

Why the Palm Tree Wins

What Hurricanes Taught Me About Leadership That Business Schools Never Could

Part II — Bent, Twisted, But Never Broken · By Dennis F. Bonilla

There is a phrase that has lived quietly beneath nearly every chapter of my life. I didn't invent it. Life did. Eventually I gave it words.

Bent. Twisted. But Never Broken.

When people first hear that phrase, they often assume it is about endurance. They think it means hanging on, refusing to quit, gritting your teeth until the storm passes. That interpretation isn't wrong. It just isn't complete.

The deeper lesson isn't about surviving the storm. It's about allowing the storm to transform you without allowing it to define you. There is an enormous difference.

The Myth of Returning to Normal

Whenever a natural disaster strikes, reporters inevitably ask the same question: "When will things return to normal?" It's a comforting question. It assumes that if we wait long enough, enough debris will be cleared, enough buildings rebuilt, enough power restored, everything can simply become what it once was.

Life doesn't work that way. Neither does leadership. After every major event in my life, there was no returning to normal. Not after discovering at eighteen that my mother wasn't dead, as I had been told for years, but alive. Not after burying my daughter Jennifer. Not after careers that seemed secure suddenly disappeared. Not after beginning entirely new chapters at ages when many people were planning retirement.

Each storm permanently altered the landscape. The question became: "Who do I choose to become now?"

Palm trees don't return to their previous shape after a hurricane. Look closely. Many of them carry permanent curves in their trunks. Scars. Evidence. History written in wood. Those curves are not defects. They are signatures of survival. Perhaps the same is true of us.

Peter Koestenbaum Changed the Way I Thought

Shortly after Jennifer's death, I discovered a book that arrived in my life exactly when I needed it — Peter Koestenbaum's *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness*. I have often said that books enter our lives when we're finally ready to hear them.

His philosophy didn't erase my grief. It gave me language for continuing despite it. One sentence has accompanied me for decades.

“Attitude is always superior to circumstance.”

Those words became my email signature. Not because they sounded inspirational. Because they had become necessary.

Circumstances cannot always be controlled. Attitude always can. At least eventually. Not immediately after tragedy. Not while tears are still fresh. Not while shock still occupies every waking moment. But eventually...

Every one of us reaches a crossroads. We cannot choose what happened. We can choose who we become because it happened. That is where leadership begins. Not in authority. Not in titles. Not in organizational charts. Leadership begins with the decision that circumstance will not write the final chapter.

The Leadership Diamond—and the Palm Tree

Koestenbaum introduced the Leadership Diamond: Vision. Reality. Ethics. Courage. Each supports the others. Together they form a framework for extraordinary leadership.

Over the years I found myself asking another question. What allows a leader to keep living inside that diamond when life becomes unbearable? What keeps vision alive after disappointment? What keeps ethics intact under pressure? What keeps courage standing after repeated failure?

My answer became increasingly simple. Resilience. Not resilience as toughness. Resilience as flexibility.

The palm tree doesn't compromise its identity. It compromises its position. There is wisdom in knowing the difference. Too many leaders confuse flexibility with weakness. The opposite is often true. Rigid leaders break relationships. Flexible leaders preserve them. Rigid organizations defend yesterday. Adaptive organizations invent tomorrow.

The world isn't rewarding the strongest organizations anymore. It is rewarding the most adaptable ones. Nature figured that out millions of years ago. Business is just catching up.

The Greatest Promotion I Ever Received

People often ask me what the most important promotion of my career was. Was it leading universities? Building corporate learning organizations? Serving as Chief Learning Officer? Executive Dean? Vice President? Chief Strategy Officer? None of them.

The greatest promotion I ever received wasn't printed on a business card. It happened the first time someone trusted me enough to tell me they were struggling. That moment changed my understanding of leadership forever.

Leadership isn't about people believing in you. Leadership is about people believing they can be honest with you. The strongest leaders don't create followers. They create safety. Because growth never begins where fear lives.

Safecrackers Don't Use Force

I often describe myself as a **Safecracker Unlocking Human Potential**. People usually smile. Then they ask what I mean.

A safecracker doesn't attack a vault with a sledgehammer. He listens. He studies. He understands the mechanism. He respects the complexity inside. Human beings aren't much different. You cannot force people to become their best. You create conditions where they unlock themselves.

Every person carries gifts. Every person carries wounds. Sometimes they're the same thing. The very experience someone wants to hide often becomes the source of their greatest contribution. I know. Because my own wreckage eventually became my message.

Comedy Taught Me Something Leadership Couldn't

People are often surprised that I perform stand-up comedy. They wonder how someone who has experienced deep personal loss finds joy in making strangers laugh. The answer is simple. Comedy taught me something leadership books rarely discuss. Timing. Not comedic timing. Human timing.

When you're on stage, you learn very quickly that silence isn't your enemy. Silence is where transformation happens. You tell the joke. Then you wait. The audience processes. Something connects. Then comes the laughter. The pause matters as much as the punchline.

Leadership is remarkably similar. Too many leaders rush to fill silence. They answer before listening. They solve before understanding. They speak before people feel heard. The palm tree never argues with the wind. It listens first. There is extraordinary wisdom in that.

The Storm Is Not Your Identity

One of the greatest mistakes people make is allowing their worst day to become their identity. "I was fired." "I failed." "I got divorced." "I lost someone." "I made a terrible decision." No. Those things happened. They are chapters. They are not titles.

The palm tree is not the hurricane. It is the survivor of the hurricane. Never confuse the two.

Why the Palm Tree Wins

So why does the palm tree win? Not because it is stronger. Not because it is taller. Not because it resists more. It wins because it understands a truth many leaders spend decades learning.

Strength without flexibility becomes fragility. Humility creates resilience. Adaptability creates endurance. Purpose creates direction. Hope creates movement. Love creates legacy. And character... character creates leaders.

The Bonilla Philosophy

After a lifetime of hurricanes—both literal and figurative—I have come to believe leadership can be reduced to one simple principle. Not simplistic. Simple. Here it is.

Leadership is not measured by how firmly you stand when the weather is fair. It is revealed by how gracefully you bend when life becomes a hurricane. Anyone can look strong on a sunny day. The storm reveals who we really are. The oak earns admiration. The palm earns another sunrise.

If there is one idea I hope survives long after I am gone, it is this:

Don't spend your life trying to become impossible to bend. Spend your life becoming impossible to break.

Because careers will change. Relationships will change. Health will change. Technology will change. Organizations will change. The world will continue changing faster than any of us would like.

The question has never been whether storms are coming. They are. The question is whether we have built lives capable of bending without surrendering our purpose.

I have spent more than seventy years learning that lesson. From a childhood marked by uncertainty. From the silent service aboard a submarine. From operating nuclear reactors. From classrooms and boardrooms. From laughter in comedy clubs. From unimaginable grief. From remarkable second chances.

Every chapter has whispered the same truth. The strongest people I have ever known were rarely the loudest. They were the ones who refused to let suffering have the last word.

So, when your next hurricane arrives—and it will—remember the palm tree. Stand tall when you can. Bend when you must. Keep your roots deep. Protect what matters most. And when the winds finally grow quiet, don't waste time wondering why the storm chose you.

Instead, look around. Someone nearby is still searching for hope. Become their palm tree.

Because in the end, leadership isn't about surviving the storm alone. It's about standing afterward, scarred but still rooted, so others discover they can survive theirs too.

That, more than any title I've ever held, is the leader I have spent a lifetime trying to become.