

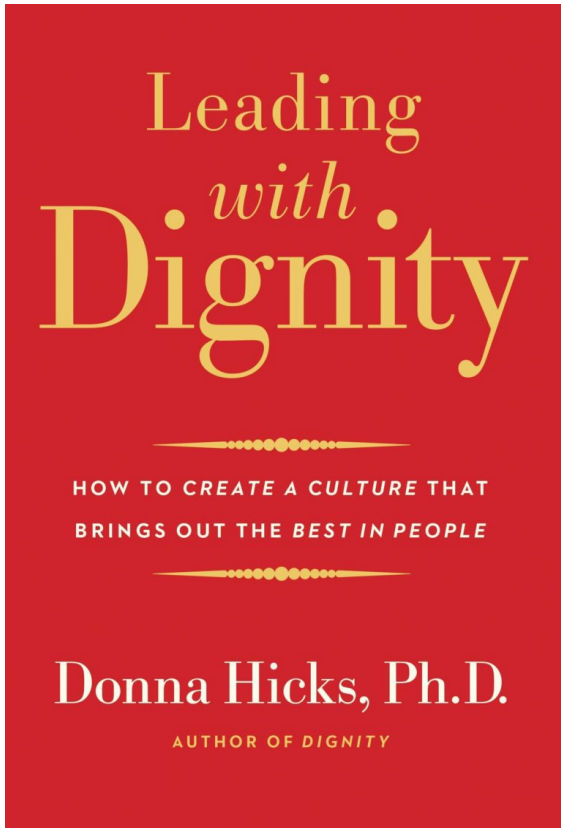
Dignity Model

✘ Donna Hicks's Dignity Model describes ten essential elements of dignity and provides a framework for understanding how attention to dignity can help to strengthen relationships, resolve conflicts, and make organizations more successful

The Dignity Model was created by **Donna Hicks**, a conflict-resolution researcher, professor, consultant, and international advisor who has facilitated dialogues between communities in conflict for nearly three decades. After witnessing seemingly intractable conflicts play out across the globe, Hicks realized that experiences of dignity and indignity were at the heart of many international disputes and dysfunctional organizational cultures. Hicks **has defined dignity** as “the glue that holds all of our relationships together” and “the mutual recognition of the desire to be seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly; to be recognized, understood, and to feel safe in the world.”

“Our universal yearning for dignity drives our species and defines us as human beings. It’s our highest common denominator, yet we know so little about it. It’s hard for people to articulate exactly what it is. What they do know is more like an intuition or sixth sense. ‘Yes, dignity is important,’ people tell me, but they come up short when I ask them to put their intuition into words. What people usually say is that dignity is respect. I get that response every time I ask an audience. But dignity is not the same as respect. Dignity, I argue, is an attribute that we are born with—it is our inherent value and self-worth.... Respect is different. Although everyone has dignity, not everyone deserves respect. Respect must be earned.... Dignity is something we all deserve no matter what we do. It is the starting point for the way we treat one another. To clear up any confusion, I think it is imperative to respect each other’s dignity.”

Donna Hicks, Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture that Brings Out the Best in People



In *Leading with Dignity*, Donna Hicks describes three components dignity-driven leadership: what one must *know* to honor dignity and avoid violating it; what one must *do* to lead with dignity; and how one can *create* a culture of dignity in organizations.

Hicks describes the Dignity Model in her two books: ***Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Conflict Resolution*** and ***Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture That Brings Out the Best in People***.

As she writes in *Dignity*, Hicks developed the model to “help people understand the role that dignity plays in their lives and relationships. It is my response to what I have observed to be the missing link in our understanding of conflict: our failure to recognize how vulnerable humans are to being treated as if they didn’t matter. It explains why it hurts when our dignity is violated, and it gives us the knowledge, awareness, and skills to avoid unknowingly harming others. It demonstrates how to rebuild a relationship that has broken under the weight of conflict and suggests what to do to reconcile. The model is my response to the elephant that is always in the room when relationships break down. It names the elephant: ‘dignity violater.’”

In organizing, engagement, and equity work, attention to feelings and experiences of dignity can play

an instrumental role in building relationships based on trust and mutual understanding, or in resolving conflicts and opening up productive dialogue. Introducing practices that affirm dignity, and taking active steps to redress past violations of dignity, are especially important in communities where youth, families, and community members have suffered from long histories of disinvestment or disenfranchisement, for example, or in which community members may harbor resentment, distrust, or anger stemming from factors such as social injustice, structural discrimination, institutional neglect, political powerlessness, economic exploitation, legal-system abuses, community violence, prolonged impoverishment, or psychological trauma.

For a more detailed discussion of the role that dignity may play in education organizing, engagement, and equity, see the [Dignity Principle](#) →

The Dignity Model

The Dignity Model provides a framework for understanding how the experience of dignity can help strengthen relationships, resolve conflicts, or make organizations more successful, and how violations of dignity inevitably damage relationships, incite conflicts, or undermine organizational cultures.

