

Developing a Problem-Solving Mindset

Last update: 4/20/2026

Description

In a conflict situation, a problem-solving mindset is critical for addressing issues effectively and moving beyond impasse. But in most conflicts, people use an adversarial mindset, which prevents people from finding the best resolution to the conflict. Mindset is one of the key ingredients – if not the most important – to approaching conflict in a way that leads to productive resolution.

Definition

- A mindset is a belief that orients the way we handle situations – the way we sort out what is going on and what we should do. A problem-solving mindset allows people to find sustainable solutions that meet many needs, especially in complex situations where there is no one right answer.

Problem-solving and adversarial mindsets

Adversarial Mindset	Problem-Solving Mindset
Goal: Win	Goal: Wise outcome
Participants: adversaries	Participants: joint problem solvers
React strongly in the moment	Pause and approach the situation with curiosity
Attack problem <i>and</i> people	Concentrate on the problem
Assume negative intentions	Assume positive intentions
Focus on the position, or the solution I want	Focus on underlying interests, which is the “why” behind someone’s suggested solution
Assume I have all the facts and information	Recognize there are things I don’t know, or can’t see
Assume I am right	Assume I need to learn their story
Come with “the” one and only solution	Be willing to explore options

Reflection questions

The next time you are involved in a conflict, ask yourself:

- In this situation, do I want to win?
- Do I see the other party as an adversary or a problem-solver?

- Am I assuming positive or negative intentions?
- Am I paying attention only to the position the other party says they want or to the *story* underneath their position?

The next time you are helping other people get through a conflict, ask yourself:

- Am I focusing on the problem, not people?
- Am I helping them develop a wise solution rather than figuring out who is “right”?
- Am I asking neutral, open-ended questions that help them learn each other’s stories?
- Am I identifying areas of common ground or common values (even on small points) to break them out of an adversarial mindset?
- Am I using positive language to remind everyone that their perspective matters? For example:
 - “I know that you care about this too.”
 - “This is tough, but I believe in our/your ability to work this out.”
 - “I respect that we/you have different perspectives on this, let’s try to understand each other better.”

If you answered yes to some or most of the questions above, consider trying out the problem-solving mindset behaviors in the table above. See if those changes help you get to resolution or simply have a better conversation.