

## ***THE DIGNITY MODEL<sup>1</sup>***

The Dignity Model was designed to respond to a missing link in conflict resolution theory and practice methodology. After years of convening dialogues with warring parties in many parts of the world, Dr. Hicks realized that while the political issues were being negotiated, there was another voiceless and nameless cry underlying all the discussions: *a yearning to be treated with dignity*. The emotional reactions that surfaced when both parties felt their dignity was violated dominated the outcomes of the negotiations. Even when a solution to the political issues was found, the parties could not sign on to an agreement. Dr. Hicks concluded that what stood in the way were *unacknowledged and unaddressed violations of their dignity*. The Dignity Model was developed to address this underlying human desire to be treated with dignity and the equally powerful desire to be acknowledged for the indignities one has suffered. It created an acceptable language for discussing the emotional injuries all human beings endure in conflict, but are reluctant to talk about for fear of appearing weak.

The methodology of the Dignity Model takes learning approach to understanding the role dignity plays in the breakdown and restoration of relationships. While dignity is something we all yearn for, knowing how to extend it to others not come naturally. We have to learn how to do it. A learning approach gives participants to a workshop all of the assumptions upon which the model is based, allowing them to be fully informed and in agreement with the logic of the methodology.

### ***THEORETICAL APPROACH***

Assumptions that underlie the Dignity Model:

1. All human being have a profound desire to be treated with dignity—it's part of our evolutionary inheritance—the need to be seen in a favorable light. The inverse is also true—than no one likes to be treated in an undignified way. We are hard-wired to react to threats to our well-being.
2. When human relationships breakdown, there has, most likely, been a threat to or violation of the dignity of one or both parties to the relationship.
3. Without check, human beings usually react to a threat to their dignity with the impulse to “attack and blame” and to seek revenge. This is a “default” reaction that is “hardwired” in us. It is part of our evolutionary inheritance.
4. This default reaction leads to the escalation of negative interactions between the parties and maintains the cycle of psychological violence in the form of personal attacks and desire to humiliate and diminish the other. This reaction feels like a way to restore one's dignity, but in fact it erodes it, because the other only fights back more, ending in mutual annihilation and further breakdown in the relationship.

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5. Every human being is capable of violating the dignity of others when we feel threatened—we all do it. We have to take the shame out of admitting that we are capable of harmful actions in the service of self-preservation. We often justify our aggression because we feel we are right. The need to be right often creates blind spots, enabling us to justify our own undignified behavior in response to being violated.
6. Our instincts for self-preservation may be hardwired—they are not our fault—but it is our responsibility to control them.
7. Understanding that we have two parts of ourselves—the “I” and the “Me”—that guide our behavior. The “I” enables us to take responsibility for our actions, overpowering the more reactive, “Me,” whose behavior is hardwired. This self-knowledge framework shows how we are not slaves to our hardwiring and can learn how to make choices in the service of our dignity and the dignity of others.
8. Understanding the difference between dignity and respect. Treating others with dignity is a human imperative, but respect is earned.
9. The *Essential Elements of Dignity*, derived from years of observations with parties in conflict, are ten ways to honor or violate the dignity of others. When they are extended they promote healthy human relationships. When they are violated, relationships can break apart in a matter of seconds. They are the following:

***Acceptance of Identity:*** First thing you need to do when you want to honor peoples’ dignity is to accept that they are neither inferior nor superior to you. By virtue of being a human being, we all have the same inherent worth and value and the same human vulnerability. Everyone should feel free to express their authentic self without fear of being judged negatively. When you have an interaction with others, start with the orientation that no matter who they are, or what their race, religion, gender, class, or sexual orientation, it is your obligation to humanity to accept them as your spiritual equals and to *do them no harm*.

***Acknowledgment:*** People like to feel that they matter. Acknowledgment can be as simple as smiling at others when they walk by to formally recognizing them for something they have done for which they deserve credit. It is especially important to acknowledge the impact of your actions on others when you violate their dignity, instead of trying to save face by diminishing or ignoring the harm you have caused.

***Inclusion:*** No one likes to feel left out or that they don’t belong. When we are included, we feel good about who we are. When we are excluded from things that matter to us, we feel an instant reaction of self-doubt. *What is it about me that I wasn’t included?* This is an affront to our dignity at all levels of human interaction, from the political, when minority groups feel left out of the political process by the majority, to the interpersonal, when we’re not included in the decision-making that directly affects us.

**Safety:** There are two kinds of safety that are important to dignity: physical and psychological. Physical threats need no explanation but psychological threats are more complicated. Honoring others' psychological safety means not shaming, humiliating, diminishing, or hurtfully criticizing them, especially, but not limited to, violations that are public.

**Fairness:** We all have a particularly strong knee-jerk reaction to being treated unfairly. If we want to honor the dignity of others, we need to ensure that we are honoring agreed upon laws and rules of fairness—both implicit and explicit—when we interact with them.

**Freedom:** A major dignity violation occurs when we restrict people and try to control their lives. Honoring this element of dignity requires that people feel free from domination and that they are able to experience hope and a future that is filled with a sense of possibility.

**Understanding:** There is nothing more frustrating than to feel misunderstood, especially when you are in conflict with others. Extending dignity means that you give others the chance to explain themselves, actively listening to them for the sole purpose of understanding their perspective.

**Benefit of the Doubt:** Treating people as though they were trustworthy—giving them the benefit of the doubt that they are acting with good intention—is honoring their dignity. This is, paradoxically, especially important when people are in conflict with one another where the cycle of mistrust is difficult to break. Treating others as though they were trustworthy, as difficult as it is, often interrupts the negative expectations, creating opportunities for a change in the relationship.

**Responsiveness:** We all want to be seen and heard. Treating people as if they were invisible or ignoring them by not responding to their concerns is a violation of their dignity.

**Righting the Wrong:** When we violate someone's dignity, it is important to take responsibility and apologize for the hurt we have caused. It is a way for us to regain our own dignity as well as acknowledging the wrongdoing to the person you violated.

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