

Decoding Conflict for Environmental NGOs

How to Uncover and Resolve What's Really Wrong



Matt McKenna, July 29, 2025
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The Plan for Today

1. Define conflict
2. Learn the six main drivers of conflict
3. Learn where to start
4. Learn a valuable model for navigating conflict

What is “Conflict”

Conflict is a clash between two or more opposing interests, needs, drives, wishes, or ideas.*

Conflict is fire.

Think Drivers

It's tempting to zero in on the cause or root of a conflict.

Instead, think **drivers**.

Ask:

What is keeping this conflict going?

Case Study - Cassandra and Tim

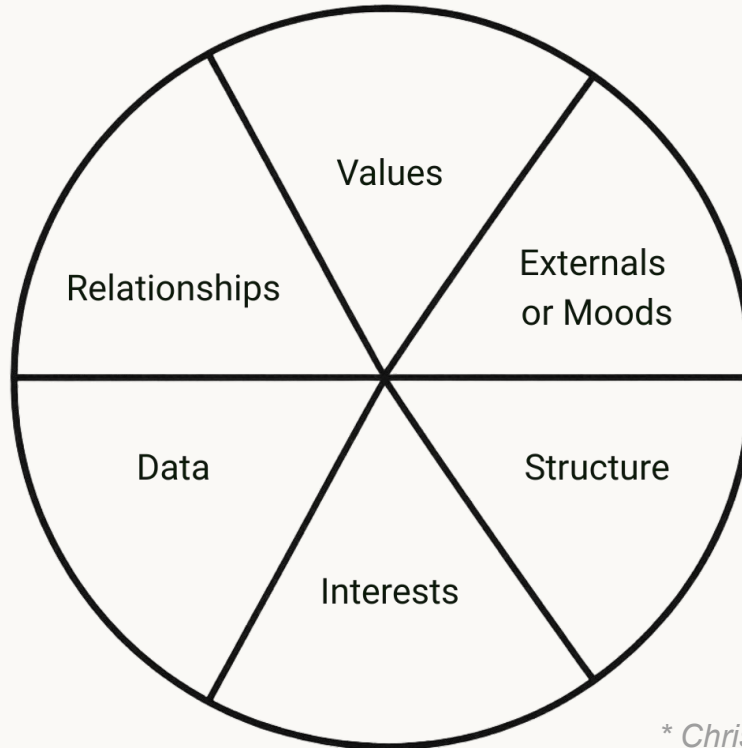
Cassandra, a Program Director for the regional branch of Earth Ethics Canada, manages three field campaigns and a small team of coordinators. Known for her high performance and deep commitment, Cassandra has taken on increasing responsibilities over the past 18 months, including partnership outreach, donor reports, and crisis response during wildfire season.

Recently **Tim**, her manager and County Director, added another expectation: she has to facilitate performance reviews for junior staff and organize logistics for an upcoming cross-country climate justice summit. Tim sees this as a sign of trust: *“You’re the only one I can count on for this.”*

Privately, Cassandra is experiencing burnout. Her emails are delayed, and she’s been less engaged in team meetings. When she tries to raise this with Tim, he responds with: *“We’re all under pressure. This is just the sector right now. We need to tough it out.”*

Meanwhile, junior team members are quietly saying Cassandra has become “snappy” and hard to approach. Cassandra feels unacknowledged, isolated, and increasingly resentful.

