest to you on an ongoing basis, I have found that the challenge of change and new directions in life becomes much more manageable and an exciting adventure in which you cannot “fail.” Feel free to change your assessment of your interests. And update your understanding of others’ interests since your ability to satisfy your own interests often depends on your ability to satisfy theirs.

Do not underestimate the difficulty of figuring out your own interests, particularly in times of great change or stress. I think you will find, however, that there are few feelings as powerful and positive as feeling that you truly understand your own core interests. Then, when you have to make difficult or life-changing decisions, at least you know you are doing so for the right reasons—to satisfy those core interests.

Good luck with those important decisions. Remember, you are not alone as you consider your options. Talk about your interests with those closest to you and listen to their assessment of your interests and how they describe their own interests as well. I think you will find that your most important relationships grow stronger and stronger as you do so. I look forward to hearing your perspectives on how understanding your interests can strengthen your decision-making and negotiation outcomes. You can reach me at jshulman@alignor.com.