

**GUEST: THOMAS KAULUKUKUI JR. ON LEADERSHIP**

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It seems to me, just from my experience throughout life, that one of the greatest factors in the success of people and organizations is leadership. For those of us who are in a position to help foster and teach leadership, to do so effectively, you've gotta have a leadership course, with a curriculum that is dedicated to the principles which have proven themselves over time to develop and foster leadership in our people.

**Former Circuit Court judge, and trustee of the Queen Liliuokalani Trust, Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. on the development of successful leaders, next on Long Story Short.**

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. needed to look no further than his close family members for examples of inspiring leadership. As his role models, the values they imparted helped shape Tom's character, and served him well in the jungles of Vietnam, in the classroom, on the football field, on the bench as a Circuit Court judge, and now as the managing trustee of the Queen Liliuokalani Trust. The trust assists orphaned and destitute children of Hawaiian ancestry. Drawing on a lifetime of public service and leadership, Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. is intent upon fostering discipline and scholarship in young people, and instilling the core values of Hawaiian culture to build future leaders in the native Hawaiian community.**

My definition is that leadership is influence; nothing more and nothing less. If you have influence, and can influence people and their thoughts, and emotions, and actions, then you have leadership ability. That says nothing about your morality, because Hitler had leadership ability. But in a very condensed sense, I think leadership is influence. And learning to influence in a positive way people's thoughts, and emotions, and actions are the core of leadership, I think. **What do you think the biggest, or the most common mistake is that would-be leaders make?**

They underestimate the power of people. One of the most important things that leaders have to know, one of the most important attributes, is to deal with

people well, and to understand them. And you can't influence them if you don't understand people.

**So you have to be able to read them well, really listen?**

Really listen, understand what motivates them. These things are really important.

**How do you know what motivates people? How can you tell?**

You have to live long, and get old, basically. Or spend a lot of time studying people. I always thought it was important in the development of my own leadership, to spend time with people of all different kinds. So, if you look at my resume, I've done just about everything. I've sold Cokes in the circus, and built roads, and done everything. And what it did is help me understand people at all different levels of education, different character. When you're in the service, for example, you meet people from all walks of life. And if you pay attention, and try to learn from those experiences, I think that'd be a great help. I think one of the main purposes and functions of a leader is morale. Whether your organization is large or small, I think that's one of the main functions of the leader, especially the top leaders. So I think some people, you have to put your arm around, some people just need other motivation. The drill sergeant's saying, You want a size nine and a half up your rear end? And they motivate you that way.

**Are you comfortable doing both?**

I'm comfortable doing both. Yeah. 'Cause it's the way I've learned it. Yeah. But I think it depends on the person. And people get dispirited because they lose heart, they lose faith, perhaps, in the mission of what they're doing. They don't feel that they're respected, or supported. And all those things come in. And I think it's a complex question that depends on the person you're dealing with.

**Did you ever have to make a decision that there was just no good way to deal with it? You know, like, it's either me or him, or just, you know, there's just no way you can compromise, and you just have to pick something you're gonna regret one way or the other.**

Yeah, many times. Yeah. If you're in leadership positions, you're gonna run into that. You have to make—the key about leadership is you have to make a decision. Because then the people and the organization can move on. If you don't make a decision, then you're stuck in limbo. I think it was a psychologist said that it's better to have a horrible ending, than horrors without end. So you have to make the decision, and then you have to deal with the consequences of it. So, I've had to do it a number of times, and what I've learned is I keep in mind one of my machine gunners who was from Tennessee had this bit of homespun wisdom. He says, If you have to eat a frog, don't look at it too long. It doesn't get any better, is what he was saying.

**And could you do that? Could you move on, and not let it bother you?**

I've learned to move on. It is not the case that it doesn't bother you. If you have a heart, it should bother you. But it shouldn't cause you to be dysfunctional. At some point, you just have to deal with it.

**Thomas Kaulukukui's father, Thomas Sr., was Hawaii's U.S. Marshall, and an Office of Hawaiian Affairs trustee known for peacemaking. He also was an educator, and a standout college athlete. In fact, Tom's father was the University of Hawaii's first All American Football Player. And as a coach, he left an indelible mark on hundreds of young men, and laid the foundation for the leadership development of Thomas Jr.**

**When can kids start learning to be leaders? I mean, how young is too young?**

I think as long as they can understand, they're old enough to understand things, they can learn to be leaders. I recall when I was probably five or six years old, my dad would travel and go to coaching clinics on the mainland. And we had a red front door; so we'd stand outside the red front door—

**That was your mom, right? The Chinese side.**

Yeah, Chinese; red front door. So, my mom would stand with my sister, who's a couple years older, myself, and my brother, who was couple years younger, a year younger, actually. And my dad would put his suitcase down, and he would kneel before me, and while this is probably not politically correct for today, he would put his hands on my shoulder, because I was the boy. And he would tell me, You're the man of the house now, help your mom take care of everybody else. 'Cause I was the oldest boy. And I was only five or six years old. And I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but I tell you what, I was sure of something, that my dad just put some responsibility on me, whatever that was. That he was counting on me to do something, because he was leaving, and I was next in line. And I was only five or six years old. I understood that. So that was leadership training, right there.

