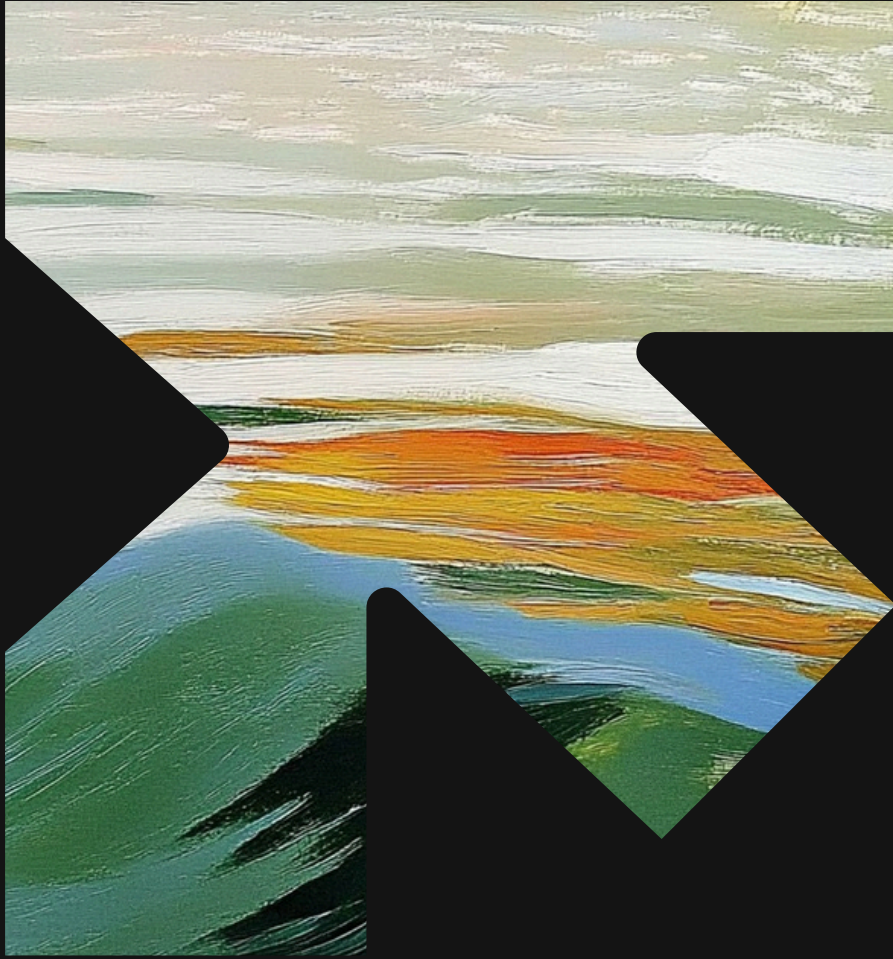




Forge
Centre for
Dignity-Driven
Leadership

Dignity-Driven Leadership: Principles for Stronger Practice

How Context, Constraints, and Relational Practice Shape
Human Behaviour and System Change

November 2025 — Forge Centre



Dignity-Driven Leadership: Principles for Stronger Practice

SECTION 01

● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Dignity Matters Now

Dignity matters because it changes how people show up, how teams work, and how systems function. When dignity is supported, people feel seen, valued, and able to act. When it is weakened, behaviour becomes reactive, trust erodes, and change becomes harder.

This white paper introduces Dignity-Driven Leadership, a practical approach that focuses on the conditions that shape human behaviour. It draws on research from psychology, trauma, adult development, and complexity science. The central insight is that people respond to the environments around them. If practitioners, leaders and systems want different outcomes, they need to shift the relational, cultural, and structural conditions that influence how people behave.

People do better when they feel they matter, are treated with respect, and have room to act. Leadership that supports dignity pays attention to worth, respects people's experience, and ensures they have agency to act. These ideas form the foundation of Forge's 14 Principles of Dignity-Driven Leadership, which offer clear guidance for strengthening dignity in workplaces, communities, and systems.

