



## turning managers into leaders

### Merge's Monthly Mega Minute – December 2006

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### The geophysics of earthquakes in Hawaii

Last month I was fortunate to spend a few days on the Big Island of Hawaii, but I got a little more excitement than I bargained for. At exactly 9:20 AM on November 23, the earth shifted beneath our feet – literally. The culprit: an earthquake just off the coast that registered a 5.0 magnitude on the Richter scale, an aftershock to a larger and more serious 6.6 earthquake that occurred on October 14. Turns out that the Big Island experiences thousands of earthquakes each year, but most are so small that they are detected mainly by instruments, and barely even noticed. These small earthquakes cause no damage whatsoever, and even if felt, are of no consequence to the daily life of those who live in the area. It's the big earthquakes, such as the October 14 episode, that cause significant damage and untold stress. Earthquakes in Hawaii are directly related to volcanic activity and are caused by magma moving beneath the earth's surface. As the molten lava shifts, the earth's plates move to compensate, and tremors are felt on the ground.

The imagery of fluid lava and earthquakes provide an interesting metaphor for workplace relationships. When you interact with other people – your employees, your clients, your boss – words are spoken and emotions are felt, much like magma moving beneath the surface of the earth. As your intellectual and emotional plates shift to compensate, tremors can be visible, ranging from mild irritation to even explosive anger. Just like with earthquakes, the mild irritation is often of no consequence, but explosive anger can cause untold damage. While it's normal to have opinions and negative reactions to what others say and do, it's the magnitude of the emotion that will determine the degree of damage. It is better to respectfully deal with issues while they are still small irritations, rather than saving them up for the big blow-up. In the long run, it may be better to have lots of little quakes than a single big one!