**So then, did you resolve to be the best little boy you could be while your dad was away?**

I wish I could say I did. [CHUCKLE] But I probably didn't.

**There are so many opportunities to show leadership when kids are young. I mean, there are so many tough deals for kids, because some kids are just inherent—I guess childhood can be a very mean place to be.**

Yup; it can. It's a challenge, and you hope, at that point, you have good parents or an adult with proper character education who will help the kids. A lot of the kids don't have it. Maybe we were lucky, we had good training, but they didn't. So somebody's gotta train them.

**So they lash out, instead of think about other ways to approach—**

They don't think about what they—

**Or go the other way, and cower.**

Or they don't think about what they're doing. The consequences of what they're doing.

**You've had a long period of leadership in different roles. Can you mention any particular leadership experiences that meant something to you?**

I became a teacher, because my dad was a teacher, and my uncles were teachers, and I always wanted to be a teacher. And actually, one experience that I remember is when I became a teacher. I became a teacher when I was twelve or thirteen. And the event was, there was a baseball clinic in Waimea, and my dad was teaching it. And he normally put the coaches in the grandstand, and he ran the clinic, and then he'd go back and tell the coaches what he was doing. On this particular day, he had about fifty kids; say, between the ages of nine and twelve, thirteen, up to my age. And I always went and helped them. At the time, I was very young. I was the demonstrator, as a matter of fact. Put on the little kids' uniform and demonstrated. Well, on this day, I was just there to help him run the clinic. And I recall that before the clinic started, he put the coaches in the grandstand. The kids were waiting, and he took off his whistle and he put it around my neck, and he said, Run the clinic, I'm gonna coach the coaches. So now, I was in charge of the whole clinic. And I recall, and I can tell you, I did it. I'd been doing it for so long, I felt not one twinge of worry. I knew how to run the clinic. And so, I went and started to run the clinic, and I looked over, and my dad was talking to the coaches. And I knew what he was saying to the coaches. He was saying, Watch how he lines them up; he's gonna put the young kids in the front, because most of them are shorter. Okay; he's gonna turn them in just a moment, so that they're not looking into the sun. You watch; in a minute or two, he's gonna throw grass. So I reached down and I threw grass. He's throwing grass, so he knows which way that the wind is blowing, so he knows which way his voice is carrying. And he will move them around, so they're not looking in the sun, if they can. And I hear his voice. Okay, watch, he'll say, he told the coaches, He's gonna correct that boy in the second row, because his right foot is forward, and the right foot should be in back. So he's gonna pinch his left foot and say, This foot in front. And then, twenty minutes from now, with fifty kids there, he's gonna look over and say, Red hat second row, and he's just gonna do this. And the kid's left leg is still gonna feel the pinch, and he's gonna put his correct foot forward, and he won't have to say one word to make that correction. Okay; all right. And that's what I learned. And on the day that he gave me his whistle, I knew he was saying to me, You're the coach, you're the teacher, go run it. So I like to tell people, I've been a teacher since I was twelve, and I know exactly when I became one.

**And you were ready.**

And I was ready, 'cause I was trained. So that's one example of a—

**And since then, you've always prepared for what you do.**

Yeah.

**It was in the jungles of Vietnam that Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. cultivated some of the leadership skills what would assist him for a lifetime. As a platoon sergeant with the paratroopers, he picked up some of those lessons the hard way.**

