

Donna Hicks



Donna Hicks is an associate at the **Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University**, and the vice president of **Ara Pacis**, a non-governmental organization based in Rome. Hicks has worked extensively on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, conducted dialogues between the United States and Cuba, and been involved in conflict-resolution processes in Colombia, Libya, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Syria, and other conflict zones around the globe. In addition to teaching courses in conflict resolution at Harvard University and other institutions, she conducts trainings and

educational seminars for schools, corporations, churches, and non-governmental organizations. She is the creator of the **Dignity Model**, and the author of **Dignity: It's Essential Role in Resolving Conflict** and **Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture That Brings Out the Best in People**.

Interview by Stephen Abbott

Q: In your first book, you describe how, after a lot of trial and error, you realized that violations of dignity often instigate and perpetuate human conflicts, and that attention to dignity can therefore play an essential role in resolving them. Everywhere you travel, people instinctively recognize the importance of dignity—it's just universally valued. But when you went looking for scholarship on dignity, you were shocked to find that almost no research existed on the topic, and when you ask people to define the concept, nearly everyone struggles to describe it. Can you tell us how you came to specialize in dignity? And how can something that seems so fundamental to the human experience be so profoundly undervalued and neglected?

That's the big question: How did this happen?

When I was a graduate student in psychology, I was interested in two things: the psychological dimension of international conflict and what made the human species so vulnerable to violence and conflict. I wanted to know what it was about the human condition that actually paved the way to conflict. Take a look anywhere in the world, wherever humans organize into groups, and you will find conflict. I was just deeply concerned about the issue, and I wanted to know more. I wanted to know why we choose violence and aggression to solve our problems over more sophisticated and peaceful methods. We certainly have the brainpower to do better than we're doing.

Leading *with* Dignity

HOW TO CREATE A CULTURE THAT
BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN PEOPLE

Donna Hicks, Ph.D.

AUTHOR OF *DIGNITY*

In *Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture that Brings Out the Best in People*, Donna Hicks explores the essential—but under-recognized—role that dignity plays in organizational leadership, conflict resolution, and group decision-making.

At Harvard University, there was a professor, [**Herbert Kelman**](#), who was working on conflicts in the Middle East. After I finished my PhD, I decided to get some practical experience resolving conflicts at the international level. Kelman invited me to be a postdoctoral fellow with him, and I followed him around for two years. At the time, several graduate students and postdocs were working with him, and we all had an opportunity to do facilitation work. We sat down with Israelis and Palestinians, both in the Middle East and at Harvard, and we had just this incredible opportunity to actually do the work—to engage in it as a practice—not just study the theory.

After the fellowship, Kelman hired me to become the director of his program. While I continued to work

with him in the Middle East, I also started my own projects in Sri Lanka and Columbia, and I worked in Cambodia for a while. One project led to the next, and I was soon bouncing all over the world working on conflict resolution and trying to bring parties together to facilitate dialogue. That's when I realized we were all focusing on how to resolve these issues politically, but we were largely ignoring the underlying issues that were keeping these conflicts alive—the assaults to people's humanity, and the anger and resentment they felt about being treated so badly.

Today, dignity work is now all I do. And not just in international conflicts—I also work in the corporate world, in the healthcare industry, and with organizations of all kinds, including schools. I have more work than I can handle at this point because dignity concerns are everywhere—it's something that touches a nerve with people. It's a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human, but it's one that has been profoundly neglected, as you pointed out. What my work does is give people the language they need to talk about dignity, and some ways of thinking about it and working with it.

So why has dignity been so profoundly undervalued and neglected?

One part of the answer is that we don't learn about dignity in our primary education—it's just not there—and when I started looking into the scholarship, it wasn't there either. As scholars and educators, we've simply not addressed many of the deep social and emotional issues that are fundamental to our species. It's only been fairly recently, and only in certain fields, that we've started to look at many of these deeper issues. Unfortunately, I think the consequences of our negligence have been profound, and we'll have to see what happens as the conversation continues.

