

Grow Maine

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So I guess what I may say in summary is that I think the key is trying to create a culture at work where it's safe for people to actually say what they think, including difficult times when we're looking at a situation that didn't go great. (14:29-14:55)

So, that's one thing I've really learned across my career is that you can be really good within your own organization, but there are going to be forces that come to play or to bear that are bigger than you are, and you have got to be agile and change responsive and financially strong in order to constantly be readjusting and reinventing your business. (39:55-40:38)

Welcome to the Grow Maine show with your host Marty Grohman at FM 98.5 and AM 560 news radio WGAN.

[00:00:20] **Marty:** Hi, this is Marty Grohman. Welcome to the Grow Maine Show, celebrating Maine business leaders and entrepreneurs that are doing well by doing good. If it's time for you to grow your business, why don't you head over to mainetechnology.org? They're our sponsor and they're the ones that make this show possible and Maine Technology Institute is what will make your next business venture possible. A time of great change and shift in the marketplace as an incredible opportunity for entrepreneurs. And you'll start right out with a one over one-hour phone consultation. They'll talk through your idea and your concept, whether it's commercializing a new product line or starting a new company or doing a market study and they'll recommend what's best for you. It could be an MTI grant. It could be referring you over to the good folks at Score or anything like that, but that's the place to get started. Tell them Marty sent you at maintechnology.org. So my good friend, Kevin Hancock. Kevin, how'd I do with that sponsorship there, that sound good?

Kevin: That was as always very impressive, Marty.

[00:01:22] **Marty:** That's good. That's good. So Kevin, Chairman and CEO, [Hancock Lumber](http://HancockLumber.com) I think most people probably know Hancock lumber, but hey, let's not assume that. Tell us about the reach and scale of the company and everything you do.

Kevin: Yeah, thank you. So our company has been in Maine for a good while here, Marty, and we have been doing business since 1848. So before the cannonball was fired in the Civil War. And the company's changed a lot through the years, but today were integrated in the forest products and lumber business. So we have three primary businesses. First, we own timber land and we grow trees. And then we've got three sawmills here in Maine, Eastern white pine sawmills that manufacture lumber and ship it all over North America and the world. And then here in Maine and New Hampshire, we have nine contractor-oriented lumber yards that have a full line of building materials and construction services. And we have 525 people who are a part of our team.

Marty: That's pretty remarkable. And I know you've been named best places to work in Maine many times and things like that.

Kevin: We have, it's six years in a row for us. And it's actually the thing we're most proud of and our number one priority. Our first focus is to try to make the company a really good place for the people

that work here. And then the belief is if we are able to do that, those people will then go out and make it a really great place for our customers.

Marty: I think that it's evident in all of the ways that you conduct and transact business. I know close to where I live in Biddeford, you're opening a new location in Saco. You've made a lot of great impressions there in helping out Habitat for Humanity and things like that. It's a big part of the company's mission. You should be committed to that. So, how did you come to that mindset, Kevin, was that a personal journey for you? And take us through your leadership story a little bit, if you will.

Kevin: Yeah. Well, it was a personal journey that I didn't see coming. I mean, I've always been a lover of people and really valued and respected people, but that accelerated for me a few years ago, about a decade ago, actually. I acquired a rare voice disorder called spasmodic dysphonia, which I'd never heard of. It's an incurable thing that affects only speech. And anyway my voice has gotten quite a bit better in recent years, but you can still probably notice it's a bit unique. But early on for quite some time, I had a really tough time talking. And so I was thrown off track trying to figure out how I would help run a company without the consistent use of my voice. I laugh about this now, Marty, but I said at the time, well, what possible good could a CEO be who can't talk all the time? But long story short, with my voice difficulty, I really ended up seeing, getting forced into initially, and then embracing an opportunity to essentially let everybody speak for the company and got really excited about this idea of, well, why can't everybody lead? And since then, I've really been interested in creating a culture and a set of business systems that disperses power instead of collects it, and strengthens the voices of others and invites everybody to lead. And that's really become the foundational cornerstone of our company and who were trying to be culturally.

Marty: Yeah, I think that's really interesting, Kevin. Kevin Hancock chairman and CEO of Hancock Lumber, my guest today on the Grow Maine show on News Radio WGAN, and the first time I met you was prior to the onset of spasmodic dysphonia. Which, I'm sure, has been an immense struggle out of the gate. I want to make sure we dig into what it was like, but you were known, frankly, in my view, I thought you were just an amazing speaker. I always thought, geez, if I could command a crowd one day, like Kevin Hancock, it's really something. So I'm putting you on the spot a little bit, but I mean, as far as I want to make the show a little bit about the journey of the CEO, if we can. I mean, do you feel that you were taking up too much of the airspace essentially in, in your leadership role?

Kevin: Well in hindsight, if you'd watched me back then for my voice condition, I don't think he would have said there was anything really wrong with my leadership approach. It was just very traditional, and it was the one I learned, which is that you were supposed to be everywhere in the middle of all the action, presiding over all the important activities and serving as the voice of the company, it was that traditional approach to leadership. And I wouldn't say there was anything wrong with it, except now having gone about it completely differently. I really have come to favor this approach because I believe the truth is everybody leads, everybody's capable of leading, everybody has got an important, valuable voice and a company can perform better when that responsibility is shared and dispersed. And more importantly, the jobs become more valuable and meaningful because they really become a place where everybody can grow and develop and take responsibility and test their skills and accomplish things and feel good about it.

