

***Windsurfing Change:  
Leadership Resilience in Turbulent Times***

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***In Memory of Evelyn Mann  
A resilient resident of Hood River Valley.***

**INTRODUCTION**

As a specialist in change management, I was delighted when Connie Nice, coordinator of The History Museum in Hood River Oregon, invited me to speak about leadership resilience during turbulent times. My professional relationship with The History Museum began in 2004 and has developed over the last five years through a series of projects: History Begins at Home: Family Memory Making Workshops, coaching leadership and change management, and donations from our family estate in Hood River. It is always a delight to work with The History Museum team. Thanks for an opportunity to be of service and to the sponsors for today's session on leadership resilience.

Although born in the United States and a graduate of the old Wy'East High School in Hood River, Australia has been my home base for many years. With a foot in both countries, I would like to open this session by acknowledging America's most recent leadership change with the election of President Barack Obama. Putting politics to one side, Obama's campaign rally cry triggered a wave of optimistic energy around the world, including Australia! His focus on *hope* over fear and an attitude of *yes-we-can* is part of today's message.

In Australia, today's sessions would be opened with an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land (Aboriginal custodians). Honoring that tradition in a playful way in another country, I would like to acknowledge Hood River as the windsurfing capital of America. My affection for Hood River compels me to use wind surfing as a metaphor to explore characteristics of resilience during our time together today. According to Jane Parker, a resident of Hood River, businesswoman, and avid wind surfer: *Balance is the key to the sport of windsurfing! Balancing your body with the forces of nature: when you loose the balance, the forces take over and only the truly addicted, resilient windsurfer actually can reclaim the nerve, strength and desire to risk yet another tug with Mother Nature. The force with which a windsurfer hits the water or her equipment on a fall or when she loses balance, is enough to make many "rookie sailors" take up another sport before the fun has even begun! It is a sport of physical combat in the early stages and even later when new challenges or tricks are learned, and only the very resilient sailor survives to say she is truly addicted and in love!*

I was intrigued by Jane's reference to *balance*. In my most recent newsletter from *The Gawler Foundation* in Australia, health was described as a dynamic state of *balance*. When balance is established and sustained, health, happiness, and true wellbeing flows. The focus of the Gawler Foundation's *Life and Living Programs* are on choice, *hope*, and developing confidence in our ability to regain and sustain balance. Let's use the windsurfing metaphor today to reflect on resilience, balance, and how emotions – such as *hope*—make a difference to leadership effectiveness during times of change.

## **DEFINING RESILIENCE**

In 2004, my book *Leading With Passion* was published.<sup>1</sup> This book reflects nearly thirty years of professional experience in human resource development and incorporated my PhD research on the director's role during times of change completed at the University of Western Sydney. Through the PhD research and my private practice, I have interviewed or coached hundreds of leaders on change management in Australia, the United States, England, and Canada. One of the key outcomes has been the importance of emotional intelligence for leadership effectiveness. The baseline criterion for a 21<sup>st</sup> century leader includes emotional intelligence or EQ, which an executive recruitment consultant described as someone with contagious enthusiasm, energy, and resilience. Resilience is one of six scales related to leadership effectiveness, according to the researchers who invented the *EQ Map*.<sup>2</sup> The other five leadership scales are Intentionality, Interpersonal Connection, Creativity, Trust Radius, and Intuition.<sup>3</sup>

The definition of Resilience is your ability to bounce back, to be flexible, to retain a sense of curiosity and hopefulness about the future, in the face of adversity. It's measured over time, not in our immediate response to a setback. Resilience also has something to do with our immune system. When we are physically and emotionally balanced, our resilience is strong. Everyone's life journey includes tough times, failures, and setbacks. People with resilience seem to have an inner source of energy to draw on during tough times. They use intuition and creativity to balance action, rest, and renewal.

What are three characteristics of resilience in action? The first characteristic is remembering personal stories that assure us that "Yes-We-Can" overcome obstacles. The second characteristic is flexibility. Finding one's center of balance, bending like bamboo in the wind and being like an Oregon pine tree with roots wrapped round the rocks so we are not blown over by winds of change. The third characteristic is knowing how to renew inner energy by building in time to be intentionally still (meditation). Our immune system can only renew itself during deep sleep or meditation.

## **REMEMBERING PERSONAL STORIES**

The *Sydney Morning Herald* recently featured a story about survivors who cheat death and learn to live again.<sup>4</sup> The article explored what helps people bounce back after incredible challenges. One of the case studies featured a 46-year old nurse in Sydney who accidentally fell eleven meters while cleaning windows in her apartment. She survived against unbelievable odds and said her recovery was shaped by three factors. The first factor was an intuitive flash, a felt presence that quietly assured her she would survive. Our intuition or spirituality whispers all of the time, if we make time to listen. The second factor was the unwavering support of family and friends. The third, and most important factor was – *hope*. That nurse is currently using her story to set up programs in Sydney to teach people simple tools for holding onto *hope*. For example, thinking: this obstacle is for today, tomorrow is another day or, this glass is half-full, not half-empty.

Today's session is dedicated to Evelyn Mann, a resilient resident of Hood River who passed away in January 2009. Evelyn had been one a friend to my parents (Lorene and Herschel 'Jerry' Johnson) for forty years. She was a resilience role model for me after my father died in 2003 and I was appointed co-executor for the family estate. It was a challenging project. During the most turbulent times, Evelyn would say, "Honey, remember, this too will change."