When I looked into the literature on dignity, I found that many philosophers and theologians did a wonderful job trying to define the concept, but it wasn't focused on practical application. They talked about dignity in various ways, but not about how we could use the concept to address the root causes driving disputes all over the world. That was how I got into it. I wanted to know, as a conflict-resolution specialist, how I could unveil and expose these dignity concerns that appeared to be motivating every one of the conflicts I was working on.

In the conflict-resolution field, we focus so much on political issues that we overlook the fact that beneath all of the politics, deep underneath, these conflicts are seething with dignity assaults. And it's

really these assaults that are keeping the conflicts alive.

“I was seeing emotional upheavals everywhere—they were there in every facilitation I did and every negotiation I was trying to mediate. At that point, I realized we needed to address the underlying concerns if we were going to make any headway in resolving the conflicts. That’s why I started looking into it: I needed practical answers to all these questions that were being raised about dignity. It just became so clear to me that what was happening below the surface was actually controlling all these peace processes.”

I only realized the importance of dignity when I noticed an underlying concern with how people were being treated. I was seeing emotional upheavals everywhere—they were there in every facilitation I did and every negotiation I was trying to mediate. At that point, I realized we needed to address the underlying concerns if we were going to make any headway in resolving the conflicts.

That’s why I started looking into it: I needed practical answers to all these questions that were being raised about dignity. It just became so clear to me that what was happening below the surface was actually controlling all these peace processes. That was my big question: Why hasn’t this issue been addressed?

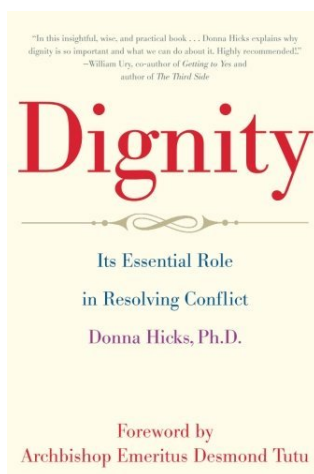
Yet when I starting trying to talk to people about the emotional reactions I was observing, they were *not* having it. For example, they *hated* the word “emotion.” They said, “This is not about emotions; this is about politics.” I realized that people didn’t want to talk about their emotions, and they also didn’t want to talk about being “traumatized”—that was another word they hated. It was only when I tried using the word “dignity,” and I started talking about assaults to their dignity, that people began to open up about the anger and resentment they felt.

When I asked people to discuss a time when they felt their dignity had been assaulted, I not only found that people were very willing to talk about their feelings and experiences, but I didn’t get any pushback whatsoever. In fact, I found that people *wanted* to talk about it.

I discovered that there was something about the word that provided a sense of legitimacy and validation. It wasn’t a humiliating word; it was a word that made people able to say, “Yes, of course. My dignity was

violated. That's why I'm so upset." It got the conversation started when nothing else I tried worked—and that was my big a-ha moment.

But once I figured out the word, I had to figure out how to put it into practice. It took me ten years to figure it out and write my two books. It wasn't easy.



Read the Organizing Engagement [introduction to Donna Hicks's Dignity Model](#), which describes the ten essential elements of dignity →

Q: In the education field, there's a tendency to favor technical solutions to problems—such as implementing a new policy, curriculum model, or teaching practice, for example—over relational or social-emotional solutions like getting everyone in a room to discuss their frustrations, work out their differences, and build a plan based on shared goals and values. It seems like a similar bias exists in the field of conflict resolution. Why do you think that people are so attached to technical or political solutions, but so skeptical or dismissive of solutions that deal more directly with human emotions?

I think they're skeptical and dismissive because they simply don't know how to handle human emotions. It's certainly true in the conflict-resolution field. Very few mediators or negotiators are trained in the psychological dimensions of conflict. I don't know if you studied psychology at all, but there was a movement that started back in the 1930s called **behaviorism**, which promoted, among other things, the idea that anything that's not measurable is not worth studying. And because you can't see emotions, and you can't easily objectify them and measure them, many fields decided they were just going to ignore them.

