Dignity & Respect

Recognising their importance for effective complaint handling

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Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“The recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world…”

[Preamble, 1948]
Essential elements of dignity

People need to perceive that they:

- are not being negatively judged (acceptance)
- belong (inclusion)
- are safe from bodily harm and humiliation (safety)
- are getting your full attention (acknowledgement)
- are appreciated (recognition)
- are being treated fairly (fairness)
- are trusted (benefit of the doubt)

[Donna Hicks, *Dignity, It’s Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*]
Emotional needs that represent innate human requirements

- **Security**: A sense of safety and security.
- **Autonomy and control**: A sense of autonomy and control over what happens around and to us.
- **Status**: A sense of being accepted and valued.
- **Privacy**
- **Attention**: Receiving attention from others.
- **Connection to the wider community**
- **Intimacy**: Emotional connection to other people.
- **Competence and achievement**: A sense of our own competence and achievements.
- **Meaning and purpose**: A sense of meaning and purpose.

Violations of dignity

Violations of dignity can include any action or treatment that makes a person feel unfairly treated, unworthy or without value, such as:

• humiliation, bullying, demeaning criticisms or ridicule,
• patronising comments or having their views dismissed out of hand.
People react similarly to threats to **dignity** and threats to **safety**

Maintaining one’s dignity and self-respect is a fundamental human need.

People are just as programmed to sense and react to threats to their dignity as they are to threats to their safety.

[Donna Hicks, *Dignity, It’s Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*]
Violations of dignity that cause **humiliation** can trigger a range of powerful reactions

**Humiliation is an existential issue—it is about an individual’s very existence.**  
Where an individual externalises the trauma of humiliation they may well seek vindication and/or revenge.  
Alternatively, if the individual internalises the trauma they may well experience anxiety and depression (and in serious cases possibly suicidal ideation).
Dignity & respect issues are at the heart of much human conflict.
A recent UK survey found a clear majority of employees reporting that the most common negative behaviour involved in workplace conflict was a perceived *lack of respect*. [seen as both a cause & manifestation of conflict]
UK survey responses
Of 2,195 respondents to the survey:

- 61% identified lack of respect as contributing to workplace conflict
- 27% separately reported: - bullying, intimidation or harassment
- 25% refusal to work together or co-operate
- 19% verbal abuse or insults

[Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey, 2015]
Dignity issues are *basic human needs*

Dignity issues relating to self-respect, self-esteem, reputation or ‘face’, are basic human needs.

While complainant interests may well be negotiable through compromise or waiver, matters affecting their dignity are not likely to be subject of give and take.
Violations of dignity and matters of ‘principle’

A perceived violation of dignity often triggers a complainant deciding that an issue is a ‘matter of principle’, resulting in an escalating ‘campaign’ for vindication and restoration of reputation and self-respect.
The importance of treating each party to a complaint with *respect*

Research has consistently found that the response to a service failure can be *as or more* important to the affected individual than the original failure.
Medical malpractice

‘claims’ physicians vs ‘no claims’ physicians

…the difference was entirely in how they talked to their patients…

Surgeons’ tone of voice:
A clue to malpractice history

...in the end it comes down to a matter of respect communicated through tone of voice...

The importance of treating each party to a complaint with *respect*

An escalating complaint related dispute can commonly be traced back to a failure to respond appropriately to a complaint at the outset. This is can be experienced by a complainant as a lack of *respect* and violation of his or her *dignity.*
A key component of the ‘interpersonal justice’ dimension of *Justice Theory* is whether a person was treated with respect. If people perceive that they have not been shown respect (or worse, that they were disrespected), this may well result in a particularly negative, if not aggressive, response.
Interpersonal justice criteria

Showing **Respect**

[at the very least **not** showing disrespect]
Interpersonal justice criteria

Treating with **Dignity**

[recognising the *dignity* of the individual and treating them as if they matter]
Justice Theory— *Procedural justice*

The ‘*procedural justice*’ dimension of *Justice Theory* focuses on the perceived fairness of the *procedures* used in a decision-making process.

If a party to a complaint perceives that the way a complaint was dealt with or an investigation undertaken was not fair, this can significantly impact on whether they will accept an unfavourable outcome.
Justice Theory—*Interactional justice*

Another dimension of *Justice Theory* focuses on the **information** given to a person relating to a decision-making process.