Circle of Conflict^{*}



** Christopher Moore, The Mediation Process*

Circle of Conflict

Relationships

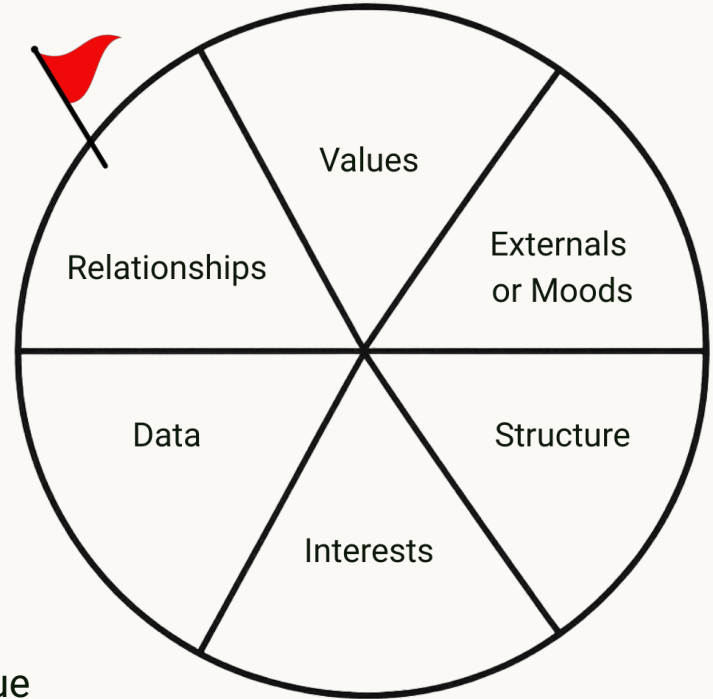
- Past relational history creating current issues
- The fight: how people treat each other

Values

- Belief systems, life-defining and day-to-day
- The fight: what matters the most

Externals or Moods

- Anything unrelated to substance of the conflict/issue
- The fight: intensity seems mismatched to the issue



Circle of Conflict

Data

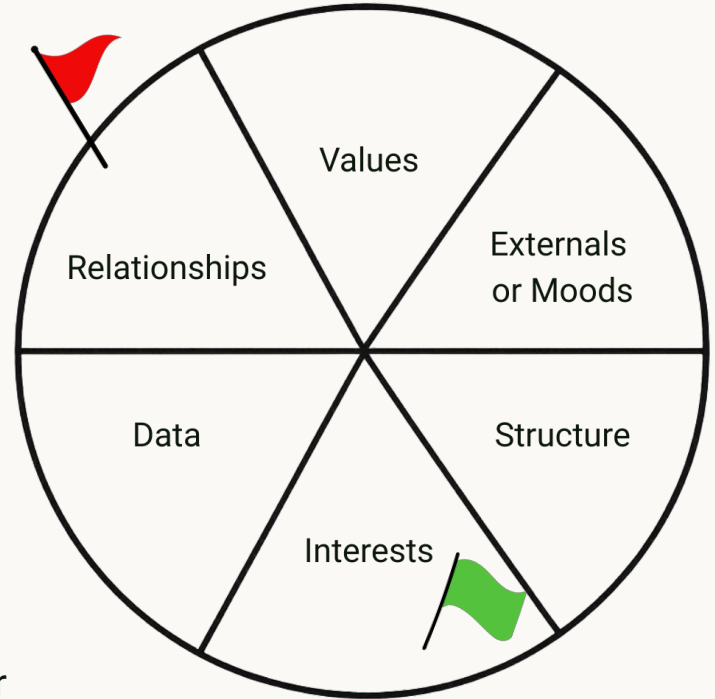
- An information differential
- The fight: what's "true" or "actually happening"

Interests

- Underneath our preferred solutions lie our interests
- The fight: what people need or want

Structure

- The nature or structure of systems we're in together
- The fight: systems, roles, how we get things done



