



PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH DONNA HICKS



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STEVE KRASKE

I'm Steve Kraske, and this is the Overland Resource Group podcast series – “Profiles in Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement.” These are stories about the surprising results organizations achieve by experimenting with alternative approaches to working collaboratively, empowering employees and leading more creatively.

These stories are told by leaders of corporations, government agencies and the unions which represent their workforces as well as leading experts in the field of organizational change.

The series is underwritten by Overland Resource Group, a change leadership consultancy bringing transformative results to organizations for over 30 years.

Today we're visiting with Donna Hicks. She's an associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard. Donna has 20 years of experience as a facilitator in international conflicts in the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Cuba and Northern Ireland, as well as in the U.S. Donna is also the author of the best-selling book *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict* that features a forward by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

And Donna, what a pleasure to have you with us. Thanks for taking the time.

DONNA HICKS

Oh, you're welcome.

STEVE KRASKE

Your work applies to Middle Eastern conflicts as well as to, you know, organizations and corporations. How can businesses apply the dignity model to achieve a more welcoming work environment as well as a more productive one?

DONNA HICKS

My experience working in the business community is that actually it's quite similar to the international community, when conflict arises, when there are problems in the workplace, when you have disgruntled employees or people who are, you know, just have grievances that they don't feel they're able to

give voice to there are going to be all kinds of problems, um, that, you know, result from that.

So, for example, people, they disengage when they feel that their conflicts are not being addressed, they're not as productive. Where, on the other hand, if people feel that they have an opportunity to talk about what's happening if there's a problem. And, and the other thing is that, nine times out of 10, these conflicts that happen in the workplace are all conflicts around people feeling like their dignity is not being honored. So there's the common denominator, in no matter what arena I apply this work to, whether it's international or in health care or in education or in the business world. When people are miserable and unhappy in their environment, it's probably because there's some underlying dignity issues that need to be addressed.

STEVE KRASKE

And so the key then to integrating dignity into the workplace, or into the boardroom for that matter, is what?

DONNA HICKS

Well, the key, I think, is that the leadership of the organization, of the company, has to recognize how important this issue of dignity is. If we don't have the leadership on board, and knowing our dignity is just as vulnerable, um, "our" meaning, you know, human beings, our dignity is just as vulnerable as our physical beings—and what I mean by that is that there's a lot of research now that shows when people feel that they have their dignity violated, their brain registers the hurt just as, as if the brain were experiencing a physical injury.

DONNA HICKS

STEVE KRASKE

I was really struck by that.

DONNA HICKS

Isn't that just—that's so amazing.

STEVE KRASKE

Yes, I did not know that.

Well, it was a sea change for me, because it was what—that—those data were what I needed to take this, this work on the road and say to corporations, to say to senior vice presidents and CEOs, "You've got to pay attention to this, because people are hurting if you don't. And, you know, when you have hurting people you don't have a productive and healthy work environment." So they listened. You know, the leadership listens when I cite the research that's, you know, that's there. So it's—it's really important to get the leadership on board. That's where the step number one to recognize how important it is, and to learn, frankly, to learn how to honor people's dignity and what does it look like to honor people's dignity both in interpersonal, you know, dynamics but also in terms of policy that they create.

STEVE KRASKE

It's the leaders who set the culture of an organization. You're saying without the leadership on board, it's not going to happen.

DONNA HICKS

Well, you know what happens is that it—it takes place in little pockets in the, in the organization. But, you know, one job that I had, I did that. I started with little pockets of areas where, um, where there were conflicts and, and used the dignity model to, um, resolve them and help people through them, but we never got the top leadership. And that was why I feel so adamant now about saying that we've got to get the leadership on board, because then it becomes systemic. Once the leadership recognizes the importance and actually develops policies and all the infrastructure, then it, it, you know, it really does trickle down to the rest of the community and work environment.

STEVE KRASKE

I want to get some definitions out of the way here, because when I first was reading the book and coming across this word “dignity” a lot, I assumed early on that was synonymous with the word “respect.” And you point out there are some very key differences between those two words. What are they?

DONNA HICKS

Well, I, like you, before I started researching this, I felt the same way. And if you notice, if you hear someone on the television talking about dignity, they'll say “dignity and respect” as if it's one word. And I was just struck by that because—and whenever I ask people, “What is dignity?” they always say it's respect. So, here's the difference. What I—what I discovered the difference is that every single human being is born worthy. It's—you know—when you think of a little baby, this sweet, precious little baby who comes, that comes into our worlds, we have no doubt in our minds that these little ones are valuable, beyond priceless even. They're irreplaceable. So, every single one of us enter the world with dignity as part of our DNA. We are worthy just by virtue of our birthright.

Now, on the other hand, when we start talking about respect, I feel that respect is very different, because respect has to be earned. And if I say I respect someone, I want to say—I want to be able to feel that I admire that person so much. He or she has done something way beyond the call of duty. I even want—I would even say to myself, “I want to be like that. I aspire to be like that person.” Whereas with dignity, we all have it. You know, we don't have to do anything to have dignity.

STEVE KRASKE

And so when someone's dignity is violated, and you've talked about this a little bit, what happens? What's the consequence? What do people need to know about what happens when dignity is violated?