Researchers working with survivors, such as the Sydney nurse or local resident Evelyn Mann, say mental toughness defines resilience and identified four key elements: a strong core self-belief of 'yes-I-can'; positive motivation; focus or concentration on a clear intention; and the ability to thrive on stress. While optimism can be learned, mental toughness is more innate – it's a strong survival instinct – it's a belief that *if* I can survive this (incident), I *can* survive anything!

**Exercise:** Close your eyes for a moment. Remember a time when you faced what looked like an insurmountable obstacle. Think of a time when you turned a set back into a success or shifted an obstacle into an opportunity. What attitudes, feelings, or actions in your story can you use to windsurf today's tough times? Remember what you did to overcome that situation. Visualize the face of someone who gave you their unwavering support—you *knew* you could phone them at 3:00 AM and they would be there for you. Now, visualize the face of someone to whom you give *your* unwavering support. Feel how your heart expands knowing there is always support around you.

## **FLEXIBILITY**

When I first tried windsurfing in Australia, my keen audience was very impressed when I got up on the board and pulled the sail up first time. I was determined to go straight down the lagoon without falling off. My problem became immediately obvious. The wind had changed direction and picked up speed. It took me sailing down the lagoon and I had no idea how to stop or turn. I was rigid with fear. I fell off to stop, when all I had to do was *be flexible enough* to step around the mast to change direction.

We all tend to use familiar or habitual patterns when reacting to change challenges. While this may feel like a comfortable automatic response, it may not be the most productive response. Moving beyond normal responses, both physical and psychological, means pushing our senses wide open to see-hear-feel how we can be more flexible. For example, one of my colleagues in Australia coaches her clients to create a more flexible mind-set by asking them to walk backwards through their home, naked, eating strawberries. You'd be surprised how well it works.

**Exercise:** Think of a time when you rejected inflexible thinking. What did you do? What attitude, feelings, or actions can you use to windsurf today's turbulent changes? Personally, I find activities such as Tai Chi, Chi Gong, or Dru Yoga helpful for unblocking energy and staying flexible. Feeling physically flexible creates a more flexible attitude to life.

## **RENEWAL**

The connection between renewal and resilience under pressure is well known. Remember, our immune system can only repair itself when we are asleep or meditating.<sup>5</sup> Taking energy breaks is essential for maintaining our emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing. It's even more important when we are windsurfing tough times--and tougher to do—because we forget to build in periods for rest and renewal.

We need to make time to be intentionally still. Aim for at least twenty minutes a day as a precious practice and two sessions a day after a serious loss or set back. If that's too much, then just stop running around for three minutes. Sit down somewhere quiet. Breathe deeply. And visualize successfully windsurfing -- up and down the beautiful Columbia River! In my book *Leading With Passion*, the director of an art museum in Canada said she swam twenty minutes a day, every day. The silky feeling of water sliding over her shoulders helped her shift the burdens she felt as an executive director of a non-profit organization. She also described the importance of continually filling your inner well by doing what you love or being creative in a way that makes your heart sing—paint, dance, play music, or sing.

**Exercise:** What do you do for energy renewal?

## **CONCLUSION**

There are five tools for windsurfing change. The first is remembering personal stories of strength. If you got through a patch of white water windsurfing before, you can do it again. Second, find your inner sense of balance – bend like bamboo, grip like a pine tree. Third, make time for energy renewal. Our immune system needs rest and nutrition. As a change management consultant, I coach leadership effectiveness by reminding people that we can create the change we want to be. Willingness is our fourth tool. Be willing

to change. Martin Seligman, leader of the school of positive psychology, keeps reminding us that adults are free to change.<sup>6</sup> We are not prisoners of the past.

The fifth and last tool for resilience in turbulent times is *hope*. During the February 2009 bush fires in Victoria, Australia, 1,700 homes were lost. Someone said the fire fighter and resident's resilience was based on *hope*. Even though many of them lost everything they owned, family members, and friends, they did not view themselves as victims, disabled, or diminished in any way. They knew their lives were going to be different. They also knew they would achieve rebuilding their communities – based on *hope*.

In closing, I'd like to share a story from a popular writer in Australia who described his delight in watching President Obama talk about the importance of *hope*. This writer was annoyed at critics in Australia (and the USA) who derided optimism and hope in the face of tough times as juvenile. In response, he said, *Emotions matter – hope is a commodity that plays a central role in achieving change. Hope gives us direction; it doesn't guarantee a destination. And Obama [like leaders in today's session] might make a difference. But only because so many have dared hope that he [and we] can.*<sup>7</sup>

## PROFILE

Dr. Sherene Suchy is a change management consultant born in America and based in Australia. She is the author of *Leading With Passion: Change Management in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum* and a contributor to *Museum Philosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and *Museum Management and Marketing*.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Suchy, S. 2004. *Leading with passion: change management in the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper, R. & Sawaf, A. 1997. *Executive EQ: emotional intelligence in leadership and organisations*. New York: Grosset/Putnam.

<sup>3</sup> AIT and Essi Systems. 1996. *EQ Map: Interpretation Guide*. San Francisco: Essi Systems.

<sup>4</sup> O'Dwyer, E. 2009. Survivors who cheat death and learn to live again. *News. The Sydney Morning Herald*. January 24-25. p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Gawler, I. 2009. *Healthy living newsletter*. Autumn. Melbourne: Gawler Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Deveson, A. 2003. *Resilience*. Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin.

<sup>7</sup> Glover, R. 2009. Emotions matter. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. January 24-25. p. 22.