Among academics anyway, I can tell you that idea was one of the contributing reasons—that if we can't analyze it, then it's not worth studying. As crazy as that sounds now, it was the prevailing wisdom for a long time. It wasn't until, I don't know, the last few decades, that people recognized how fundamental emotions are to the human condition and to our understanding of it.



Donna Hicks delivering a talk a TEDxStormont in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 2013. Over the past decade, Hicks has traveled the world doing presentations and workshops on dignity for political leaders, business executives, educators, and public audiences. Photo: Kelvin Boyes of Press Eye.

With the advent of neuroscience, for example, we can now see the physical effects that different social interactions and conflicts have on our brains. We now have hard evidence that our nervous systems and brains react in very profound ways to dignity assaults and conflicts. It's not

something we can ignore anymore—the science is there for us to see.

Another reason is that it's so much easier—or at least *seems* so much easier—to focus on the technical aspects of a problem: developing a new policy, buying a new computer program, whatever it is. Human emotions are messy, and human interactions, especially when people are in conflict, are not only messy, but they also can be threatening and dangerous. People are afraid—that's another part of the explanation.

While all these problems linger to this day, I think we're getting much more insightful about the consequences we'll have to pay if we continue to neglect the role of emotion in human conflict. That's certainly my message.

In my conflict-resolution practice, I now approach each new project as an educational enterprise. I start by introducing the idea of dignity and sharing all my research on why conflicts are so difficult to resolve and how dignity assaults prime us for conflict. I say to them, "Now, you're going to put aside your identity as Party X and Party Y, and we're all going to become students of dignity here. I'm going to share with you everything I've learned."

By the time we're finished, and sometimes it takes two or even three days to get through all that material, there are no surprises left. Once they get to that point, they realize, "Oh I see it now. I see the role that dignity was playing and I see why we need to go deeper or go in a different direction."

Every group or organization, though, has its own biases and preferred technical fixes. Let's take an example from education like bullying. When I was working with a private school, I remember saying to the headmaster, "Look, if you just target the bully and the bullied, nothing is going to shift in the culture or the system here. If you really want change to happen, you have to provide education and training to every single student, teacher, staff member, and administrator. What you need is everyone to understand why it's not okay to treat someone badly, and everyone needs to understand what it means to have their dignity violated."

In this case, I think that moment was a big eye-opener for the headmaster. He thought he was doing the right thing, but his approach was technical, reactive, and overly focused on those directly involved in the incidents. I explained to him that system-wide dysfunction was creating the school's bullying problems—it was the consequences of kids not knowing how to behave toward one another, not being aware of the harm caused by dignity violations, not understanding underlying reactions, and not being educated about this fundamental aspect of our shared humanity.

Once he and the other administrators started to see and understand those complex dynamics, and once the teachers started developing a dignity curriculum, it was only then that the culture shift began to take hold.

Q: I want to return to something you mentioned earlier. You found that talking about violations to our dignity—rather than, say, “emotional trauma” or similar framing—makes people far more open to discussing the underlying pain and suffering that’s so often driving human conflict. Why do the words we use matter so much in conflict situations?

I touched on this already, but I think that there’s a real stigma associated with human emotions and psychology, particularly with the idea that someone might be emotionally unbalanced or traumatized or have mental health problems. Even though there’s been a movement to de-stigmatize mental health issues, we have a long history of negative labels and associations that need to be overcome.

One reason we should be more attentive to the language is that some words are just not uplifting or empowering. That’s what I realized about dignity—the word has so much resonance because it’s an empowering concept. The term allows people to say, “Yeah, the reason why I’m feeling and reacting this way is because someone harmed my dignity. It’s not because I have a mental problem or because I’ve been traumatized; it’s because my dignity has been assaulted.”

