

Kūlia i ka nu‘u

Achievement.

Pursue personal excellence.

Strive to reach the summit.

Kūlia i ka nu‘u. Define what achievement is for you, and strive to the highest summit there is.

Pursue personal excellence. Be the best you can possibly be.

Seek achievement that allows you to *Ho‘ohana*, work with purpose and intent, within *‘Imi ola*, a life lived for its highest form.

You will find you *Ho‘omau*; you persist in a way that will cause the good to last, for in striving for the best, you have become your best. As you grow, your *Aloha* has captured more abundance to be shared with others.

Kūlia i ka nu‘u is the Hawaiian value of achievement, and it promotes personal excellence. Excellence is never an accident: It is always intentional, and it always demands more than the norm. Excellence in the achievements you set your sights on will set you apart, for it will color your character with the destiny of leadership. Therefore it is quite understandable that Hawaii’s most legendary teacher of *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* was a queen.

The gift of a Queen

I was a student at the University of Hawaii when I discovered the serene morning pleasures of getting your exercise with a run around Kapi‘olani Park, a verdant oasis between Diamond Head and Waikīkī. So years later, with frequent business trips from the Big Island back to O‘ahu, the promise held for me in staying at Waikīkī hotels was their proximity to the park for my now ritual morning run.

Over the years, the landscape along my run would change as Kapi‘olani Park aged with me, reminding me that nature doesn’t stand still: you need to look carefully so you won’t miss her surprises. I vividly remember the day I first saw one of those great surprises, completely unexpected and so warmly welcomed. Near the zoo and bandstand, and facing the ocean-side walkway was a newly unveiled bronze statue of Queen Kapi‘olani. I stopped to read the inscription at the base of her pedestal, and read:

Queen Kapi‘olani

Queen of Hawaii 1874 – 1891

Kūlia i ka nu‘u

(Strive for the highest)

Wife of King David Kalakaua and founder of

the Kapi‘olani Medical Center for Women and Children.

“The Queen who loved children” was a woman of commanding presence, of easy manner and quiet disposition, ever kind, ever thoughtful of others.

She dedicated her life to the well being of her people.

I was not sure when the statue arrived at the park, for she wasn’t there back when I was still in college, yet her timing for me that day of discovery seemed to be perfect. You see I like to imagine she was waiting for me to learn the meaning of her message. Those words—*Kūlia i ka nu‘u*—would not have meant as much to me back then as they do now, and small as she is in her bronze stature there, shaded over by taller and imposing trees, I may even have passed her by completely. Each time I now have a morning’s opportunity to visit Kapi‘olani Park, my ritual has changed. I pause at the statue, and silently thank the queen for what she has taught me more than one hundred years later. I soak in the encouragement I imagine she would give me as I think of the summit I am currently facing. I never fail to resume my run with a spurt in energy I didn’t have moments earlier. *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* inspires me to be my best, and take actions that matter.

The literal translation of *nu‘u* is summit, or highest place. *Kūlia* is to strive. However *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* is not simply a description the sculptor chose to describe Queen Kapi‘olani; during her lifetime it was widely known by her people as her motto, favorite words she would say often to explain her own beliefs, and to encourage her people to reach constantly, and to reach as high as they could. To act with the spiritual rightness of actions that stem from being at one’s “highest place.”

What waits at your highest place?

As a value that inspires us, *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* presents us with some questions to ask ourselves. What is at the top of my mountain? What waits at the summit for me? What will I find there—at my highest place? More importantly, what do you *seek* there, if you have made the decision to create your own destiny? Have you set your goals high enough, so that their achievement will truly satisfy you?

The images of mountains have always inspired people, and scaling them is considered a monumental feat, whether they be Mt. Everest, Mt. Fuji, or here in Hawaii, the magnificent Mauna Kea (the name means white mountain in Hawaiian, for the snow that often crowns it). They symbolize such vastness in size we are humbled knowing we are just a small part of a world far bigger than ourselves. Ironically, the comfort comes when we realize that we can climb them. In fact, once scaled, we can always climb an even higher mountain, we can always reach further. We will never reach a pinnacle from which we will not be able to set our sights higher. There is always more hope; there is always more promise that waits for us.