Key Insights

- Dignity is inherent, but people experience it through the conditions around them.
- Behaviour is shaped by context (conditions, patterns, pressures & supports), not just personal choice.
- People do better when they feel they matter, are respected, and are free to choose to act.
- Leadership strengthens dignity by improving clarity, fairness, and relational safety.
- Dignity-Driven Leadership offers a realistic path for improving trust, engagement, and social health.



Table of Contents

Dignity-Driven Leadership	02
● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	
Why Now?	04
● INTRODUCTION	
Why Dignity Matters	05
● SAFETY & TRUST	
Dignity is the Centre	06
● SEEING DIGNITY	
Dignity Triangle	07
● FORGING DIGNITY	
Dynamics of Change	08
● OPERATIONALIZING DIGNITY	
Forge Model	09
● DIGNITY CONTEXTS	
Forge Dignity-Driven Leadership Principles	10
● LEADING WITH DIGNITY	
Implications	12
● LOOKING AHEAD	



Why Now?

“Most system problems are dignity problems”

Across Canada, people are carrying more strain in their daily lives. Loneliness and isolation are rising. Workforces are stretched. Many systems feel harder to navigate. These pressures affect wellbeing and shape how people behave at home, at work, and in their communities. Leaders in government, organizations, and frontline services are seeing the results: growing disengagement, rising conflict, and increasing frustration from people who feel unseen or stuck.

At the centre of these challenges is a simple idea. People respond to the conditions around them. When environments support dignity, people have the stability and confidence to show up well. When environments weaken dignity, behaviour becomes defensive, avoidant, or overwhelmed. These patterns are not signs of personal shortcomings. They reflect the conditions people are navigating.

This white paper introduces dignity-driven leadership as a practical way to understand and strengthen those conditions. It brings together research from psychology, public health, adult development, and systems thinking to show how dignity shapes behaviour and what leaders can do to support it. The ideas are grounded in lived experience and tested in real practice with leaders, practitioners, and communities across the country. The aim is to offer a clear, usable framework that helps people work with complexity without losing sight of the human experience at the centre of it.

Key Insights

- People respond to the conditions around them, not just their own motivation or will.
- Many signs of strain in workplaces and systems reflect weakened dignity.
- Leaders can improve outcomes by shaping environments that support worth, respect, and agency.
- A dignity lens helps explain behavioural patterns and offers practical tools for change.
- Now is the moment for leadership that understands people in context.



Why Dignity Matters

“Dignity-Driven Leadership creates the conditions to have difficult conversations about responsibility and impact while the worth, respect and agency of everyone is honoured.”

Dignity is at the core of human experience. People need to feel they matter, that they are treated with respect, and that they have room to act in ways that reflect who they are. These needs show up in every setting: workplaces, families, classrooms, community services, and public systems. When dignity is supported, people participate more fully. They are more open, more willing to collaborate, and more able to take responsibility for their actions. When dignity is weakened, behaviour shifts. People withdraw, become reactive, or lose trust in the systems around them.

Research from psychology, public health, and conflict resolution reinforces this reality. People are shaped by the conditions they move through. Environments with clarity, fairness, and relational safety make it easier to think clearly and act well. Environments marked by uncertainty, disrespect, or inconsistent expectations narrow what feels possible. This helps explain why many of the challenges leaders face are not about knowledge or skill. They are about the conditions that support or restrict how people can show up.

A dignity lens creates a clear and practical way to understand these patterns. It helps leaders see not only what people are doing, but what might be influencing those actions. It brings attention to relational dynamics, cultural expectations, and structural pressures that often go unnoticed. Most of all, it offers a grounded approach to strengthening social health in workplaces, communities, and public systems. When dignity is supported, people have the stability they need to solve problems, repair relationships, and take meaningful steps forward.

Key Insights

- People need to feel they matter, are respected, and have room to act.
- Dignity is shaped by the conditions people move through each day.
- Many behavioural challenges reflect weakened dignity rather than lack of motivation.
- A dignity lens helps leaders understand context, conditions, and patterns.
- Supporting dignity strengthens trust, engagement, and social health.