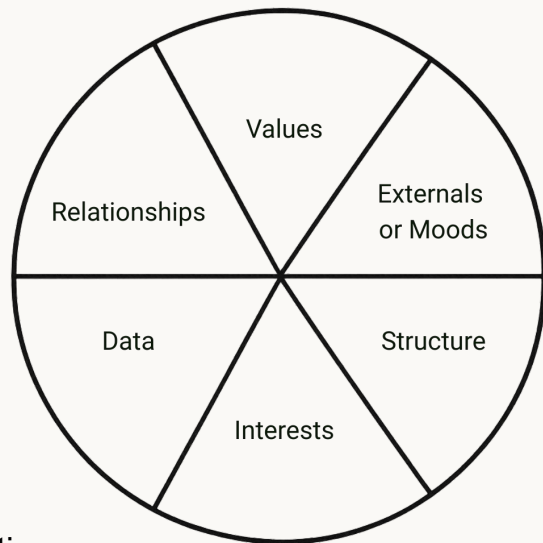
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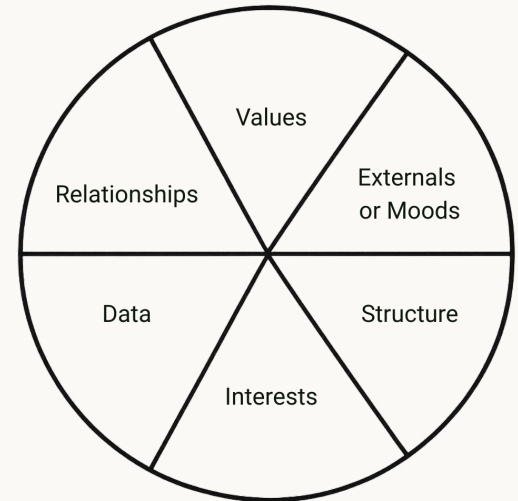
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Discussion - Case Study

1. Read the case study
2. 60 Second Reflection - What drivers are at play from the Circle of Conflict?
3. Gather in breakout rooms (3-4)
4. Briefly introduce yourselves.
5. Discuss the drivers at play. Is one more prevalent?
6. Return and debrief



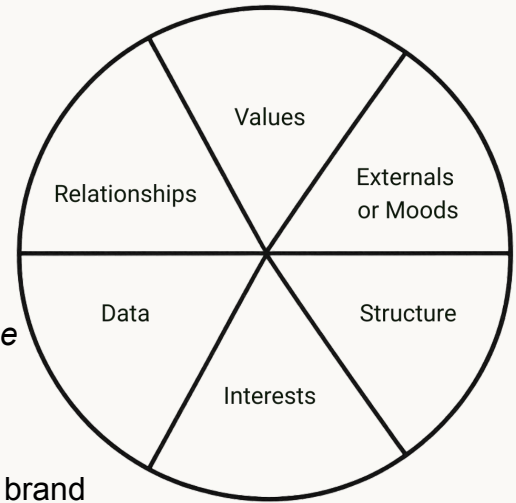
Discussion - Case Study - WildRoots

WildRoots International receives a \$1M conditional funding offer from the Maple Leaf Climate Trust. The grant is earmarked specifically for *climate education in schools*. It's a safe, non-confrontational area. However, WildRoots has built its reputation on direct climate action, including organizing protests and legal challenges.

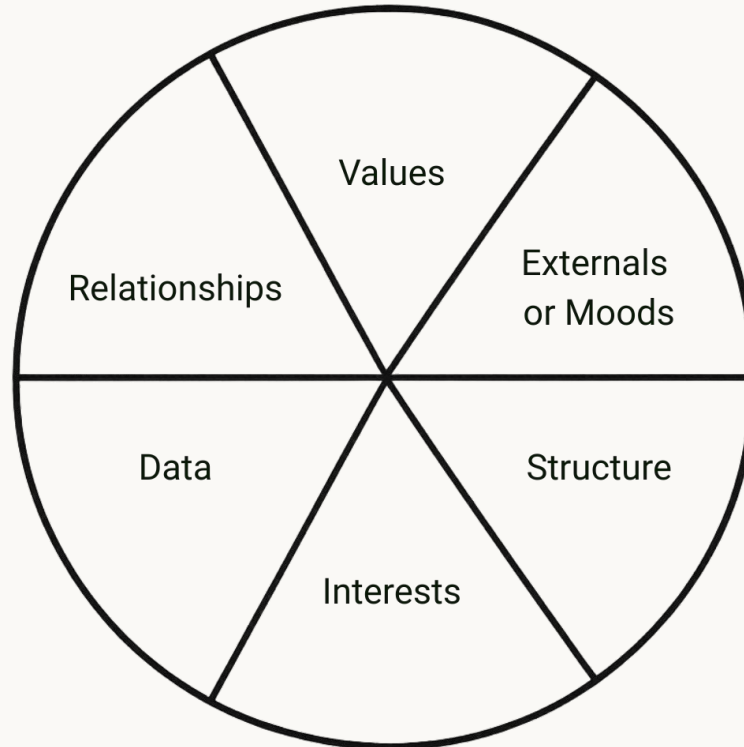
Emily, the Executive Director, sees the grant as a financial lifeline. Their unrestricted funding reserves are nearly depleted. Emily says, *"This buys us time to keep the lights on. We can make the educational stuff exciting. This is still impactful."*