Once people in conflict latch onto that notion, they can stand up straighter. As I said earlier, they feel validated. There’s magic in that word—and not only when it’s used in conflict zones, but everywhere I’ve worked. Once people realize, “Yeah, this is why I’m feeling so bad. There’s nothing wrong with me; something wrong *happened to me*. I had my dignity assaulted, and that’s why I feel the way I do.” The concept is so effective in helping people get through difficult moments because

they recognize *they're having a normal reaction to an abnormal experience*. They are not the problem—the situation is the problem.

“I’ve been in so many long, drawn-out sessions in which people are not getting to the core of the problem. They are not connecting the cause of their suffering to the problems they’re discussing or arguing about. But the minute you can get them reconnected to their inherent value and worth as human beings, that’s when the healing process starts.

When I frame the problem in terms of dignity, it introduces a healing component. I’ve been in so many long, drawn-out sessions in which people are not getting to the core of the problem. They are not connecting the cause of their suffering to the problems they’re discussing or arguing about.

But the minute you can get them reconnected to their inherent value and worth as human beings, that’s when the healing process starts. The suffering takes place in the disconnection from their fundamental humanity. Once we let go of our inherent value and worth, once we no longer think we have it or we think someone has taken our dignity from us, that’s when we start suffering. So when somebody comes along and says, “Wait a minute, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’ve just experienced some really humiliating and shameful interactions with other people, and that’s why you’re feeling bad,” that’s when the shift starts to happen. That’s when people regain a sense of their own power.

Dignity is power, in my mind—and it’s the best kind of power. It’s the power that comes from within and empowers people; it’s not the kind of power that disempowers people from the outside, which is the kind of power that so often produces conflict. While dignity violations disempower people, a reconnection to dignity empowers them.

Q: You already touched on this issue as well, but it’s so central to your work that I feel we should unpack it a bit. In brief, researchers have discovered that the pain centers in our brain interpret physical and emotional trauma in similar ways—that, from a cognitive standpoint, the experience of emotional pain is almost indistinguishable from the experience of physical pain—and that dignity violations can consequently become deeply encoded in our neural circuitry. Yet because our brains are highly adaptable and resilient,

you look at these findings positively: it means that new experiences and human connections can help us overcome dignity violations and the conflicts they cause. Can you explain this cognitive process and its implications in more detail?

One of the most important things to point out is that *the cognitive process comes after the emotional process*. Our cognitive processes interpret what's going on, what's being experienced or felt. The really stunning neuroscientific research you just alluded to has shown that when people experience a physical injury, it shows up in the ancient brain center—the part of our brains that evolved very early. It's also where we experience all kinds of deep emotions, such as fear, hatred, joy, and even love.

If someone breaks her arm, we'd never say, "That doesn't hurt" or "That didn't happen." We never dismiss the experience and the fact of physical pain. The astonishing part of this research was the finding that when people experience violations to their dignity, they activate the same area of the brain that activates when people experience a physical injury. Physical pain and emotional pain share a common neural pathway, and the brain basically doesn't know the difference between a wound to our physical selves and a wound to our dignity.

When I came across this research, it was the turning point for me as a scholar and practitioner. At that time, I had collected so many anecdotal stories and observations on the effects of dignity violations, but I didn't have the hard evidence I needed. The first wave of research was done in the early 2000s, but since then the research has been replicated over and over. For the neuroscientists who study emotions, it's more or less common knowledge now. The research is pretty clear. What's still not clear, though, are all the many implications of this research.

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Ken Robinson said something really interesting in one of his books. I believe it was in **Creative Schools**. He said, effectively, "You know, we human beings live in two worlds. We live in a world that's permanent, that's out there—our physical world—which is going to be there whether we exist or not. The other world is our internal world. We have a whole inner reality filled with inner dialogues. We

have assessments of who we are, how good we are, how bad we are. All this internal dialogue has basically been neglected by our schools and by our educational systems.”

Then he says, “It’s now time to focus as much energy and attention on the inner worlds of our children and students as we do on the outer worlds, such as learning mathematics, science, history, literature, all of those wonderful subjects. Now it’s time to go deep into this other world—our inner world.”