As Hicks writes in *Leading with Dignity*, “The emotional volatility associated with having our dignity honored or violated cannot be overstated. When people feel that their value and worth are recognized in relationships, they experience a sense of well-being that enables them to grow and flourish. If, in contrast, their dignity is routinely injured, relationships are experienced as a source of pain and suffering.... Why is this knowledge important for leadership? *If we are going to lead people, we better understand them.*”

In her work, Hicks also discusses the need for dignity strategies to be embedded in the day-to-day functioning of systems and institutions. “What I learned,” Hicks writes, “was that it wasn’t enough to introduce the basic building blocks of the model to the specific people who were experiencing the conflict and expect that everything would be fine. I learned that without a *systemwide* understanding of dignity and the role that it plays in our lives and relationships—without everyone in the organization on board—dysfunctional aspects of the broader culture would influence the target groups with which I was working.”

In other words, violations of dignity do not just occur at the level of relationships; they can be perpetuated and amplified by the cultures of organizations, communities, and societies.

Ten Essential Elements of Dignity

The Dignity Model consists of *Ten Essential Elements of Dignity* and *Ten Temptations to Violate Dignity*, which have been reproduced here in full with permission from Donna Hicks.

1. Acceptance of Identity

Approach people as being neither inferior nor superior to you; give others the freedom to express their authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged; interact without prejudice or bias, accepting that characteristics such as race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and disability are at the core of their identities.

2. Recognition

Validate others for their talents, hard work, thoughtfulness, and help; be generous with praise; give credit to others for their contributions, ideas, and experiences.

3. Acknowledgment

Give people your full attention by listening, hearing, validating, and responding to their concerns and what they have been through.

4. Inclusion

Make others feel that they belong, at all levels of relationship (family, community, organization, and nation).

5. Safety

Put people at ease at two levels: physically, so they feel free from the possibility of bodily harm, and psychologically, so they feel free from concern about being shamed or humiliated and free to speak without fear of retribution.

6. Fairness

Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way according to agreed-on laws and rules.

7. Independence

Encourage people to act on their own behalf so that they feel in control of their lives and experience a sense of hope and possibility.

8. Understanding

Believe that what others think matters; give them the chance to explain their perspectives and express their points of view; actively listen in order to understand them.

9. Benefit of the Doubt

Treat people as if they are trustworthy; start with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity.

10. Accountability

Take responsibility for your actions; apologize if you have violated another person's dignity; make a commitment to change hurtful behaviors

Ten Temptations to Violate Dignity

1. Taking the Bait

Don't take the bait. Don't let the bad behavior of others determine your own. Restraint is the better part of dignity. Don't justify getting even. Do not do unto others as they do unto you if it will cause harm.

2. Saving Face

Don't succumb to the temptation to save face. Don't lie, cover-up, or deceive yourself. Tell the truth about what you have done.

3. Shirking Responsibility

Don't shirk responsibility when you have violated the dignity of others. Admit it when you make a mistake, and apologize if you hurt someone.

4. Seeking False Dignity

Beware of the desire for external recognition in the form of approval and praise. If we depend on others alone for the validation of our worth, we are seeking false dignity. Authentic dignity resides within us. Don't be lured by false dignity.

5. Seeking False Security

Don't let your need for connection and relationship compromise your own dignity. If we remain in a relationship in which our dignity is routinely violated, our desire for connection has outweighed our need to maintain our own dignity. Resist the temptation to settle for false security.

6. Avoiding Conflict

Stand up for yourself. Don't avoid confrontation when your dignity is violated. Take action. A violation is a signal that something in a relationship needs to change.

7. Being the Victim

Don't assume that you are the innocent victim in a troubled relationship. Open yourself to the idea that you might be contributing to the problem. We need to look at ourselves as others see us.

8. Resisting Feedback

Don't resist feedback from others. We often don't know what we don't know. We all have blind spots; we all unconsciously behave in undignified ways. We need to overcome our protective instincts and accept constructive criticism. Feedback gives us an opportunity to grow.

9. Blaming and Shaming Others to Deflect Your Own Guilt

Don't blame and shame others to deflect your own guilt. Control the urge to defend yourself by making others look bad.

10. Engaging in False Intimacy and Demeaning Gossip

Beware of the tendency to connect by gossiping about others in a demeaning way. Being critical and judgmental of others when they are not present is harmful and undignified. If you want to create intimacy with another, speak the truth about yourself, about what is happening in your inner world, and invite the person to do the same.

EDITORIAL NOTE: The original version of the Dignity Model is described in Donna Hicks's first book, *Dignity* (2011); the updated version above appears in *Leading with Dignity* (2018).

Acknowledgments

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