Campaign Lead **Sriram**, disagrees. He and his team believe this will dilute their brand and demoralize frontline activists. *"We're not here to make pretty posters for classrooms while fossil fuel companies keep drilling,"* he says in a tense staff call.

Tensions rise at the leadership table. Some staff support Emily's pragmatism, especially those who work in comms or admin. Others side with Sriram, seeing the shift as mission drift. Rumors begin circulating about Sriram looking for jobs elsewhere.

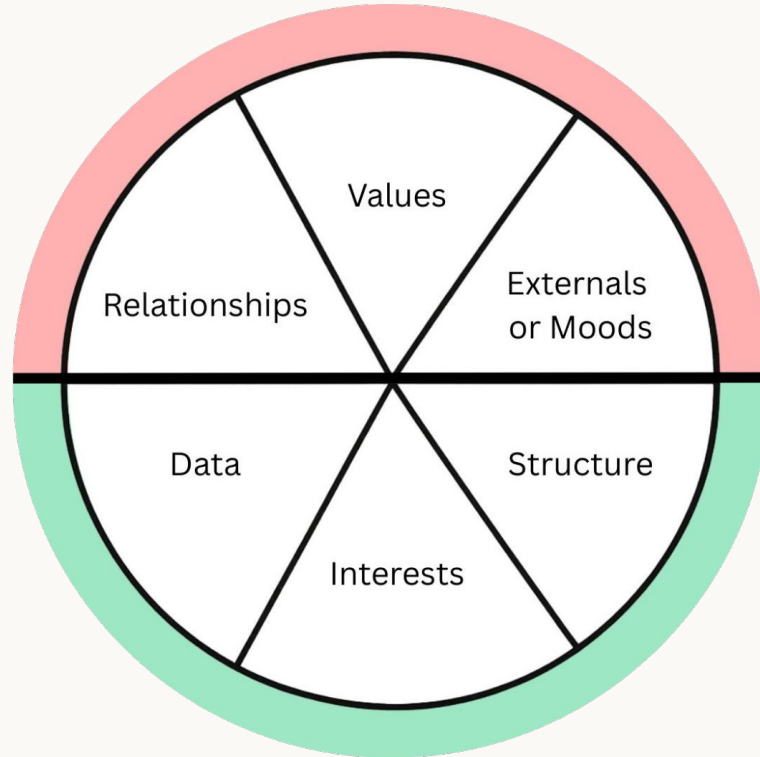


Discussion Debrief^{*}



Practical Tip #1

START
at the
BOTTOM



