Conflict can feel like a competition in which you either win or you lose. However, most of the time, there are solutions that will give everyone something they need. A key to managing conflict is to begin by understanding everyone’s interests, needs, and priorities and then think creatively about mutually beneficial solutions.

There is a set of specific skills that will help you unpack the conflict, find common ground, and identify these win-win solutions.

### Unpack the Conflict

**WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?**

1. **Before looking for solutions, define the problem in a way that is mutually acceptable.**
   - Ask questions and share information about how each person sees the problem, the goals, and obstacles to reaching the goals.
     - “What do you see as the real issue?”
     - “What is the goal here?”
     - “What do you think is getting in the way of solving this problem?”

2. **Identify and discuss each person’s interests, needs, desires, and fears.**
   - Ask questions and share information about the key issues and each person’s preferences on each issue.
     - “It sounds like timing is a big issue for you. What would you like the timing to be?”
     - “Cost is an important issue for me. I need to keep it no higher than what we spent last year.”
Unpack the Conflict (Cont.)

3. **Restate and summarize the problem and the issues.**

   “So, we need to come up with one set of recommendations that we both agree on. The biggest obstacle has been that we don’t know what each other’s priorities are. It’s important to you that whatever we recommend fits within the budget for this year and doesn’t require you to ask for more money. I need to get upgraded equipment for the labs. Is that accurate?”

Find Common Ground

Once you have unpacked the conflict to understand the problem and the needs and priorities of everyone involved, look for a solution that maximizes both parties’ interests.

**WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?**

1. **Based on the issues you identified when you unpacked the conflict, think creatively about alternative solutions.**
   a. Find trade-offs that benefit both parties.
      - What do you each have that the other wants?
      - What do you both have that you can trade?
      - What are you each comfortable giving away?
      - Are there issues that are more important to one person than another?
   b. Unbundle issues that can be separated.
   c. Consider “package deals” where you combine multiple issues into one possible solution.
   d. Brainstorm possible solutions and evaluate how acceptable they are to each person and why.

2. **Summarize all of the options you have identified.**

3. **Keep decisions tentative until a final proposal is complete.**

4. **Get commitment to the final agreement (e.g., in writing).**