I couldn’t agree with him more. I personally think dignity education should be at the forefront of our educational programs. Our kids need to know and understand what’s going on inside them, and how to manage or react to those thoughts and emotions. When kids don’t know anything about dignity, we’re basically letting them walk around experiencing a lot of unnecessary suffering. At every developmental stage, kids experience wounds to their dignity, and those wounds can have a deeper and more lasting negative impact.

In my view, that’s perhaps the most unfortunate consequence of our collective neglect of dignity—how it adversely affects our young people. We can and should start with young kids. I’ve worked with educators who are now teaching dignity from kindergarten all the way through elementary school. These young children are fully capable; they may not cognitively understand exactly what’s going on, but emotionally they know exactly what it feels like when somebody mistreats them. They just don’t have words to describe it.

But the really crazy thing is that I work with a lot of graduate students, and they are equally as ignorant of the concept as any child out there in the world. And it’s because we haven’t exposed them to the concept and our education systems never taught them about their own dignity.

Q: Let’s talk a little more about dignity in education. In my experience, a lot of the frustration, resentment, and anger I’ve encountered in schools and communities can be traced back to dignity volitions—students and families just feeling like they’ve been ignored, left out, judged, patronized, lied to, mistreated. I know you’ve done a lot of work not just with schools, but also with the restorative-justice community over the years. How would you like to see your work—and the Dignity Model specifically—being used in schools or in, say, a community dialogue or reconciliation process? What are some of the practical applications?

One thing I've been doing is Dignity 101 seminars with teachers and administrators. When I go into a school, I don't work directly with the students and I don't develop curriculum—I'm not a curriculum expert. The teachers I work with are the curriculum experts, so I just give them the content they can use.

I remember this one little boy in Fort Worth, Texas, who was maybe eight years old. He was a third-grader and very withdrawn. He felt like he was on the margins all the time, and he just wasn't connecting with other kids.

The teacher I was working with at the time did an entire semester on dignity and trained her kids to become dignity agents and dignity leaders. When this eight-year-old started learning about his own inherent value and worth, this withdrawn little boy—who was so quiet that the teacher could hardly get him to speak in the past—he came alive. He became the biggest advocate of dignity, and he won the class prize for the best dignity leader. He started connecting with other kids, and everyone in the class became friends with him. It was just astonishing the transformation she observed in this one young child.

I'm relating this story because I want educators to know that there's a way to teach even our youngest children about dignity, and I'm already working with people who have taken some of my ideas and developed them into an effective curriculum. For example, I worked with another wonderful educator at the Berkeley Carroll School, a private school in Brooklyn, New York, who has developed the most sophisticated dignity program for middle-school kids that I've seen. It's just amazing to see the transformation that happens when you give these young students the language, concepts, and support they need to address the inevitable social problems they'll encounter.

“We're going to get into conflict with one another. It's inevitable. The question, then, is how can we resolve our conflicts in ways that allow people to maintain their dignity? And, more importantly, how can we get out in front of the problem and prevent these dignity violations from happening in the first place?”

There's another thing I want to emphasize: we're going to get into conflict with one another. It's inevitable. The question, then, is how can we resolve our conflicts in ways that allow people to

maintain their dignity? And, more importantly, how can we get out in front of the problem and prevent these dignity violations from happening in the first place?

I've already seen so much evidence that once students really grasp the concept, once they understand their own dignity and recognize the dignity of others, the transformation happens almost overnight. These young students start out questioning everything: "What am I capable of? Why is this happening? Why do I feel so bad?" Then everything changes: "You mean, I can really do this? I have inherent value and worth? I don't have to work hard to be valued and worthy?"

If we are not giving our kids the emotional scaffolding they need to get by in the world, to not be so devastated or lash out if someone treats them poorly, if they don't understand what's going on inside them, or how to resolve conflicts and move on, if they feel disconnected from their inherent value and self-worth...then what are we doing? Why are we not teaching them the knowledge that matters most?