Dignity as the Centre

“A dignity lens helps leaders focus on conditions rather than personal blame”

Dignity is not an abstract idea. It is a lived experience shaped by how people are treated and by the conditions they move through each day. At its core, dignity means that every person has inherent worth, deserves to be treated with respect, and needs room to act in ways that reflect who they are. These elements are fundamental, not optional. When they are supported, people have a sense of stability and grounding that changes how they navigate challenges, relationships, and decision-making.

Research from conflict transformation, philosophy, and human development reinforces that dignity is a basic human requirement. People need to feel they matter. They need interactions that communicate respect. They need opportunities to exercise agency. Without these conditions, trust breaks down and behaviour shifts. People become guarded, defensive, or disengaged. These reactions are not signs of weakness. They are human responses to environments that do not support dignity.

When leaders understand dignity as a central human need, they see behaviour differently. They pay attention to the conditions surrounding people rather than assuming problems are rooted in personal flaws. This perspective helps leaders respond with clarity, steadiness, and care. It shapes how they structure work, how they hold conversations, and how they design systems that influence daily life. A dignity lens helps leaders create spaces where people can step forward rather than pull back.

Key Insights

- Dignity is built on worth, respect, and agency.
- People respond to environments that support or weaken their dignity.
- Breakdowns in trust or behaviour often reflect dignity being compromised.
- Seeing dignity as a central human need strengthens leadership practice.



The Dignity Triangle

Integrate a relational and moral approach to dignity in order to make dignity a leadership practice.

Dignity becomes real in people's lives through three connected experiences: worth, respect, and agency. Together, these elements form what we call the Dignity Triangle. They describe what people need in order to feel steady, capable, and able to participate in the world around them.

- **Worth** is the sense that a person matters. It is communicated through how others speak, listen, and respond. It shows up in whether people feel included or overlooked.
- **Respect** is the experience of being treated with care and fairness. It is reflected in tone, clarity, boundaries, and whether people feel seen rather than dismissed.
- **Agency** is the room a person has to act, decide, and influence their own path. It emerges when people have the information, support, and permission they need to take meaningful steps.

When any part of the triangle is weakened, behaviour shifts. People might hesitate, withdraw, or react strongly. They might lose trust or feel powerless. These responses are not about motivation or character. They are reflections of what the environment is making possible or impossible for them.

A dignity lens helps leaders notice which part of the triangle is being supported and which part may be under strain. It gives them a practical way to understand what is influencing behaviour and what conditions need attention. Strengthening worth, respect, and agency helps people show up more fully and creates environments that support honest dialogue, responsibility, and healthier relationships.

- Dignity is expressed through worth, respect, and agency.
- Breakdowns in relationships often reflect strain in one part of the triangle.
- Leaders can strengthen dignity by paying attention to what the environment is making possible.



Dynamics of Change

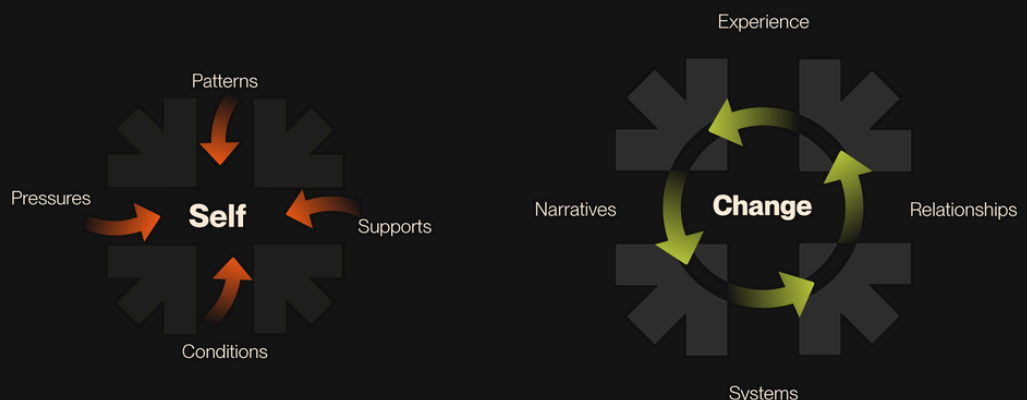
“Thinking, feeling, and acting for change is always in relation to the conditions, patterns, pressures and supports of the contexts you’re working with.”