DONNA HICKS

So when somebody—I mean what we're talking about—let me give a picture of what we're talking about with dignity. When someone feels discriminated against because of you know maybe their gender, their race, their religion, their ethnicity... When you're, when you're treated as something less than—or humiliated or shamed in some way, criticized, just made to feel inferior. This is—this is what I'm talking about with a dignity violation. And one, when we

have that experience of someone violating our dignity, we actually have a physiological reaction. You know, as I said earlier, that reaction shows up in our brain as if we had a physical injury.

And so, it is—it is something that stays inside us unless it's addressed. And this is why I, you know, clamor to people in organizations, "Please have a way to have people talk about when they feel they have their dignity might have been violated."

If someone felt shamed in a staff meeting or someone felt, you know, misunderstood or dismissed. All of these things—the key to it is to have people knowledgeable enough in positions of power to know how to handle them. And by that I simply mean giving people an opportunity to talk about them, to acknowledge that what happened to them was wrong. Um, you know it's honestly, it's—it's pretty simple stuff, but we all have to learn it. It doesn't come naturally to know how to actually—how to honor people's dignity and how to—how to set a process into motion once we have.

Because, you know, here's the other thing I have to say. I've worked all over the world. I just got back from working with Syrians, of all people, last week in Rome, and one of the things I recognize is that everybody feels this in the same way, no matter where we are. But here's the other key point. The other key point is that most people when they actually violate somebody's dignity, they're not even aware of it. And so my, you know my work now is really trying to give people an awareness, to promote awareness of how, how delicate we are on the inside around our dignity, and, and because people are not—people aren't bad who violate people's dignity. You know, they just don't know, they just don't understand.

STEVE KRASKE

You're taking the words right out of my mouth.

DONNA HICKS

Yeah?

STEVE KRASKE

Because one of the key points you make is that people don't get it, and how often they do that, and I'm wondering, Donna, could you give us an example or two of how people wind up violating other people's dignity as often they do. Maybe a common example or two?

DONNA HICKS

Well, one—the first thing that comes to mind is when, let's just say we're in a staff meeting. We have a—you know, we have a weekly staff meeting, and whoever the boss is, the manager who's running the show would say something demeaning to a person in the—in the, you know in one of his direct reports, or in one of her direct reports. And, you know, thinking that he needs to point out how this person is not doing his or her job.

But there's a way of pointing that out. There's a way of doing it so that people don't feel humiliated in front of—and especially in front of a group of other people and especially their colleagues—people with whom they have to work on a daily basis. So there's tact involved. There's a way of delivering this information.

Or—here's a very common one, actually in the workplace that I've discovered—that people often feel left out and not included with things that they feel they should be included with. Let's just say someone is on a project and has worked—and, you know, has been the lead person on a project—and the boss ends up deciding, “Well, you know, I know what this person thinks. I'm not going to include her in the meeting.” Well, feeling excluded with something that you feel a part of is really one of the most painful dignity violations.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, in your work, Donna, you've brought together these bitterly opposing sides and sometimes you first ask everyone to describe incidents in which they felt their own dignity was violated. And then you do something that's really interesting to me. You follow up by asking people to describe ways that they have offended others. You switch it around. Why do you do that and what result does that generate?

DONNA HICKS

You know what? It's the simplest method of resolving a group conflict. I just did it in Rome. When I did it with the Syrians, we had some big explosive conflicts that came up. When you ask people to talk about a time when their dignity was violated, let me tell you, you have to stop them, right? Because they'll go on forever. But when you ask a person to reflect on a time when they felt they might have violated the dignity of another person in the room or in the group, believe me, that doesn't come as swiftly or as naturally. People really have to think about it, because we know when we're feeling bad, but we don't have a built-in mechanism to know when we've actually offended other people.

So this responsibility, responsibility-taking, which is the reason to ask that question, “Talk about a time when you felt you've done something to harm another's dignity.” That kind of responsibility-taking is the switch in the default, because we have a default setting, where we only know our own but what part of the learning about dignity is trying to switch that default to self-reflection rather than self-defense, because we will fight to the bitter end if somebody violates us.

I mean some of us do, but others just withdraw. But the point is this is part of the human condition that we really have to learn, just like we have to learn mathematics. And you know, we send our kids to school for how many years, not to mention, you know, graduate school and all that? We—if we spent a fraction of the time learning about these dignity sensitivities that we all have. If



we spent—take the effort and the time and the discipline to do it, I swear, we'll see a different world.

STEVE KRASKE

And you say when people do pay attention to all of this that you've witnessed miracles—

DONNA HICKS

Absolutely.

STEVE KRASKE

That they take place when people decide to educate themselves about the power of dignity and really engage here. So you're parting advice to business and civic and union leaders would be what?

DONNA HICKS

It would be to simply recognize how vulnerable each and every one of us is as human beings and that the dignity vulnerability is equally as powerful and if not more powerful than the, our vulnerability to be injured physically.

Recognizing that, I mean, that would be enormous. And to put policies in place and procedures in place where people in the workplace actually learn about it what means, and do the ABCs of dignity, take the time to learn the process and understand how to address these violations, how to recover from them, how to defend your own dignity, how to give feedback to people about how their dignity — um, you know, how to treat people and how not treat people— just pay attention to it and give it time and attention. That's all.

STEVE KRASKE

Donna Hicks is the author of *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict*. Donna, thanks so much for your time today.

DONNA HICKS

My pleasure. Thank you.

STEVE KRASKE

This Profile in Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement Interview was brought to you by Overland Resource Group. For a transcript or more information, visit their website at www.orginc.com or email them at WorkingTogether@orginc.com.