

Dignity



Affirming, valuing, and honoring the intrinsic worth of every human being

Dignity Defined

The principle of dignity in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to the intrinsic value and worth of every human being, and to words, actions, or conditions that either affirm human dignity or violate it. In schools, workplaces, and communities, dignity can be affirmed when the value of a person is recognized, validated, and honored, for example, or it can be violated when people experience indignities that undermine feelings of self-worth, when they feel patronized or stereotyped, when their identity or culture is denigrated, or when they live or work in conditions that are humiliating, degrading, or dehumanizing.

EDITORIAL NOTE

This introduction to the role of dignity in education organizing and engagement is based on the work of **Donna Hicks**, a conflict-resolution researcher, professor, and consultant who has facilitated dialogues between communities in conflict across the globe for nearly three decades. Hicks developed the **Dignity Model**, which describes Ten Essential Elements of Dignity. The exemplar strategies below are aligned with the Ten Essential Elements, and Donna Hicks contributed to the development of this resource.

In organizing, engagement, and equity work, attention to feelings of dignity or indignity can play an instrumental role in resolving conflicts, opening up productive dialogue, and building relationships that are based on trust and mutual understanding. Introducing practices that affirm dignity, and taking active steps to redress past violations of dignity, are especially important in communities where students and families have suffered from long histories of disinvestment or disenfranchisement, for example, and 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.

In fact, organizing, engagement, and equity work are often explicitly focused on reestablishing the experience of dignity for students, families, and community members who have suffered through experiences and conditions that were humiliating, degrading, or disempowering.

While dignity can be affirmed or undermined in interactions among individuals and groups, the

experience of dignity also results from the structure and functioning of societies, systems, communities, and institutions. A few illustrative examples:

- **Social Dignity:** Feelings of dignity or indignity can be influenced by positive or negative social interactions, approving or disapproving cultural conventions, and experiences related to community inclusion or exclusion, respect or disrespect, or cultural acceptance or discrimination.
- **Economic Dignity:** Feelings of dignity or indignity can be influenced by the experience of wealth or poverty, employment or unemployment, prejudice or privileges based on socioeconomic status, and the ability or inability to purchase basic life necessities.
- **Legal Dignity:** Feelings of dignity or indignity can be influenced by just or unjust laws, the granting or denial of citizenship, the existence or absence of legal protections, and fair or unfair treatment by police officers and criminal justice systems.
- **Political Dignity:** Feelings of dignity or indignity can be influenced by political empowerment or powerlessness, the ability or inability to vote, legislative representation or disenfranchisement, and political rhetoric that either affirms or attacks one's identity, culture, or values.

Dignity may also be defined in terms of its absence—or the treatment and experiences that lead to feelings of indignity. For example, experiences with dismissiveness, minimization, humiliation, shame, powerlessness, disrespect, denigration, mistreatment, abuse, dehumanization, defenselessness, or insecurity can all undermine a sense of dignity and self-worth in individuals and groups.

The following examples will help to illustrate just a few ways that dignity may be undermined or violated in educational settings:

- Students attending chronically underfunded, under-resourced, or understaffed schools with inadequate educational programs—particularly when well-funded, well-resourced, and well-staffed schools with rich and dynamic educational programs are located in adjacent neighborhoods or communities.
- Students experiencing their education in dilapidated, unclean, or unsafe school facilities, and in classrooms with broken furniture, no natural light, bare cement walls, or severely outdated textbooks and battered learning materials.
- Students being exposed to metal detectors, armed police officers, unwarranted in-school arrests and body searches, random drug raids or drug testing, perimeter fencing topped with razor wire, and other conditions and experiences evocative of prison facilities or the treatment of criminals.
- Educators teaching lessons to students that are characterized by racial or ethnic stereotypes, misleading or inaccurate ethnocentric narratives, or the absence of historical, literary, scientific, or political figures who reflect the diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural

backgrounds of the students.

- School leaders and educators talking or behaving disrespectfully or disdainfully toward parents, particularly in front of their children or fellow parents, or students and parents being routinely exposed to derogatory racial, ethnic, sexist, heterosexist, or other prejudiced comments in school settings.
- Schools hosting events and activities that are only accessible to families with disposable incomes, flexible work schedules, reliable transportation, or English-language fluency, and educators then blaming, judging, or demeaning parents who are unable to attend school events for not caring about or being more involved in their child's education.
- School administrators dismissing, minimizing, or ignoring the legitimate concerns raised by teachers, staff, students, or families, especially when those concerns are related to experiences of prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or abuse.
- School administrators and elected officials making unilateral decisions about school closures, privatization, or educational programming without any participation, involvement, or input from the teachers, staff, students, families, and community members who will be directly impacted by those decisions.

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see [HOW PRINCIPLES WORK](#) →

Dignity Strategies

This section describes a selection of representative dignity strategies that may be used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Practicing acceptance**
 2. **Providing recognition and validation**
 3. **Acknowledging others**
 4. **Being inclusive**
 5. **Ensuring physical and emotional safety**
 6. **Establishing and practicing fairness**
 7. **Supporting and developing independence**
 8. **Improving mutual understanding**
 9. **Extending the benefit of the doubt**
 10. **Demonstrating responsibility and accountability**
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1. Practicing acceptance

Expressions of genuine acceptance toward others are foundational to the social relationships and conditions that allow people to live and interact with dignity.

- People and groups should not be viewed or treated as either superior or inferior to any other individual or group.
- Social, professional, or educational interactions should not be characterized by prejudice toward certain individuals or groups, and institutional policies, programs, and practices must be free of bias and discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other forms of identity or culture.
- In dialogues, meetings, and other activities, people should be able to express and share their feelings, opinions, values, and experiences in a context that is free from judgment or criticism.