Human change does not happen in isolation. People shift when conditions shift. Emotions, relationships, environments, routines, and broader systems all play a role in what feels possible for someone at any moment. When these conditions support dignity, change becomes more stable. When they create pressure or confusion, progress becomes fragile.

Inner experiences such as stress, shame, or a sense of being overwhelmed can narrow a person’s ability to think clearly or take healthy risks. Relational patterns also matter. Trust, communication, tone, and support influence whether people feel safe enough to engage honestly. Environmental and cultural norms signal what is acceptable, expected, or discouraged. Structural factors such as access to resources, power dynamics, and system policies shape what choices are available.

From this perspective, behaviour is not simply an individual action. It is a response to an ecology. Leaders who understand this shift their focus from trying to change people to shaping the conditions that make change possible. They pay attention to what strengthens stability, what creates unnecessary strain, and what small adjustments would help people take the next step with more confidence and clarity.

- **Conditions:** The structural, legal, institutional, and material environments that set the boundaries of what is possible or permissible.
- **Patterns:** The relational, cultural, and historical rhythms that shape habits of interpretation and expectation, often implicitly.
- **Pressures:** The situational forces (stress, scarcity, stigma, threat, emotional intensity) that narrow a person’s range of safe responses.
- **Supports:** The stabilizing resources - trust, clarity, relationships, identity anchors, and structural protections - that expand what is possible.



Forge Model

“Change is non-linear. To create the possibility for new behaviours and relationships, the constraints must change.”

The Forge Model explains how human behaviour is shaped by the conditions people move through. It is built on the idea that people respond to constraints: the forces that make some actions easier and others harder. Constraints can be conditions, patterns, pressures, or supports. When constraints support dignity, people have the space, clarity, and confidence they need to act well. When constraints create pressure, confusion, or fear, behaviour narrows.

The model groups these constraints into four connected categories that together form a person's context.

- **Personal resources & constraints** include stress, emotional patterns, beliefs, and personal history. They influence how people interpret situations and what feels possible in a moment.
- **Relational resources & constraints** emerge in the interactions between people. Tone, trust, boundaries, and how people respond to one another set the conditions for whether someone feels safe or guarded.
- **Cultural–environmental resources & constraints** include norms, expectations, signals about identity, and the routines or cues that shape daily behaviour. These often guide people without their awareness.
- **Structural resources & constraints** include policies, power dynamics, access to support, and the broader systems surrounding people. These determine what options are available and what actions carry risk.

These contexts do not operate separately. They interact and reinforce each other. For example, unclear expectations (a cultural constraint) can increase stress (an inner constraint), which then affects how someone communicates (a relational constraint). Leaders who understand these interactions can see behaviour more clearly and make better decisions about where to intervene.

The Dignity Triangle supports leaders to identify which domain and constraints are supporting dignity and which are frustrating or violating it. A dignity lens shifts the focus from blaming individuals to shaping the conditions that influence their choices. This approach makes it possible to design environments where people feel safer, more respected, and more able to act.

PERSONAL
Self and Intrapersonal

RELATIONAL
Behaviour and Interpersonal

CULTURAL
Worldviews and Norms

STRUCTURAL
Systems and Structures



Forge Principles

The Forge principles offer a clear way for leaders to understand human behaviour through context, dignity, and the conditions that shape people's choices. Each principle is short, practical, and grounded in real experience across workplaces, communities, and systems.

1. Dignity is both inherent and shaped by conditions.

People have worth that cannot be taken away, and they also experience dignity through the environments they move through.

2. Behaviour is embedded and embodied.

What people do is influenced by pressures, emotions, relationships, and structures that are not always visible on the surface.

3. Growth happens in different ways and times.

Growth happens at different paces across emotional, relational, and cognitive areas, and different parts of a person may be at different stages.