Remember those obstacles you stacked up against the more formidable energy of *Ho‘omau*? Well imagine now that you made it: You are celebrating a recent achievement, and enjoying the magnificent view you have up on your summit. When you are soaring at your highest place, your gaze goes across the valleys below toward the next mountain, the higher one you will next set your sights on climbing. Now imagine how small those once-insurmountable obstacles look to you, as they disappear in the refreshing mists that cradle the slopes of your mountain, the mountain you have already conquered. Adversity slips and falls away below you, for the secure footholds are already occupied by your confidence. Once you embark on your next journey and the trek finds you crossing that valley, you need only to look up. The mountain peak you are traveling to always is higher, towering over any obstacle that may be ahead in your path. You can always look up and beyond it, and see your goal.

There’s something about mountain climbing that is so progressive and consequential. You don’t tackle Mount Everest until you’ve scaled some smaller peaks first. Back when I was waitressing at The Third Floor restaurant, I set my next sights on being a captain for better tips and more control. I wasn’t ready to be a manager yet, and I surely didn’t want to own the place! There was a whole journey to be taken, and being a captain was on top of my next peak. For me it happened in another restaurant, one that held that possibility for me, and I became a captain at the Maile Room of the Kahala Hilton Hotel. Thereafter I’d set my sights on managing a restaurant as my next and higher summit.

Striving holds its own rewards.

Then too, there is great pleasure and worth in the act of the striving itself. I absolutely loved being a captain at the Maile Room, and I was very happy working there. While we may be looking for one certain answer as the golden egg or brass ring, we’re also gaining tremendous benefit within the exercise of the *doing*. We are doing all of what comes first. We enjoy the striving itself. It moves us, and infuses us with newfound energy and vitality for the peak we’ll climb next. It serves to charge our battery.

My running is like that. I am fortunate that my metabolism seems to keep my weight where it should be, and it’s an added perk to know that exercise is good for my overall health. However it is the exercise itself that gives me the most satisfaction. So I hit the pavement before the sun does each morning, running way more than the 20 minutes three times per week the doctors recommend to keep you fit, simply feeling it is the best way to start my day. I run alone, for if I can carry on a conversation with someone as I run, I’m not working it enough—I need to push myself harder than that, or it is a social call and not exercise. If I miss a morning to the infrequent island wind and rain, or to catch an early-bird flight or appointment, it takes a lot more willpower to move me out of first gear the rest of the morning: My battery’s not fully charged yet.

There’s another fringe benefit I love that mystifies me in its frequency, yet I wholeheartedly welcome it—in fact I’ve begun to expect it. As I run, thinking about nothing, answers magically pop into my head for problems I had been struggling to solve while sitting at my desk or reaching some meeting’s impasse the day before. These answers come with amazing clarity and certainty. Many of my first thoughts for the chapters of this book came from my early morning runs. They were the reward of the striving.

Be your best, pursue personal excellence

The message in *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* is a simple and direct one: Be your best. Don’t settle for less, for there’s no honor and no reward in aiming lower than you are capable of achieving. Once achieved, excellence has a way of permeating every aspect of what you do. And your personal excellence and pursuit of quality is contagious. It affects everyone you touch in an organization, infecting those around you with zest and vitality. Employees love working for managers they feel are hard-working and dynamic. Employees want to work for managers who want the best, and make it known that nothing less will do.

Consider contagiousness for a moment, and the contagiousness of success in particular. Champion teams seem to get renewed when they get in a huddle—everyone is affected, and everyone wants to be a part of it. When I would interview prospective candidates who had specifically sought out our company, I would hear things like this:

“I’m applying here because I want to be associated with the best there is.”

“I want to work at a place that understands the difference quality can make, and I want to work with other people who are looking for quality too.”

“I want to be proud of what I do, where I am, and who I associate with. I want people to recognize that I’m part of the best there is when I tell them where I work.”

Personal pride is important to people. They want to surround themselves with excellence, with environs that will keep them in the flow of the best stream heading toward the biggest ocean. If your company is known for excellence, it will attract quality candidates. If you are a manager known for excellence, you will attract motivated employees and retain them.

Define your personal achievement professionally

When you are someone with a calling to be a great manager, there is a wealth of possibilities out there for you, an entire mountain range of summits. Managers manage people, and this is a common denominator across industry, field and trade.