We were someplace where another unit got in trouble, and they called us and said, You need to go help them. There's a battle going on, you need to go help them. And you need to get from Point A to Point B, right now. The trouble was, to go from Point A to Point B, you had to go between two hills. General rule, bad idea to go between two hills, because if the enemy is up on both hills, they're gonna ambush you, and you're never gonna get there, you're gonna be dead. So I called my squad leaders together. I ran a platoon of about thirty-five men. And I said, We have to go from Point A to Point B. They looked at the map, they said, We can't go through there. I said, We don't have a choice, because if we don't go through there, by the time we take an alternate route, our people will be dead. So I gave an order. All the people kinda sat around, and they looked at me and they figured out where we were going. And they said, We're not going. Now, think about the magnitude of that problem. Battle commander, give an order, people won't go. Okay. Squad leaders, gave an order, they wouldn't go. I tried to exhort them to move, they wouldn't move, because the consequences were deadly. So finally, at that point, I got my radiotelephone operator, made him saddle up, put on his backpack. I put my mine on. I said to everybody else, If you're afraid, I'll go save them myself. I will fight this battle by myself. But you better hope I get killed, because if I'm not, I'm gonna come back and fix this. Off I went. Took the longest, slowest, smallest ten steps of my life down the trail waiting to hear if anybody else got up. And fortunately, I started hearing people getting up. They got up, and they followed me, and off we went, and we made it all right. Difficult experience. I'm not sure what would have happened if they didn't follow. But one of the things I learned from that is, you gotta lead in front. Can't just tell people to go, especially if it's difficult. You gotta be willing to pick up your rifle, put on your pack, and lead in front.

**And be willing to go it alone.**

And be willing to go it alone, if you have to.

**That's another thing about leadership; it can be a very lonely place.**

Yeah, it can be lonely, but ... you know, it's always been that way. As the saying goes, uneasy rests the head that wears a crown. And ... goes with the territory.

**Following his discharge from the Army, Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. entered graduate school at Michigan State, and started a family. In 1971, he and his wife Joyce returned to Oahu, where he followed in the footsteps of his father, and became a physical education teacher at Kailua High School. He coached wrestling and football. In 1974, his career plan changed. He decided to attend the newly established law school at the University of Hawaii. Afterward, he put his law degree to use, with an emphasis on business litigation. In 1988, a black robe became his uniform as a trial of the First Circuit Court in Honolulu.**

### **So when you have dilemma as a leader, who do you go to?**

Well, sometimes, I talk to my Kitchen Cabinet, who's my wife and my kids. Because when you're up on lofty leadership positions, sometimes you lose sight of the trees. And even when I had some difficult decisions as a judge, where the law intertwined and justice was difficult to see through the forest of the laws, I'd sit down at dinner with my wife and kids and say, Hey, how about this one? And I'd tell them, and I'd say, you know, The law seems to say I have to go here. And you know, they'd say, That's stupid, Dad. You know, and you gotta stop, and you gotta say, if people who don't have training, who just have a common sense of decency and character and justice say that's stupid, it probably is stupid. And maybe you've gotta figure out another way to get where you need to go.

### **But don't you have to use whatever law is there?**

Yeah, but there's usually space in it.

### **You find the space in the—**

You just gotta—

—trees.

—find the space in the trees. Yeah.

### **So do people come to you with their problems?**

Some people do, because I've trained and taught a lot of people. So some people believe, correctly perhaps, that I'm their mentor. And sometimes people come with their problems, and I try not to solve them for them, but just have a discussion, and usually, people have a pretty good idea what's right. They may not be quite clear on the strategy of getting there, but I think the first thing that they have to be clear about is whether their sense of what is right, and just, and correct is a character question. And sometimes, it's just a matter of discussion with them, before they figure out, Yeah, I knew it was right, it was just kinda hard to do.

### **Yeah. You know, you're also a practitioner and a leader of *lua*. And for a long time, there was, and maybe still so, there's a shroud of secrecy over this martial art, this Hawaiian tradition.**

Yeah; traditionally, the art was not practiced by everyone. Mostly by *alii*, and taught at night. Was a secret art. In fact, many of the schools put a large stone in a net above the door, and if you gave the wrong password, they pulled the thing and squashed you. So you didn't get in.

### **To say the least.**

Yeah. Pretty efficient. So there is some secrecy involved in it. What I think is important about cultural arts, a couple things that are important. One is to preserve them as best as you can, because they reflect certain values of the time in which they were practiced. So I think that's important for historical purposes. I've always felt that any martial art, or any art like that should have as its main purpose making us better for the future, helping us be better people for the future. So the core values of *lua*—*lua* means, two, that you should be in balance. Male, female; straight, crooked; wet, dry; hot, cold.

### **Sweet, sour.**

Yeah; sweet, sour. There you go. *Li hing mui*. To be in balance. And so it's an important philosophy of the art. Forget the fighting part of it. All right. The other thing I think that's important about *lua* is to understand that we have roles within our society we have to fulfill, that there is a loving role, and there's a protective role, a warrior role. And I think it's really important for not only Hawaiians, but for our men, especially, and especially our Hawaiian men, to pick up the responsibility that they have in their families and in their communities, because I think that that is an area in which we're not doing well. And my hope is that arts like *lua*, or *hula*, or anything else that will foster the sense of responsibility, especially responsibility in our males, 'cause our women, female leadership is strong, is something that's really important for the Hawaiian community.