4. Perspectives are real but partial.

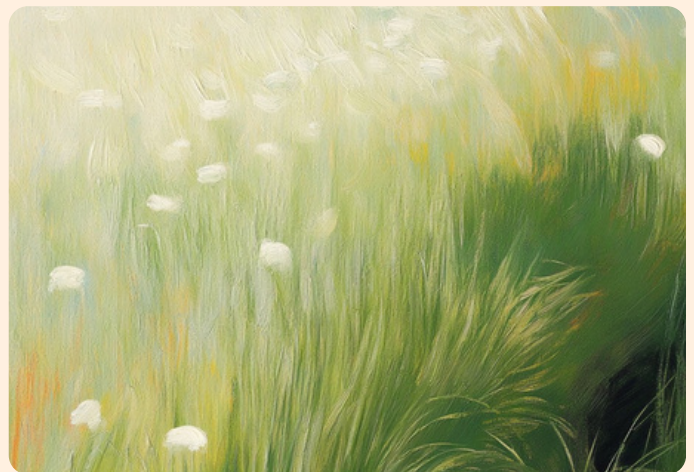
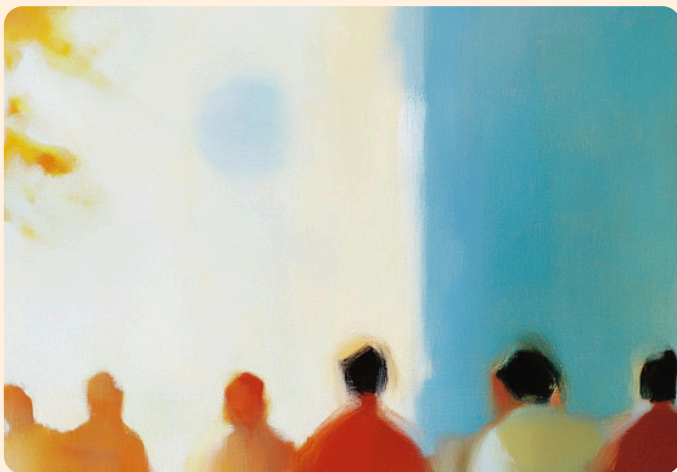
People see from where they stand, and their history, culture, and experiences shape how they interpret events.

5. Systems shape behaviour and behaviour shapes systems.

People make choices within the limits and possibilities created by habits, norms, environments, and structures.

6. Change is created by constraint mechanisms, not effort alone.

Behaviour shifts when the forces that shape it shift, not just when people try harder.



Forge Principles

7. Power and inequality matter.

Uneven access to safety, resources, and influence changes what people can reasonably do.

8. Worth, respect, and agency work together.

Dignity is strongest when people feel they matter, are treated with respect, and have room to act.

9. Inner and outer change must move together.

Personal insight and emotional regulation are important, but so are practical supports and stable conditions.

10. No one person sees the full picture.

Everyone has a limited view, and good explanations pay attention to evidence, context, and the experience of others.

11. Dignity builds real freedom.

People are most able to act when barriers are reduced and conditions support their capacity to choose.

12. Repair is a shared responsibility.

Healing and accountability are strengthened through relationships, community, and structures that support repair.

13. Working with complexity requires staying engaged.

Human problems rarely resolve quickly, and progress often comes from steady attention rather than fast answers.

14. Action and reflection drive change.

People learn through trying things, observing what happens, and adjusting with support.



Implications for Leaders

“Healthy systems protect dignity. Weak systems erode it.”

Dignity-driven leadership does not replace existing leadership practices. It strengthens them by focusing attention on the conditions that shape how people behave. When leaders understand how worth, respect, and agency influence human responses, they make clearer choices about how to structure work, hold conversations, and support change. This perspective helps leaders see patterns that might otherwise be interpreted as resistance, lack of motivation, or personal limitation.

For organizations, this approach highlights the importance of clarity, fairness, relational safety, and predictable structures. Many performance challenges, cultural tensions, and engagement issues trace back to environments that leave people uncertain, overwhelmed, or invisible. When organizations strengthen dignity at all levels, people participate more fully, teams collaborate more effectively, and conflict becomes easier to address.