If a party to a complaint perceives that they were not given adequate information, at the right time, this can also significantly impact on whether they will accept an unfavourable outcome.
Minimum standard of behaviour for complaint handlers

“Others’ bad behavior doesn’t give us license to treat them badly in return. Their inherent value and worth need to be honoured no matter what they do.”

[Donna Hicks, Dignity, It’s Essential Role in Resolving Conflict]

While there is no moral duty on complaint handlers to ‘feel’ respect for the people they deal with, they do have a duty to ‘show’ respect, even if they don’t like them.
The importance of treating each party to a complaint with *respect*

Complaint handlers need to avoid communications or actions that may unintentionally or unnecessarily violate the dignity of any party to a complaint.
The importance of treating each party to a complaint with *respect*

The key dignity/respect related *needs* of each party to a complaint are that they:

- are seen as having value,
- are not, and will not be, negatively judged,
- are treated fairly,
- are believed (and given the benefit of the doubt),
- are not, and will not be, humiliated,
- have your full attention
Showing respect and avoiding violations of dignity

Ways to show respect and avoid violations of dignity can include:

• **actions**: engaging in conduct and expressing views that demonstrate respect,

• **inaction**: listening with positive attention; and

• **avoidance**: avoiding conduct or the expression of views that are likely to be perceived as disrespectful and a violation of dignity.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a violation of dignity

1. **Listening:** Allow a reasonable time to calmly listen with positive attention to each party’s story or explanation to get an understanding of their perspective about the issue, without interrupting or challenging them.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a violation of dignity

Acknowledging feelings: Acknowledge and indicate an understanding/recognition that the party is experiencing strong emotions/feelings about the issue and/or what they are going through.
Manage expectations: Identify each party’s expectations about how the complaint will be dealt with and likely outcomes, and specifically address any expectations that are unreasonable or unrealistic.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a violation of dignity

Manage expectations (cont’d): Common expectations held by complainants are:

• life should be fair,
• people will understand what they are trying to say,
• they will be believed (or given the benefit of the doubt).

Failure to meet any of these expectations can be perceived as a sign of disrespect.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a violation of dignity

Manage expectations (cont’d): Organisations that handle complaints need to ensure:
• procedures are fair and reasonably perceived to be fair,
• their staff can devote sufficient time to listen to complainants and clarify gaps or misunderstandings, and
• complainants are informed that the decision on their complaint will be based on objective evidence and not on taking one person’s word over another’s.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a violation of dignity

4 Acknowledging integrity: Recognise that each party’s views are based on their subjective perceptions about what occurred. From their perspective those views are entirely valid. Explain that the complaint handler is obliged to make a decision based on an objective assessment of the evidence.
4 Acknowledging integrity (cont’d): Where a complaint can not be substantiated, advice to the complainant should clearly distinguish between whether the complaint was:

- not substantiated due to insufficient evidence,
- not substantiated due to a lack of evidence,
- not substantiated due to a misunderstanding, or
- false
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a *violation of dignity*

5

**Assuring good intentions:** Explain that you have tried your best to address the issues raised in the complaint, but for various specified reasons outside your control, it has not been possible to objectively substantiate the allegations.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a *violation of dignity*

**6**

**Making a full apology about any procedural shortcomings:** Where relevant and appropriate, admit fault and apologise for any identified deficiencies in the handling of the complaint.
Avoiding language of dominance, power or control: Where possible avoid using language or tone that might convey an impression of dominance, power or control to inform a complainant that you are unable to take the matter further.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a violation of dignity

Minimising humiliation: Where an interaction or communication could potentially cause humiliation, it should be kept as private as possible and appropriate in the circumstances.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a *violation of dignity*

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**Avoiding unnecessary challenges to a person’s sense of identity:** People are unlikely to accept being labeled an unreasonable complainant or a bully, but may well accept that other people could perceive their conduct to be unreasonable or bullying and prefer not to have such a reputation.
Strategies to avoid or help address a conflict arising out of a *violation of dignity*

**10 Using hierarchy strategically:** In particularly problematic cases, as a way of showing respect which may help to restore a party’s dignity, where possible and appropriate have a senior officer of the organisation communicate directly with the person.
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