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# INTEGRATION INSIGHTS

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PRINCIPLED NEGOTIATION – A METHOD FOR INTEGRATING  
INTERESTS

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## PRINCIPLED NEGOTIATION – A METHOD FOR INTEGRATING INTERESTS

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*Integration across multiple research partners involves meeting different interests. At present there is no toolbox of integration methods that provides a range of options for tackling this synthesis challenge. One appropriate technique, which provides a starting point for developing a toolbox of dialogue-based methods is principled negotiation. This is based on four principles: (1) separating the relationship from the substance of the problem, (2) focusing on interests, not positions, (3) generating a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do, and (4) looking for a fair solution based on the merits.*

*Integration Insights is a series of digests of concepts, techniques or real-world examples of integration in research.*

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### INTERESTS AND INTEGRATION IN RESEARCH

Any research addressing complex issues will involve integration of interests that are a substantial component of the research topic. This is illustrated by the research undertaken for the World Commission on Dams (see *Integration Insights #2*), where such interests included the motivations of construction companies to apply their expertise and make a profit, of governments to ameliorate flooding or provide electricity and to attract investment to the country, and the aspirations of people affected by proposed dams to stay on family plots, maintain communities, and avoid a worsening of their economic and social circumstances.

As well as the interests inherent in the research topic, the researchers and other stakeholders will also have personal motivations and ambitions which need to be accommodated. These may include boosting research careers through significant breakthroughs, meeting employment performance requirements by bringing in funding and producing publications, or influencing policy or practice change.

At present there is no toolbox of integration techniques that provides methods for integrating interests. The example presented here therefore provides both a description of how to meet a significant integration challenge, as well as an example of the sorts of techniques an integration toolbox would contain.

Effective integration of interests focuses on finding a mutually agreeable fair solution through a problem solving approach. This is the essence of *principled* negotiation. A problem solving approach will not produce an outcome that allows all interests to be fully met in every case, but it does lead to fairer outcomes overall.

### THE ELEMENTS OF PRINCIPLED NEGOTIATION

Fisher and colleagues (1991) have developed four steps for principled negotiation, which are adapted here to the circumstances that are likely to arise in integration in research:

1. separate the relationship from the substance of the difference or problem;
2. focus on interests, not positions;
3. generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do; and
4. look for a fair solution, based on the merits.

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## SEPARATING THE RELATIONSHIP FROM THE SUBSTANCE OF THE DIFFERENCE

Any difference occurring in research has two components – the relationship between those experiencing the difference and the substantive or content issue. These often become intertwined.

In terms of problem solving, there are three aspects of relationships to be mindful of – emotions, perceptions and communication. Principled negotiation concentrates on the substantive issue and this works best when emotions, perceptions and communication are untangled from the content issue and managed separately. That does not mean that they should be ignored – quite the contrary. Key elements for managing emotions, perceptions and communication are outlined, before moving back to dealing with the substantive issue.

Emotions are integral to being human, but they can be misleading and get in the way of effective problem solving. Everyone knows the importance of letting anger cool before acting and most of us have had occasion to regret not doing so. But it is not only negative emotions that research partners need to watch out for. Enthusiasm and optimism can blind people to signals from others that they have concerns, sympathy can lead people to excuse bad behaviour, and liking can lead partners to overlook significant weaknesses. Each partner needs to recognise and understand emotions – their own and those of the other research partners – but they need to disconnect them from the substance of the problem.

In terms of perceptions, everyone has their own version of reality. Therefore no two people see the world or any particular issue in exactly the same way. In principled negotiation the aim for each person is to see the issue from the points of view of the other research partners. Understanding is not the same as agreeing. Instead, rather than aiming to reach a unified view, the intention is to better grasp how each partner sees the situation and to avoid misinterpreting their intentions. A common form of misperception occurs when people project their hopes and fears onto partners and imagine that they govern the partners' intentions.

Communication is the third aspect of relationships to be considered when bridging differences or problem solving. Essentially communication founders when people do not listen, do not hear, misunderstand, or misinterpret. In brief, listening actively, which involves checking that the listener is hearing and interpreting correctly, is a key ingredient for improved communication. But speakers can also pay more attention to what they say, particularly to think about what they want to get across and how this can best be achieved. It also helps if both sides are tolerant and slow to take offence.

## FOCUS ON INTERESTS, NOT POSITIONS

In terms of the substance of the issue, the position a person takes usually results from the combination of a number of interests. In essence, a position is a 'summary statement' and may be only one way of meeting all the underlying interests. Thus, for example, dam construction companies will generally take a position in favour of building dams, while non-government organisations representing displaced people will usually take a position opposed to building dams. Most importantly, it is generally hard to find mutually satisfactory resolution between competing positions, making it important to shift focus from positions to interests.