When I became the director of resort operations at Hualalai, I had specific past experience in lodging, food and beverage, convention and event planning, retail and property management. I knew little to nothing about the other departments I would also manage: golf, the spa business, natural resources, recreation and ocean sports, landscaping and maintenance. Yet I was confident I could apply the knowledge and comfort I had with

the common denominator: people. I could *Ho‘omau*: continue to manage my staff well with *Aloha*, *Ho‘ohana*, *Imi ola*, and my other Hawaiian values. I was confident I could learn what I needed about everything else in their respective disciplines if I let them do the jobs they’d selected for themselves with my support and not interference. I wasn’t afraid to ask the managers I led for help, allowing them to shine as my experts in their fields. And I totally enjoyed the journey, being able to satisfy my own hunger for learning new things in the process.

Ask yourself how you can texture more richness into your life’s experiences as a manager. And remember that managers are expected to inspire those they manage, something that’s hard to do for others when you lack inspiration yourself. If you find your passion waning where you are, ask yourself where else you might ignite a fire of new passion: There’s a whole world of mountain summits out there. Management is virtually boundless in its possibilities; any limits are those you place on yourself.

Define what is “best” for the work you do

Within the business pursuits of your company, the message is also “Do what you do best.” Do not tolerate dilution or mediocrity, and do not accept anything less than distinction in your field. Focus on whatever your product is, and focus on the quality and essence of that product, don’t meander off course and climb lower peaks that only serve to fragment your efforts and sap your strength.

The Hualalai Development Company sells real estate, but they knew that they were building a community, and their product wasn’t the land or the buildings. Their product was the “Art of *Ho‘okipa*” (hospitality), a service branding that became synonymous to their customer with what it *felt like* to live in the community called Hualalai. Their service amenities were as varied as property management, retail, golf, spa rejuvenation, fine restaurants and a five-diamond hotel, but the product with which they could “do what they did best” was the art of *Ho‘okipa*. It tied everything else they did together, and their path was clear when they would say “*Kūlia i ka nu‘u*.” It was largely felt that *Ho‘omau* described the character of their company as focused determination and persistence, and *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* was the epicenter of high quality that connected all the other values incorporated into their mission.

Define the achievement you must deliver as a manager

I’ve shared with you that I started my management journey with the Alaka‘i Nalu (watermen) of Hualalai with the goal of improving their reputation: This was our highest summit. There would be smaller peaks we’d first have to scale on our journey to prepare us for this achievement, sequentially reaching higher and higher. Let’s go mountain climbing, shall we?

First peak: plan.

Second peak: communication, relationship, partnership.

In our first few months together, my own goal was to familiarize myself completely with the validity, feasibility, and dynamics of the department’s business plan: We had to work smart with the right plan in place. The Alaka‘i Nalu were given the goal of teaching me what they knew about their field, and helping me understand the *mana‘o* of their *Ho‘ohana*: the deeply ingrained beliefs they held about their personal missions. I knew I had to tap into their passion. And this was indeed a summit for them, for they had voiced much frustration about having a manager who understood them: My goal was that they begin to communicate better, taking some responsibility for our relationship. I accepted responsibility for making them business partners: Along the way I taught them business finance, and I sought their agreement on the core assumptions that would help us achieve a consistent profit. I taught them about *Ho‘omau*, for they knew what to do: Fewer words *did* have more meaning for them. I sensed my most important gift to them would be my confidence in them, and their belief I gave it with full trust, sincerely.

Third peak: transition plan into action.

Once we reached agreement on both the common sense and business sense of *what* we were doing, we turned our focus to *how* we would do it. With two peaks behind us, we were buoyed by a new relationship that felt good between us, one infused with *Aloha*: In effect we had built strength and stamina for our next climb. By this time we had written their departmental mission statement, and *‘Imi ola* had the Alaka‘i Nalu on the path of seeking new life at its fullest. They’d discarded their attitude of “here we go again ...” replacing it with one that asked, “What’s next?” We identified any recurrence of “automatic pilot” in their everyday work—after all, the poor reputation that saddled them was hidden there in their actual performance. We looked at everything: the programs themselves, our customer service standards, their performance levels individually and as stimulated by work shifts and assignment dynamics. They now could look at glitches objectively and unemotionally, i.e. in a business context, and they self-corrected with the degree of responsibility a business partner must accept.

Fourth peak: the individual responsibility of living up to their name.