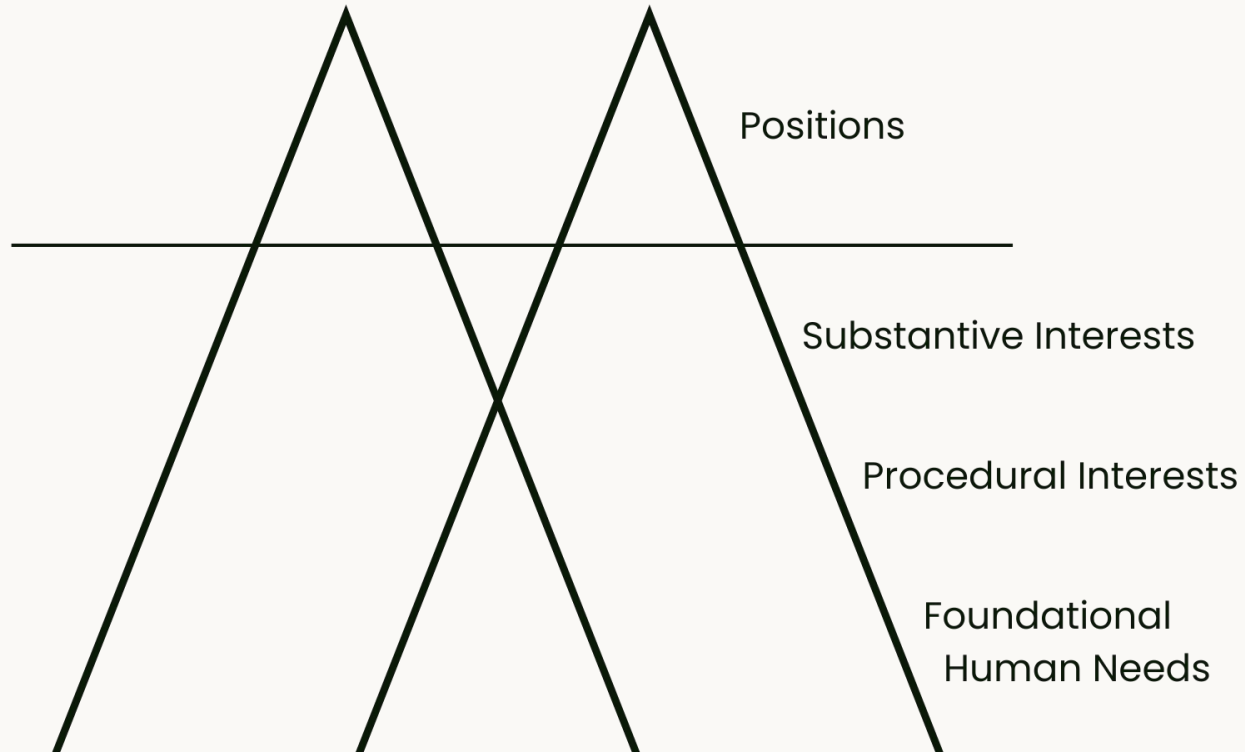
Practical Tip #2

START by LISTENING

Get the info you need
for good decisions

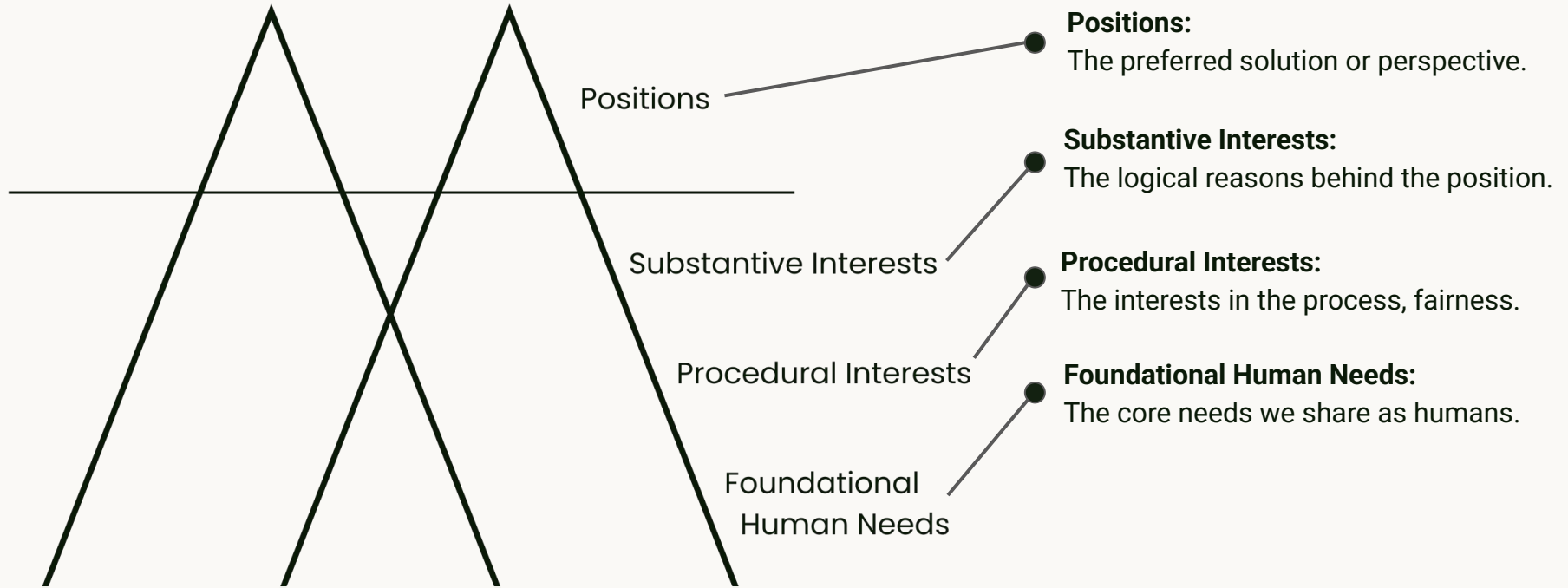
Create the conditions
for collaborative
decision- making

PIN Model *



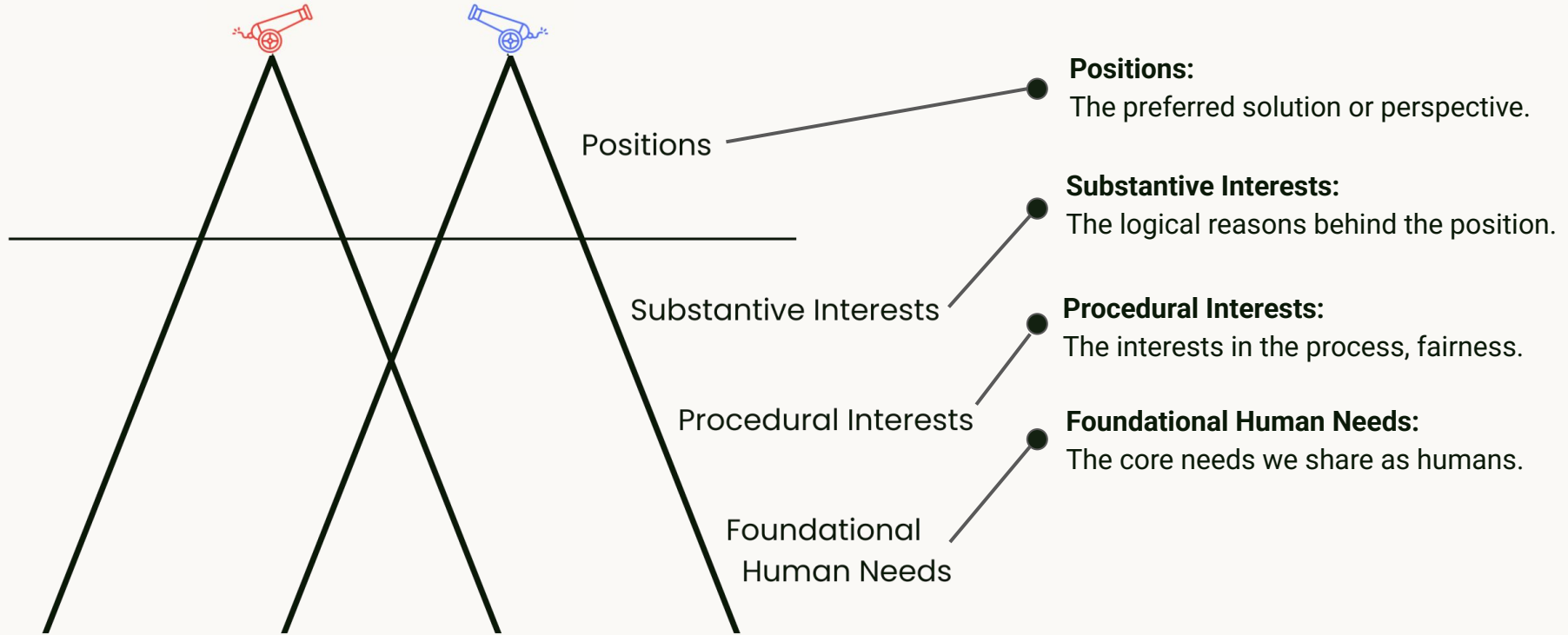
*from Mediation Services, Winnipeg and Credence & Co.

