

Bob Gunn, Editor

Resiliency

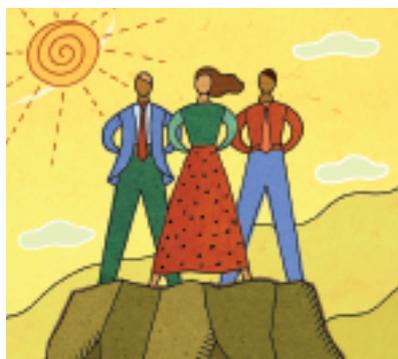
BY ROBERT W. GUNN &
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“How cute,” we thought, encountering a flock of chickens at a beachfront park on our first morning in Kauai. During the next few days, we drove all over the island and saw them everywhere. Roosters. Hens. Baby chicks.

“That’s because of Iniki,” a friend explained. One of the most powerful storms in Hawaii’s recorded history, Hurricane Iniki devastated Kauai in September 1992. It swept away huge chunks of beach, destroyed 1,400 houses, and damaged 5,000 more. The story goes that Iniki blew apart coops that housed chickens of European extraction as well as fighting cocks from the Philippines. The task of rounding up escaped chickens was a low priority in the massive cleanup, so generations of wild chickens ensued.

The wild chickens may amuse, but Iniki offers serious lessons. It laid entire forests bare, stripping away lush greenery and leaving dull, brown hillsides. In very short order, however, Kauai began to rebound.

“To be alive is to be able to *respond*,” notes an exhibit at Kokee Natural History Museum, located in the heart of Kauai. “Forest plants and animals that survived the extra-



ordinary stress of the bruising winds of Hurricane Iniki responded in some amazing and beautiful ways. Birds foraged resourcefully in new food sources, while surviving trees and plants bloomed out of season. Life on the mountain paused not a day as the forest immediately embarked on its recovery.”

That’s the way of all things natural—including human beings. No matter how much stress we are subjected to, no matter how much damage we suffer, our bodies have an inborn resiliency. If we nick a finger cleaning carrots, we don’t have to

drop everything for days and concentrate on healing the wound. Our innate body wisdom goes to work: Beneath a scab, our finger becomes whole again. Good thing, too. If we had to add “healing hurts” to our lists of things to do, we might never again go to the kitchen to cook or, indeed, get out of bed!

In other words, even though nobody is entirely healthy all the time, everybody benefits from “innate health.” This is true physically and emotionally: As intense as feelings of loss may be when a relationship ends or a divorce is finalized, we go on to love again. By 1998 almost half of all marriages involved at least one spouse who had been previously married, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. (A century earlier, Oscar Wilde called a second marriage the “triumph of hope over experience.”)

As inspired as we are by the resiliency of the body and the heart, we are awed by the innate health of the spirit. One example is found on the DVD of *The Lives of Others*, the 2006 film focused on the repression of East Germans via surveillance and intimidation by the secret police (Stasi). One of its stars, the late Ulrich Mühe, had lived in East Ger-

many. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, he was one of many to ask to see their Stasi files; he was shocked to discover that among those listed as informants against him were members of his acting troupe and even his wife. And, yet, in an interview, Mühe expressed no bitterness, merely sadness at “the choices people felt they had to make.”

We are inspired, too, by signs of resiliency and innate health in corporations. It’s hard to kill the human spirit—no matter how discouraging the results, how angry the customers, or how difficult it is working under the thumb of the most egregiously self-centered boss.

For example, consider a publishing company in New York. The firm owned a book list that was pure gold and included more best sellers than the next three publishing houses combined. Its reputation attracted aspiring editors looking for fame and fortune—many of whom did go on to become well-known in their own right. The company was a money machine, and its profits were the envy of the industry.

Then “CEO Iniki” took the top job. He yelled, screamed, and insulted everyone. Sure, he could be charming from time to time, but those were exceptions. The booksellers hated him because he played favorites, demanded up-front payments on hot properties, and refused to ship to accounts that had—in his view—slighted him in various ways. The staff cringed in fear, mostly avoiding the corner office. Demands for ever-increasing returns caused divisional leaders to put off investing in infrastructure, facilities, or systems. Profits teetered on a shaky foundation. Everyone except the despot knew that he was killing the goose that was laying the golden eggs.

Cracks began to appear, such as author and editor defections, fourth quarter earnings surprises, and bookseller returns. The CEO’s reaction was to scream that much louder and humiliate employees that much more publicly. But as he wound himself up, his executive team became quieter, calmer, and more determined to hold true to their values. The harder the CEO pushed, the more energy the team built to fuel eventual change. They never lost confidence in *how* the game would end even though no one could see *when* it would happen.

If this were a movie, it would have ended with a bang: a high-noon showdown that left blood and guts—or perks and bonuses, at least—splattered on the boardroom walls. But CEO Iniki’s tenure ended with a whimper: He left voluntarily, taking a job at a much smaller company because, he said, he wanted a more entrepreneurial experience!

In fact, the clarity and solidity of the executive team became a mirror in which the CEO saw an uncomfortable reflection. What stood out was the absurdity of his emotional outbursts. He felt out of place, like he no longer fit, so he simply took himself out of the game.

Had damage been done? Of course. But the tyrant was replaced by the kind of stalwart, inspiring leader who connects with people’s inner aspirations and shows how it’s possible to realize them here and now. The new CEO fostered an environment in which staff could “respond in some amazing and beautiful ways.” Under his guidance, it took only a few months to restore the enthusiasm of employees and the trust of retailers. Defectors were wooed back to the fold. Investments were made in necessary infrastruc-

ture (the plans had been drawn secretly during the previous CEO’s term). Today, the company is capably coping with a changing market that faces challenges from the Internet and lower rates of book readership.

What are the lessons?

First, this company’s recovery from the hurricane force of an arrogant CEO wasn’t due to some sort of external intervention. It was the inescapable resurgence of its innate health, its organizational vitality.

Second, the more common response to difficult bosses—resistance—actually drains productive energy. It takes a lot of effort to hold up protective walls. Quiet resolve, however, creates its own energy for change—if for no other reason than we don’t have to fight our own thinking. Momentum builds, and it’s as if someone is filling a vase drop by drop. No outbursts, no demands, no passive aggressive resistance—just an understated calm that buffers the toxic CEO.

The important lesson is to not lose hope, even when organizational vitality is buried beneath layers of dysfunction. A deep reservoir of human energy exists in every organization. The most pernicious disasters will prove a dim memory due to the inner resiliency that guides us to the far shore. For organizations, as well as for individuals, “To be alive is to be able to *respond*.” ■

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