### **What happened to the Hawaiian men?**

I wasn't there when all of it happened, but I can hypothesize. There was a point in time where Hawaiian men were in charge of taking care of the gods, feeding the gods. They were in charge of feeding the people and the family, although women also gathered food. They were in charge of defending the tribe, or the valley, or the settlement. They had really important roles, and as the roles changed, they tended to lose those roles. Christianity came in, different god. The islands united, no more battle. A lot of things changed, which helped undermine their roles in society, just as it has happened with many native people. If you want to colonize a people, a few things you have to do. You have to defrock the priests, change the gods, you have to take away the ability to communicate, change the language, disarm the warriors. That's how you do colony. That's what happened to us, like everyone else. So that's the challenge for us, is that our men became depressed. Now, here's an interesting thing, is my uncle and my dad were not depressed. When I was growing up in the 40s and 50s, and even the 60s, people were not complaining about all the things that other people did to them. They just picked up, and moved on.

### **And why didn't that happen to women, as a group?**

Well, this is my theory again. Females can continue to be females, no matter whether they're colonized or not. They still produce children, they still are the backbone of their families. Their roles yet remain. Male roles get undermined, diminished, or diluted, but females are ... females are females. I've become convinced that if there is one thing we can do to uplift the Hawaiian community, it is that, to help the men uplift themselves. We have to pick up the responsibilities that we traditionally have, and fulfill them. Especially in terms of leading our families. We have to make sure that our young people understand that the seeking of knowledge and the acquiring of knowledge is a Hawaiian value. Because sometimes, I don't think that the parents in some of our homes set high standard of education as a value that's a Hawaiian value. It is.

**And your family always had that. I know your dad drove for education. Was that in this family before that?**

It's hard to tell. He was the first of his family to go to college. But there was an event that really changed his life, and the life of our family. Charles Hemenway was one of the original founders of the University of Hawaii, and he was on the Board of Trustees. He had one child who was a son, and that boy died at about the age of twelve of an illness. Well, Charles Hemenway decided that he would help some Hawaiian boys, young men, get their education if they had potential. And he actually helped fund my dad's college education. Charles Hemenway, thankfully, was a great football fan also, so he liked athletes. So there were some athletes that he helped bring to college. Even when there was no University of Hawaii scholarship program, Charles Hemenway had his own scholarship program. It seems to me, just from my experience throughout life, that one of the greatest factors in the success of people and organizations is leadership. When you look at the failure or the weaknesses in the lives of people, or their organization, it's because of poor leadership, lack of leadership, or weak leadership. And I think that leadership is important enough that it should be a course. In some ways, since it will affect our lives, for the rest of our lives, it might be more important than some other courses, which we require in high school and in college. And I'm not gonna insult anybody by mentioning what courses they may be. But there are some courses that I took in high school and college that I have never used since. I've used leadership all of my life. So I think that leadership should not be left to chance. Such as, if you get a college education, you'll be a better leader. You won't. The world is full of, you know, educated derelicts who are not leading very well. So I believe that in order for those of us who are in a position to help foster and teach leadership to do so effectively, you've gotta have a leadership course, with a curriculum that is dedicated to the principles which have proven themselves over time to develop and foster leadership in our people. And I'm particularly interested in doing that for our youth.

**So we know that there are born leaders, but you don't have to be a born leader. You can develop it over time. You can be taught it.**

I think, absolutely. They may be, quote, born leaders, because they have a certain charisma, which tends to motivate people to follow them, or to believe in them. That's the same definition of a conman, by the way. So it doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to be a leader. What I think, no matter what your governance structure is, or your organization, is that somebody needs to be responsible. Someone needs to be responsible. Because when everything goes to hell in a hand basket, and the roof falls in because there's an earthquake, people are gonna look for leadership. And those leaders in organizations aren't always the ones at the top of the structure.

**True.**

They're gonna run to somebody else's office. And in Hawaiian, that's called the *pouhana*, the main post. It's the post that holds up the house. And sometimes, it's not the one that's on the organizational chart, or the top of the organizational chart.

**Right.**

**As I speak, in 2011, Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. serves as the managing trustee of the Queen Liliuokalani Trust. He is an instructor and mentor with various leadership programs. *Mahalo piha*, Thomas Kaulukukui Jr., for sharing your Long Story Short. And thank you for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou*.**

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit [pbshawaii.org](http://pbshawaii.org).

My father and mom were terrific people. They thought character was one of the foundations of being a mature adult and a good adult. And character is one of the top things on my list for development of leadership. My dad had a particular influence upon me, 'cause I'm a boy, and he was an All American athlete, and a coach who was well respected. He was an elder in the church. I had a great example of leadership in my home, in my mom and dad.