At a systems level, a dignity lens helps explain why many public and social challenges remain difficult to shift. Issues such as isolation, burnout, violence, and low trust are connected to conditions that weaken dignity in people’s daily lives. Policy and service design that pays attention to relational and contextual realities can reduce friction and create pathways that feel more accessible and responsive. Leaders who take dignity seriously build systems that invite participation rather than discourage it.

Key Insights

- Leadership improves when attention shifts from individual behaviour to the conditions shaping it.
- Many workplace and system challenges reflect environments that weaken dignity.
- Strengthening worth, respect, and agency improves engagement and relational safety.
- Organizations function better when expectations are clear and people feel they matter.
- Systems that support dignity help communities become more connected, stable, and resilient.



Ways to Work with Forge

“Dignity-Driven Leadership is possible when dignity becomes the organizing principle.”

Forge supports leaders, organizations, and systems that want to strengthen dignity and improve the conditions shaping human behaviour. Our work combines relational practice, developmental insight, and systems thinking to help people make sense of complexity and design environments that support stability, connection, and agency.

Leadership Development

We offer workshops and programs that help leaders apply dignity-driven practice in their day-to-day work. These sessions focus on clarity, relational skill, psychological safety, and building environments where people can participate more fully.

Practitioner and Workforce Training

Forge provides specialized training for people working with men, families, and communities. This includes tools for reluctant help-seeking, emotional regulation, repair, and creating conversations that support dignity rather than shame.

Organizational Culture and Change

We partner with organizations to strengthen culture, clarify expectations, improve relational safety, and align structures with the realities of human behaviour. This work helps teams collaborate more effectively and respond to challenges with steadiness.

Systems and Policy Partnerships

Forge works with government and community organizations to design services and policies informed by dignity, social health, and contextual understanding. This includes work in relational systems change, men's health, community safety, and violence prevention.

About Forge Forge Centre for Dignity-Driven Leadership is a Canadian certified B Corp focused on strengthening the conditions that help people, organizations, and systems thrive. Founded by Dr. Jeff St. John, Forge brings together research, relational practice, and systems design to support healthier work, community, and service environments. We develop tools, training, and partnerships that help leaders create cultures where people feel they matter, are treated with respect, and have room to act.



Selected References

- Addis, M. E., & Mahalik, J. R. (2003). Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help-seeking. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 5–14.
- Cacioppo, J. T., & Cacioppo, S. (2018). The growing problem of loneliness. *The Lancet*, 391(10119), 426.
- Courtenay, W. H. (2011). *Dying to be men: Psychosocial, environmental, and behavioral correlates of suicide among men*. Routledge.
- Edmondson, A. C. (2019). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth* (2nd ed.). Wiley.
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence - from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- Hicks, D. (2011). *Dignity*. Yale University Press.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227–237.
- Juarrero, A. (2023). *Context changes everything: How constraints create coherence*. MIT Press.
- Killmister, S. (2017). *Taking the measure of autonomy: A four dimensional theory of Self-Governance*. Routledge.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. Bloomsbury Press.



Authors



Jeff St. John, PhD

CEO, Forge

Dr. Jeff St. John is the Founder and CEO of the Forge Centre for Dignity-Driven Leadership, a Canadian B Corp dedicated to strengthening the conditions that support human wellbeing, healthy relationships, and systems change. With over 25 years of research and practice in dignity, development, and relational leadership, Jeff helps leaders, organizations, and communities design environments where people feel they matter, are treated with respect, and have room to act. He is also the co-lead of the Men & Project, a national initiative advancing men's mental health, relational wellbeing, and violence prevention across Canada.





We're not just envisioning a better future. We're actively re-shaping it.

Forge is designed to bring dignity-driven learning, practice and leadership to the centre of our communities, organizations and systems. Our evidenced-based tools and programs blend digital resources and in-person engagement to support individuals and practitioners.

For questions, reach out to us at info@forgecentre.com