That's why I would like to see dignity being taught in every public school in the country. I would like to see our public-education system take this on and develop it. Dignity is our social bedrock—it's just so fundamental to who we are as humans.

But we are only addressing part of the problem if it's only our young people who understand dignity. If the teachers and administrators, the people in positions of authority or those making all the policy decisions, if they don't understand how dignity operates, then we're putting the cart before the horse.

If the adults in a school are not modeling and practicing the [principles of dignity](#), it's never going to become part of the culture. In fact, the dysfunctional aspects of human social dynamics are going to take over, which is what we see happening now. If the people at the top of the hierarchy in an organization or institution—whether it's in education or healthcare—are mistreating others or creating policies that are degrading, humiliating, or dehumanizing to the people who work there or the people they serve, we're never going to get anywhere.

I should also emphasize that because we have ignored this issue of dignity for so long, and because our ignorance about it is so pervasive, the implicit norms in an organizational culture often promote the exact kinds of behavior we don't want. When I say "implicit norms," I mean all of the unconscious behaviors that we engage in, particularly those unconscious behaviors that have a negative impact on

others. We need to make these implicit norms explicit and clearly understood. We need people to know that it's not okay to get into an argument with a colleague and make her feel "less than."

Everybody understands this intuitively because nobody wants to be mistreated. It's the great irony of dignity work: no one wants to be mistreated, and yet we need to be taught that it's not okay to mistreat others. In schools, we need to start the education process with the educators first, before we can expect students to understand it or practice it. The students are watching everything their teachers do—kids are highly perceptive. If they see teachers mistreating each other or mistreating other students, how can we expect our young people to pay attention or listen or take seriously anything we might be talking about when it comes to appropriate or productive social behavior?

The whole system needs to be a dignity-honoring culture.

I'll give you one example.

Over the years, I've done sessions introducing the Dignity Model to people in the restorative-justice community. They just love it. They feel like it's been a missing piece, something they hadn't incorporated into their methods and practice. It's one thing to facilitate a restorative-justice circle that gets people talking about their conflicts, but if the people in that circle don't understand the root causes of the conflict, if people don't understand they are feeling violations to their dignity—that they're feeling humiliated, angry, or resentful for specific and justifiable reasons—it will be so much harder for both sides to recognize what happened, why it happened, or stop it from happening again in the future, and it will also be much harder to take responsibility, let go, and move on, even if you have a face-to-face process.

In my view, you need to have a way—a language—that helps people understand and talk about dignity violations. There's a professor—[Anna High](#) at the University of Otago in New Zealand—who wrote [**an article on restorative-justice programs in schools**](#), and her basic argument is that dignity education is missing piece. Apparently, she's had some success integrating the Dignity Model into the restorative-justice process.

I think that we're just in the beginning stages of figuring out how dignity education can be applied in all kinds of fields. I think we'll figure it out, but it's going to require some patience to get these processes right. I can tell you, though, that, without training, even people with the best intentions, if they don't know what they're doing, can sometimes do more harm than good. Dignity work isn't easy.

“I go around the world talking about dignity, and I’ve seen the profound resonance it has with people. Everywhere I go, people respond the same way. **The desire to be treated with dignity is universal—it’s our highest common denominator as human beings.** We just need more awareness, and we need to educate more people. That’s why I strongly believe that we, in the educational community, have to step up and make sure we’re doing our part.”

But the important thing is that we’re opening a door that has been closed for a long time. As you rightly pointed out at the beginning of our conversation, our neglect of dignity has produced a lot of conflict and suffering as a consequence.

I think we’re going to experience a big shift in the not-so-distant future. I really do. I go around the world talking about dignity, and I’ve seen the profound resonance it has with people. Everywhere I go, people respond the same way. The desire to be treated with dignity is universal—it’s our highest common denominator as human beings.

We just need more awareness, and we need to educate more people. That’s why I strongly believe that we, in the educational community, have to step up and make sure we’re doing our part.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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