Within the range of interests that make up opposing positions, some are likely to be shared and compatible, while others are likely to continue to be in conflict. For example, in the World Commission on Dams case, dam construction companies, governments and affected people are all likely to share an interest in mitigating floods. However they are likely to disagree on the necessity of displacing people or of using alternatives to dams to achieve that outcome.

The process of identifying interests therefore usually clarifies where real disagreements lie, and, because some interests will be shared or complementary, the areas for conflict will generally be smaller than first thought. It is essential here for all sides to listen with respect, show courtesy, and emphasise concern to

## GENERATE A VARIETY OF POSSIBILITIES BEFORE DECIDING WHAT TO DO

meet the basic needs of the other parties. In addition, each partner must be specific about their interests and their importance. The idea is to frame a joint attack on the differences in interests.

Once everyone appreciates the needs and motivations of all the research partners, the next step is to generate a variety of potential solutions to the conflicting interests that have been identified. The most widely used method for generating possibilities is brainstorming, where participants are encouraged to rapidly put forward ideas, without judging whether the ideas are good or bad. Encouraging interaction at speed, with no in depth discussion, tends to circumvent narrow thinking and opens up the possibility of creative solutions, as partners spark ideas in each other.

Once a list of options has been generated, the merits of each alternative are discussed. Overall, the idea is to search for mutual gains, to dovetail different interests and, if necessary, to give partners an easy way of backing away from previously stated positions. The focus is on looking forward and leaving past disagreements to one side. There are four primary barriers to be avoided:

1. Premature judgment, in other words leaping to a solution before considering the options;
2. Searching for a single answer. This results from an assumption that there is only one "right" answer, rather than an appreciation that there are generally many ways in which interests can be met;
3. Assuming the problem is embedded in a set of rigid constraints, or as Fisher and colleagues would say "*the assumption of a fixed pie*" (p. 59). Lateral thinking is to be encouraged, which may include identifying additional resources that can be brought to bear;
4. Thinking that one or more parties have no role in solving the problem, in other words that "*solving the problem is their problem*" (Fisher and colleagues, 1991, p. 59). Instead, seeing areas of conflict as shared problems requiring shared solutions is more likely to lead to mutually satisfactory outcomes. If only one partner is involved in finding options, it is less likely that the options will take the interests of all partners into account.

## LOOK FOR A FAIR SOLUTION, BASED ON THE MERITS

Once options have been generated, the next step is to evaluate them and to find a fair solution, based on objective criteria. Objective criteria are independent standards, including "*market value, precedent, scientific judgment, professional standards, efficiency, costs, what a court would decide, moral standards, equal treatment, tradition, reciprocity*" and so on (Fisher and colleagues, 1991, p. 89).

Clearly, different criteria will be useful in different situations. In the case of the World Commission on Dams the objective criterion was a globally accepted framework of norms about human rights, social development and environment, and economic cooperation, based on United Nations declarations and principles.

Finding a fair solution is also helped when each partner has worked out their BATNA (Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement). In other words each partner works out the best outcome they could achieve without the negotiation. In conditions where a perfect solution for each partner cannot be reached (which will be most negotiations), the aim is for everyone to be better off than their BATNA.

In summary, the three basic points are to:

- "1. Frame each issue as a joint search for objective criteria.
2. Reason and be open to reason as to which standards are most appropriate and how they should be applied.
3. Never yield to pressure, only to principle." (Fisher and colleagues, 1991, p. 91).

## CONCLUSION

*Integration Insights #3* set out to show what a toolkit of integrative techniques would contain by describing one method, namely a dialogue-based method for integrating interests. This is an approach that many researchers involved in integration can learn and apply themselves, although some will find it easier to employ an independent facilitator at critical stages throughout the life of a project. Such stages include the planning phase, key milestone delivery periods, including project wrap-up, and any times when significant conflict arises.

Although principled negotiation was originally developed to resolve conflicts, it can also be used to deal with the normal differences inherent in research. Principled negotiation is appropriate to integrating both the substantive interests encompassed in the research topic and the different interests that motivate individual researchers and research partners.

It is interesting to note, however, that there is little evidence that this application has been either recognised or put into practice in the research context. Principled negotiation is widely used in conflict resolution and expanding its use to integrating interests in research seems desirable and feasible.

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## PREVIOUS ISSUES

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