



## TECHNIQUES TO ADDRESS UNDERLYING INTERESTS AND NEEDS

**THE CONFLICT:** Gina and Matt are seniors at different high schools, but they are going to attend each other's proms as a couple. They are having a dispute over who is responsible for paying for the tickets. Gina says Matt should pay for both because he has more money and she needs to save hers to spend money on two dresses. Matt says Gina should pay for both because he has to pay for two tux rentals and her school's prom tickets cost more money than his school's. Over the past week the dispute has escalated, currently resulting in Matt refusing to discuss the issue, while Gina refuses to discuss anything else until it's resolved.

### Underlying interests and needs involved:

- Sustenance - they don't want to spend more money than they have
- Understanding - different types of communication, they each want their perspectives to be understood
- Autonomy - they want to be able to make their own decisions
- Community - they want to be with one another, as well as their school communities at the dances

### 1. Tackle the Easiest Issue First

**EXPLAIN:** Address the least complicated issue first. Gina and Matt refuse to communicate in ways that work for both of them, leaving the mediation at a standstill. No progress can be made until they agree to participate equally.

**SHOW:** Mediators individually ask Gina and Matt to explain why they aren't communicating equally. Matt says he is tired of arguing about the problem and doesn't think Gina listens to his perspective whenever it comes up. Gina says Matt ignores her attempts to discuss the problem in depth, which makes her feel like he doesn't care that it's important to her. Next, Mediators explain the importance of equal communication and listening during a mediation, then they proceed to develop agreed-upon terms, using both Gina and Matt's input, that they feel will allow them to be heard fairly and equally.

### 2. Derive Strategies to Meet Needs

**EXPLAIN:** Include everyone in a brainstorming session to come up with ways to resolve the conflict and leave with a lasting and satisfying solution. All ideas are equally valid, no matter what. Work together to narrow down ideas to ones that would best meet the underlying needs of everyone involved.

**SHOW:** Mediators facilitate brainstorming of ideas from both Matt and Gina. Matt contributes the ideas that Gina either pays for all the tickets, or at least the tickets for her school. Gina contributes the ideas that Matt pays for all the tickets, or that they split the cost of the tickets and she only buys one dress instead of two.



### 3. Separate the People from the Problem

**EXPLAIN:** Be careful not to perceive the people themselves as the problem. If you feel yourself beginning to see an individual as the problem, remind yourself to think of the unmet needs and interests that caused the problem, rather than the people in the conflict.

**SHOW:** Matt begins to roll his eyes, shake his head, and physically reacts negatively to anything Gina says during the mediation. While he doesn't interject verbally, his body language shows that he disagrees with Gina and is agitated by the situation. A Mediator begins to feel that Matt might be the problem, rather than a conflict over prom tickets. Catching themselves, the Mediator quickly focuses on Matt's needs for understanding and expression that are not being met, which may be contributing to his behavior. The Mediator offers Matt a chance to voice his disagreement with Gina, thereby allowing him to express himself verbally and, in turn, relax physically.

### 4. Take a Forward-looking Approach

**EXPLAIN:** Too often in conflicts, disputants focus on blaming each other for events that occurred in the past. This is unproductive in the search for a resolution. Instead, take a future-oriented approach to help look past the blame and seek workable solutions. One way to do this is by asking "How can we...." questions rather than "Why did you..." questions.

**SHOW:**

**Don't:** WHY Question

"Gina, why did you refuse to pay for all of the tickets?"

"Matt, why did you ignore the issue when Gina tried to bring it up before?"

**Do:** HOW Question

"Gina, how can we develop a fair way to pay for the tickets?"

"Matt, how can we make this a more comfortable conversation for you to be a part of?"



## 5. Separate the Facts from the Feelings

**EXPLAIN:** During conflict, people often perceive their feelings and values should be counted as fact, but since we all perceive reality in different ways, “facts” can become skewed. Feelings can be helpful clues in understanding a person’s underlying interests or needs, but should be separated from the “facts” of the conflict.

**SHOW:** Gina’s eyes begin to water when she expresses concern that Matt doesn’t want to go with her to prom at all. The Mediator asks Matt if he does want to go to prom with Gina. Matt confirms his interest in going to both proms, but states his concern over the cost of tickets. While Gina is expressing valid feelings of insecurity over her need for acceptance that are important to take notice of, the Mediator works to remind and re-establish the fact that Matt does want to be Gina’s date, and the conflict is solely over the cost of the tickets and the needs for autonomy and continuing ability to support oneself, not the interest in attending.