Literally translated, Alaka‘i Nalu means “leaders of the waves.” As you will learn of more in Chapter 14, *Alaka‘i* is one of the Hawaiian values, the value of leadership. The *nalu* is the surf, or the waves of the ocean. I was and would always be their manager. I myself was not an Alaka‘i Nalu: It was time for them to write their own goals, and scale their own mountains. They each agreed to write three individual goals for their next year, and put synergy to work in the department. The first goal would have something to do with *Ho‘okipa* (hospitality) so we would be unified in our focus on the all-important guest. The second goal

would be on the theme of *Ike loa* (to know well), for to be Alaka‘i Nalu was to be professionals in their own right, and continue the learning in their field. Their third goal would be on leadership, *Alaka‘i*. They would *Kūlia i ka nu‘u*, pursue personal excellence in their individual leadership potential. They were committed to being the best, individually and as a group.

Competition itself is not a goal

The Alaka‘i Nalu became extremely committed to supporting each other as they pursued excellence. *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* is a reminder that competition serves no purpose if its only goal is to leave someone else behind. *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* reminds you to strive to be *your* best, not just better than someone else. It calls for some introspection, being sure that you are not your biggest obstacle. If you must compete, compete against your previous self; improve.

This same perspective can be of great value when applied to your business as a whole. Today there are frequent laments as to the lack of plain old good service across the spectrum of business offerings. Businesses seem to blend together in their mediocrity and in their sameness. However it is not enough to ask how you can be different, competing on uniqueness or novelty; you must ascertain how you can be the best. Determine what you can deliver to customers, and how you can do it in the way they want it most. If you are truly the best—even for yourself and your own professionalism—the customer will seek you out, and they will be faithful to you. They are thirsting for what you can offer them; they are hungry to be satisfied customers, and they will remain your customers if excellence is what you offer.

A higher peak in the Competition Mountains

In Hawaii’s resort community and visitor industry, there is a higher peak everyone strives to scale in the realm of competition. While we recognize that our island neighbors can capture some business that potentially had been ours, our greater calling is to promote all of Hawaii, and celebrate the success of the industry as we continue to work toward our own. We want the entire island and the entire state to be a successful destination, and at times our neighbors are not those we should compete against. Their success will feed into our success, and ours will help stimulate theirs. This is a mountain we climb together, and sometimes it proves wise to join forces with those you at first were inclined to compete with. In climbing our mountain, where at the summit we find Hawaii is the travel destination of choice, we all strive to create a place of comfort, escape and *Aloha* that prospective visitors will flock to.

I believe it was this value of *Kūlia i ka nu‘u*, held by so many here, that helped us realize our strength together in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States. The travel industry took severely damaging hits in those uncertain months that followed, yet in a relatively short time, we were successful in reminding travelers that Hawaii offered U.S. soil to them, and could be a safe haven to visit. This was a

period of time in which the warmth and beauty of the islands were secondary in what a traveler wanted.

Those formerly in competition throughout Hawaii eagerly joined forces to tell our story together. In Hawaii, we seek to dish up a feeling that is very real. It is a vibrant tangible energy force connected to our spirit of *Aloha* that is called *Ho‘okipa* (hospitality), something we’ll visit in the next chapter. It called out to many visitors, and they came to experience it for themselves. The perceived risk in traveling to Hawaii began to lessen. The September 11 tragedy had far-reaching economic effects to the detriment of our country: In Hawaii we rebounded much more quickly than most, and *Kūlia i ka nu‘u* enabled us to do so.

I would later learn that the statue of Queen Kapi‘olani was unveiled at Kapi‘olani Park on December 31 of that year as we all looked forward to the promise of more prosperity in 2002. In part, the news release done by the City and County of Honolulu gave this description of what sculptor Holly Young had captured: “Her bronze statue, which is mounted on a pedestal faced with black granite, depicts the Queen in ‘street costume’ at about the age of 40. Her face has a warm, subtle smile and one of her arms is slightly extended, palm open, as if to welcome someone into her home.” In those final months of 2001, Hawaii’s entire travel industry extended our own arms as well, and I like to think the Queen would be proud of us.

Kūlia i ka nu‘u will circle back to Aloha

Kūlia i ka nu‘u. Define what achievement is for you and for your business, and strive to the highest summit there is. Pursue excellence, and be the best you can possibly be.

Kūlia i ka nu‘u is a value of hope and of promise. There *is* more out there for you.

Seek achievement that allows you to *Ho‘ohana*, work with purpose and intent, within *‘Imi ola*, a life lived for its highest form.

You will find you *Ho‘omau*, you persist in a way that will cause the good to last, for in striving for the best, you have become your best.

Managers have a profound effect on those they manage when they manage well. As you grow and as you work on your achievements, your *Aloha* has captured even more abundance, an abundance to be shared with others in the outpouring of your spirit.