

Indignity, Indignance, & Introversion

“You need to be funnier.”

“You’re just too serious.”

These are examples of two cards played against me on significant occasions that led to painful career path alterations.

As an introvert and a leader, my journey to self-acceptance and understanding has been winding. In the West, we are taught from a young age that leaders are to be charismatic, loud, highly social, and fast-paced. Introverts living in this biased culture will often experience violations of our inherent dignity. “You’re just not leadership material,” we are told, despite our previous leadership successes.

It is only recently that the business world is beginning to recognize and value the leadership strengths that introverted thinkers bring to the table. But even in introvert-friendly environments, the change isn’t happening quickly enough.

In her book *Dignity*, Donna Hicks contends that we all have a right to be treated with dignity simply by virtue of being human. Nothing can forfeit this birthright.

Unfortunately, as a *yin* leader in the yang West, this ideal has often not matched my experience. I have personally had my dignity trampled on in the name of the extrovert ideal. And I have many introverted colleagues and friends who have experienced the same. It’s common for extroverts to use their temperamental differences to allege a form of superiority over introverts. They often treat us as less than—with indignity.

Our identities are a unique expression of who we are. For an

introvert to be judged a lesser person because of this inborn trait inflicts a particularly painful and personal wound. How can who we are be wrong?

The problem is that indignity often creates indignance on the part of the receiver. The anger—and subsequent desire to withdraw—that introverts feel from being rejected is a natural reaction. But if we simply react without thinking, we are likely to perpetuate the cycle of devaluation.

Here are four practical suggestions to help you move through this part of your personal introvert revolution as you move toward deeper authenticity as a leader:

- See indignity for what it is. Often, naming the things we experience can, in itself, be empowering. Begin to see the wounds you have suffered as aspects of an assault on your inherent dignity as a human being. Give the violation a name.
- Transcend your initial emotional reaction to being treated with indignity.
Know that when we experience indignity, our natural emotional reaction will most likely be fight or flight. This is driven not by our frontal cortex but by our limbic system, which makes us susceptible to being emotionally high-jacked. Practice emotional intelligence, including self-regulation.
- Don't just return fire; take the high road. Refuse to give indignity back.
Knowing what you know about dignity being the right of all human beings (including the extrovert who may be failing to treat you with dignity), refuse to return tit for tat. Someone needs to stop the cycle. Let it be you.
- Treat others around you with dignity. Don't stop at setting aside the wrong treatment of others. Move positively toward them with deep empathy as appropriate for someone who is a fellow member of the human race, a person deserving of being treated with dignity.

Understanding the universal need for dignity, in yourselves and others, will help you move from the earlier stages of introverted identity characterized by dissonance into a more mature and healthy place of introspection, articulation, and awareness. You are a person of inherent dignity and value.