

Why the Palm Tree Wins

What hurricanes taught me about leadership that business schools never could

Part I · By Dennis F. Bonilla

There is a lesson hiding in plain sight across the Caribbean, the South Pacific, and every coastline where hurricanes and typhoons come ashore.

It isn't taught in business school. It isn't discussed in most leadership seminars. And yet, if we paid closer attention, it could fundamentally change how we choose leaders, build organizations, and prepare ourselves for the storms we all eventually face.

The lesson is this:

The strongest tree in the forest is not always the one left standing after the storm.

For most of my life, I believed leadership was about becoming an oak. Strong. Steady. Unmovable. Dependable. The person others could lean on when everything around them seemed uncertain.

That belief served me well. I spent decades in environments where strength wasn't simply admired—it was required. As a young nuclear reactor operator aboard a United States Navy submarine, there was no room for hesitation. Every valve, every procedure, every decision carried consequences. Later, operating commercial nuclear power plants and eventually leading organizations, universities, and corporate learning teams, I discovered something surprising.

The technical challenges weren't usually what brought people down. Life did. A divorce. The loss of a child. A career setback. An unexpected diagnosis. A layoff after decades of loyal service. A public failure. The death of a dream.

Storms have an uncanny way of ignoring résumés. No amount of education, experience, or executive title grants immunity from life's hurricanes. I know because I have lived through more than a few.

There were seasons when I believed everything I had built was coming apart. There were moments when the safest place in my life seemed to be behind a smile while privately wondering how I would ever put the pieces back together. There were chapters filled with grief so profound that language itself seemed inadequate.

And yet, looking back over more than seven decades of living, I realize something that escaped me while I was trying so hard to stay strong. Strength alone wasn't what carried me through. Something else did.

The Wrong Hero

Business magazines love heroic stories. We celebrate founders who never quit. CEOs who never blink. Leaders who never show weakness. Movies reinforce the same image. The hero stands firm. Never backs down. Never bends. Never breaks.

But nature tells a different story. After major hurricanes, people are often surprised by what they see. Massive oak trees that have stood for generations lie uprooted across roads and neighborhoods. Beside them stand palm trees. Bent. Twisted. Their fronds shredded. Their trunks curved in ways that almost seem impossible. Yet they are alive.

They survived not because they resisted the storm. They survived because they surrendered to forces they could not control.

That distinction changed the way I think about leadership. The oak believes its strength lies in resisting. The palm understands its strength lies in adapting. One fights the wind. The other dances with it.

My First Hurricane

Long before I ever thought about leadership philosophies, I experienced hurricanes as a teenager growing up in Puerto Rico. Anyone who has lived through one knows the strange quiet that comes beforehand. The sky changes. The air becomes heavy. People prepare. Windows are covered. Supplies are gathered. Families wait.

Then comes the wind. Not ordinary wind. Wind that seems determined to rearrange the world. Trees bow until you wonder how they can possibly remain rooted. Roofs disappear. Power lines surrender. Entire neighborhoods change overnight.

The morning after always tells the story. The trees that insisted on remaining rigid often paid the highest price. The palms looked wounded. But they were still standing.

At the time, I thought little about it. Years later, life would make sure I understood.

Life Doesn't Ask Permission

One of the greatest misconceptions about resilience is that it belongs only to extraordinary people. It doesn't. Resilience is ordinary. It belongs to parents raising children. To nurses working double shifts. To veterans rebuilding civilian lives. To teachers who show up every morning. To entrepreneurs whose first company failed. To caregivers who quietly shoulder impossible burdens. To anyone who wakes up after heartbreak and chooses to continue.

Most of us don't volunteer for our defining moments. They arrive uninvited. Life doesn't ask permission before introducing suffering. It simply knocks. Sometimes it doesn't even knock. It kicks the door open.

The question isn't whether storms will come. The question is what kind of tree we have become before they arrive.

Jennifer Changed Everything

No parent imagines attending the funeral of a child. There are losses that divide life into before and after. For me, losing my daughter Jennifer was one of them.

People often ask how someone survives something like that. The honest answer is... you don't. Not in the way you imagine. The person who existed before the storm never fully returns. You become someone else. Grief doesn't simply pass through your life. It changes the architecture of your soul.

And yet, over time, I discovered something unexpected. Being changed is not the same as being destroyed. That realization became the seed of an idea that would take decades to fully understand.

Perhaps resilience isn't about returning to who we once were. Perhaps resilience is learning to become someone new without losing who matters most. That is what the palm tree had been teaching me all along.

The Leadership Mistake

Organizations often promote the strongest performer. The smartest engineer. The highest salesperson. The most technically accomplished expert. Those qualities matter. But they don't necessarily prepare someone to lead human beings.

Leadership is not tested during predictable quarters or favorable economic cycles. Leadership reveals itself during uncertainty. When layoffs become unavoidable. When projects fail. When trust is broken. When people lose confidence. When fear enters the room.

Anyone can lead when the weather is perfect. Storms reveal character. And character, unlike confidence, cannot be manufactured overnight. It is grown. Slowly. Quietly. One difficult season at a time.

To be continued in Part II: "Bent, Twisted, But Never Broken," where Dennis develops the Palm Principle into a practical leadership philosophy, connects it to Peter Koestenbaum's "Attitude is Always Superior to Circumstance," explores why adaptability outperforms rigidity, and concludes with the manifesto that defines The Bonilla Philosophy.