PIN Model *



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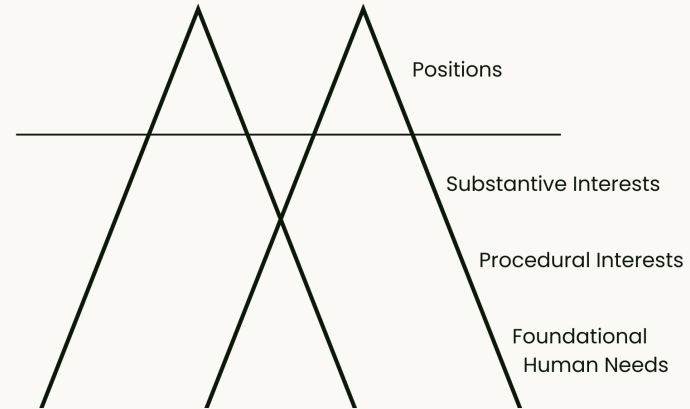
PIN Model *



*from Mediation Services, Winnipeg and Credence & Co.

Discussion - Case Study

1. Read the case study
2. 2-minute reflection
 - What positions are at play?
 - What interests?
 - What needs?
3. Gather in same breakout rooms (3-4)
4. Discuss the Interests and Needs at play. Where are they stuck?
5. Return and debrief



Case Study - The Coalition

The "Stop the Pipe" Coalition is a partnership of six environmental NGOs united to oppose the Northern Tide Pipeline, a project slated to cut through old-growth forests and unceded Indigenous territory. While united in opposition to the pipeline, the coalition has hit a wall trying to agree on its primary strategy moving forward.