2. Providing recognition and validation

People experience dignity when their hard work, talents, insights, or thoughtfulness are recognized, validated, and valued by others.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can generously express praise, compliments, or admiration when participants make sacrifices, help others, or display courage, such as when they speak up for others, share emotionally difficult experiences, take responsibility for inappropriate behaviors, or apologize for hurtful comments.
- They can also recognize and credit the unique contributions of individuals or groups in personal interactions, team settings, and public forums.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Celebration Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity](#)

3. Acknowledging others

People experience dignity when others give them their full attention, when they look them in the eye and listen to what they have to say, and when they genuinely acknowledge, empathize with, and respond to their feelings, thoughts, concerns, perspectives, and experiences.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can ensure that community members feel heard by expressing gratitude and appreciation for their comments and participation, especially if those community members had to overcome barriers to participation by, for example, taking time off from work to attend or overcoming a fear of public speaking.

4. Being inclusive

People experience dignity when they are invited and included, and when they feel a sense of belonging in a process, team, organization, or community.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can actively and intentionally reach out to community members, especially those who have been historically marginalized or left out.
- They can also make efforts to ensure that participants feel welcomed and wanted, and that discussions, activities, and events are structured and facilitated in ways that allow all participants to feel included and involved.
- For example, organizers can have discussions translated for those who are not proficient in the language being spoken, or they can co-design and co-facilitate events with members of diverse cultural groups to ensure that activities are not inadvertently alienating or offensive to certain community members.

5. Ensuring physical and emotional safety

People experience dignity when they feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe, and when they are able to speak openly and freely without fear of being judged, attacked, shamed, or humiliated.

- In communities, workplaces, and schools, people need to know that speaking out about their feelings, concerns, or experiences will not result in retaliation, whether it's being socially condemned or shunned, demoted or fired from a job, denied a leadership role or opportunity, or subject to intimidation, threats, or harassment.
- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can create spaces and conditions that encourage feelings of physical, emotional, and psychological safety, and that encourage civil behavior, respectful disagreement, and conflict resolution.

→ **For a related discussion, see the [Civility Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity](#)**

6. Establishing and practicing fairness

People experience dignity when they are treated fairly by others and by institutions—whether that institution is a small community school or the criminal justice system—and when rules, policies, or laws are applied impartially and justly to everyone regardless of their position, status, or power.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can create spaces, processes, events, and conditions that establish the expectation that everyone will be treated fairly, and they can use facilitation strategies that encourage participants to behave respectfully and compassionately toward one another.
- For example, facilitators can establish ground rules or group agreements that require all participants to act respectfully toward one another, they can intervene when rules or agreements are broken, and they can model fairness by applying agreed-upon rules equally to all participants regardless of whether their position or status in a school, organization, or community.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Facilitation Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

7. Supporting and developing independence

People experience dignity when they are able to advocate for themselves, their family, or their community; when they can take actions on their own behalf to advance their interests or secure their needs; when they feel a sense of agency and control over their lives; and when they can experience feelings of optimism, positivity, confidence, hopefulness, or possibility.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can give people the power to influence decisions that affect their lives, and teams, organizations, or communities can share power with stakeholders by giving them roles in governance, leadership, and decision-making processes.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Advocacy Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

8. Improving mutual understanding

People experience dignity when they feel that other people understand their opinions, values, or experiences, and when others give serious consideration to what they have to say.

- In organizing, engagement, or equity contexts, people should be given time to express their viewpoints and explain why they think or feel a certain way.
- To encourage productive interactions that lead to greater mutual understanding, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can teach participants the basic principles and characteristics of active and compassionate listening, or give people opportunities and time to share their personal stories and histories with others.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Dialogue Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity](#)

9. Extending the benefit of the doubt

People experience dignity when others treat them as though they are trustworthy and principled.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can assume—at least until behaviors indicate otherwise—that participants have integrity, and that they will act respectfully, decently, and fairly if they are treated with respect, decency, and fairness.

Discussion: When Benefit of the Doubt Does Not Apply

Leaders, organizers, and facilitators should recognize that some individuals, groups, or cultural communities may have difficulty giving others the benefit of the doubt—especially participants who have experienced social, political, or institutional marginalization, injustice, discrimination, powerlessness, exploitation, or abuse. For example, students and families may have difficulty trusting school administrators or giving them the benefit of the doubt if the school system has repeatedly broken promises, ignored their concerns, cut vital programming and services, or made unilateral decisions that they believe have negatively impacted their family or community.

In these situations, organizing, engagement, and equity work may need to begin with healing and the rebuilding of trust, not with the expectation that marginalized or mistreated groups should give those in positions of power the benefit of the doubt—this is especially important consideration in communities where power has been abused or where certain groups have historically been mistrusted, doubted, or treated with suspicion.

10. Demonstrating responsibility and accountability

People experience dignity when others take responsibility for their actions; when they acknowledge and apologize for disrespectful, unkind, or upsetting comments or actions (even when those comments or actions were unintentional); and when people commit to changing hurtful behavior and making amends for any pain, unhappiness, or humiliation they may have caused in others.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can create conditions for accountability by openly discussing and defining accountability, establishing expectations for accountable behavior in a process or their organization, modeling accountable in their own behavior or leadership, and not ignoring or overlooking disrespectful, negligent, or harmful behavior by pretending that it isn't happening.
- Promoting accountability may also require that local leaders, organizers, and facilitators not avoid confrontations or uncomfortable conversations with colleagues or collaborators who may have acted irresponsibly or hurtfully toward others.

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