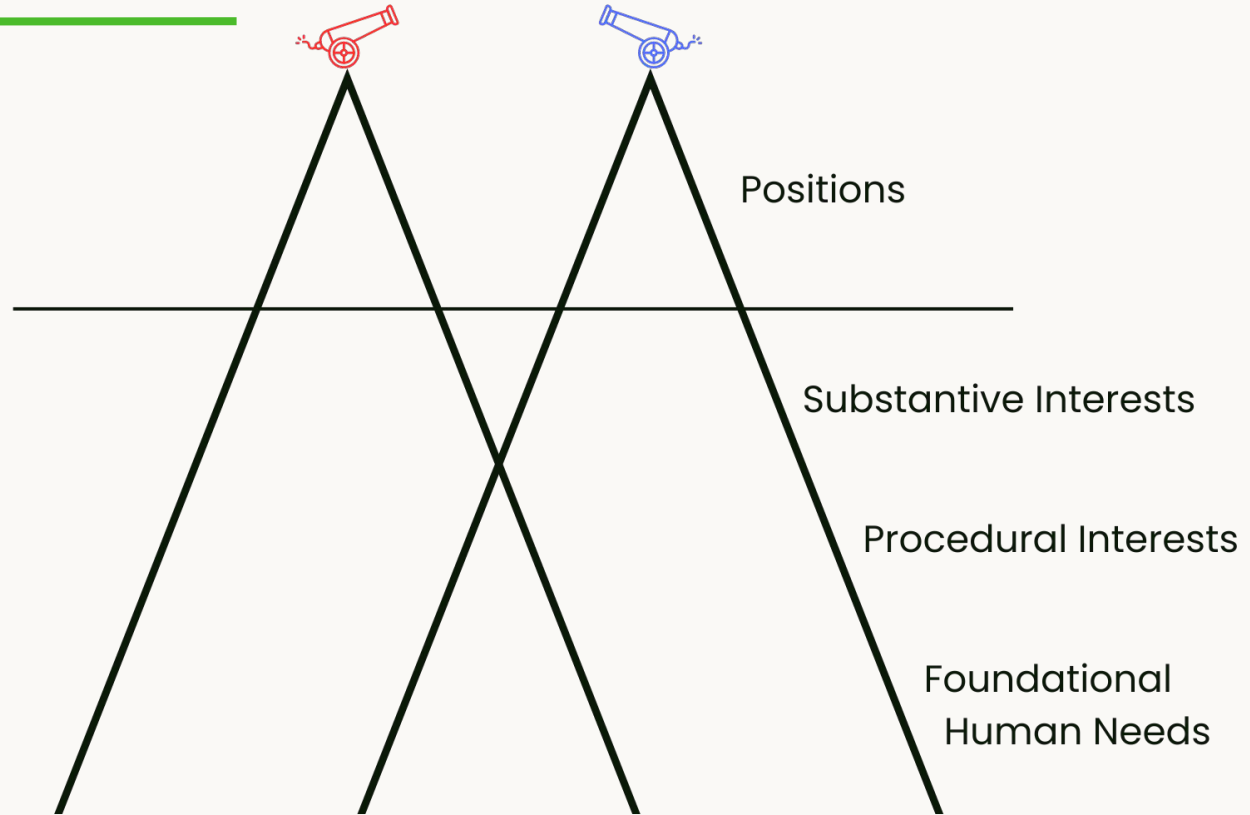
Two voices have emerged as most influential, and most opposed.

Elaine is the campaign director for NatureFirst Legal, an NGO known for litigation and court-based advocacy. She's pushing for an immediate legal injunction, arguing that the most effective path is to *"use the courts to stop this at the source."* Elaine's group has access to experienced environmental lawyers and has already drafted legal filings.

Marcus, on the other hand, leads GreenShift, a grassroots mobilization group. He strongly opposes prioritizing a legal-first approach. *"We've seen this before. Court cases drag on. By the time there's a decision, the land's already been cleared. We need to get people in the streets and onto the land now."* He's organizing a multi-community action and is in close contact with local Indigenous land defenders.

Tension is mounting between the two. Marcus has publicly criticized *"courtroom egos"* in a coalition meeting, while Elaine has dismissed his tactics as *"symbolic gestures that won't hold up against large corporations."* Other coalition members are becoming increasingly disengaged as meetings devolve into repetition and tension.

Discussion Debrief



Practical Tip #3

How do I get them to go down their iceberg?

Step 1: Acknowledge

Step 2: Open-ended questions

(repeat)



Questions?

Getting In Touch

- Web: matt-mckenna.com
- Email: matt@matt-mckenna.com
- Slides and PDF from Paul B.



If you'd like to explore how I can help, let's connect.

Want to learn more?

Here are some resources worth exploring:

- The Conflict Resolution Toolbox - Gary T. Furlong
- BrainFishing - Gary T. Furlong
- The Space Between Us: Conversations About Transforming
Conflict - Betty Pries, PhD *
- Crucial Conversations - Patterson, Granny, McMillan, Switzler
- Supercommunicators - Charles Duhigg