Marty: Yeah. Oh, that's funny. That's a Coronavirus joke right now. Are they going to come up with a zoom or a WebEx meeting where the CEO can burst in and screw up the agenda and throw the whole thing off the rails?

Kevin: No, right, exactly. So what I found, Marty, was really counterintuitive, which was, and it took me a while to get comfortable with it, but it was essentially this, the less I did, the better we did. So I

really have become a big fan of leadership restraint, which is having the power, but not always using it, and having the patience for process and the trust in the whole team to let everybody actually own their job and the decisions that go with it. And now with our managers, I'm really constantly encouraging them to manage others a little bit less and themselves a little bit more and really right out of that iconic Gandhi quote or philosophy of being the change we wish to see in the world.

Marty: So can you think of an example, Kevin, where a decision came up for the company that you feel landed differently or was executed differently? I'm going to give you a second to think about that, Kevin, if we can. So we're going to go to a quick break, and we'll come back with that. All right. So let's think about a decision like that. And I think listeners really want to know. So learn more about the Grow Maine show@growmaineshow.com. We're also on iTunes and Spotify and suggest a guest, become a guest. I've had some great people writing off of the website recently. And it's wonderful to have their support and go over to mainetechnology.org when it's time for you to start your next seven generation long company. And we will be right back with the Grow Maine show.

Welcome back to the Grow Maine show with your host, Marty Grohman. At FM 98.5 and AM 560 news radio. WGAN.

[00:10:51] **Marty:** Hi, this is Marty Grohman welcome back to the Grow Maine show. Let's get right to it. So Kevin Hancock, Chairman and CEO of Hancock Lumber. When we went to the break, Kevin, we talked about an example of something that you've taken on differently because of your changed leadership style. What comes to mind?

Kevin: Well, let me do one general example and then a specific one. Early on Marty, when I was having so much trouble with my voice, people would come to me in that traditional exchange with a question, because I was the CEO or the boss. But at the time I couldn't talk very much and really give answers. So I started answering that question with a question. Someone would come to me with a question, and I began saying, "That is a good question, what do you think we should do about it?" And while initially I was taking that approach just to protect my voice, over time what really struck me and excited me was that people actually already knew what to do. They didn't really need, most of the time, a management-centric solution to the problems or challenges that they face. They knew what to do. They really just needed the confidence and the safety and the encouragement to go.

Recently we had a situation where things had not gone the way I'd like in a particular site and I was pretty upset or disappointed about it, but we huddled everybody together to talk about it and all I did at that meeting, Marty, was actually talk about my shortcomings with respect to that subject. I made a list of the things that I did not do that probably allowed that situation to occur or things that I did do that helped that situation occur. And with no agenda after that we just went around the room, and everybody did the same thing. So I guess what I may say in summary is that I think the key is trying to create a culture at work where it's safe for people to actually say what they think, including difficult times when we're looking at a situation that didn't go great. And that people don't get in trouble and we're not really talking about mistakes as much as opportunities to learn and prove. And when it's safe and people say what they think it's really pretty amazing what kind of progress can be made and what kind of things can be achieved.

Marty: Well, I think that's interesting. Kevin Hancock, Chairman and CEO of Hancock Lumber, my guest today on the Grow Main show news radio WGAN. So as a CEO, and I have this experience as well, and you're really looking for people to come in and make suggestions. So if there is a situation where essentially some CEOs would regard it as a failing, really when a decision comes to them unmade, or at least the person or group bringing you to you should be offering you some alternatives, but you, because you really weren't in a position to say much, you forced to that essentially and drew people out into that leadership style.

Kevin: Yeah, right. And really, I think anyone at work knows this, that each individual, take our company, for example, each individual with their job and responsibilities knows more about that specific job than anybody else in the company does. So really every person is an expert in their particular area of the company and as they live that area of the company every day, all day, they know what works well and they know causes problems or wastes time. And so they know how best to fix and improve that area. So it's really just about creating the right conditions where everybody can take charge and initiate change and lead.

[00:15:50] **Marty:** I love it. So Kevin let's do this if we can. I want to talk about your book. It's your second book. And then after we do that, I know I asked Adam Lee, [Lee Auto Malls](#), the first time he was in the auto repair shop. I've got to know about the first time you were in the lumberyard or what your first memories were, but it's not nothing to write a book, it's a huge undertaking. This is actually your second book, [Seventh Power: One CEO's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership](#). And what drove you to write this book? And what has the experience been like?

Kevin: Yeah. Thank you. Well, generally when my voice was particularly bad, writing was quite therapeutic for me because what I wrote, I could say everything I wanted to say. So I started out really just journaling, but then I identified some topics I really want it to write about and talk about. So shortly after my voice condition, I started traveling back and forth out to the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota, which is one of the biggest most historic poorest today of all the Sioux reservations on the Northern Plains and there, Marty, I countered an entire community that felt like a piece of its voice that take in or missing or was stolen if you will. And the combination of being with the people they are and my own voice condition got me thinking about leadership and how there are lots of ways for people, humans to lose their voice in this world and not feel fully heard or respected as they are. And that across time, leaders, unfortunately, have probably done more to limit and restrict and direct the voices of others than to free them. And this was perhaps why modern organizations were in a bit of a slump. I got looking nationally at employee engagement data and it's like one out of three people in America will describe their work experiences as engaging or something more than just an economic exercise. And I was thinking that it was all not necessary. So anyway, this book is a travel adventure, it starts on the Navajo reservation east of Flagstaff on the Colorado Plateau and it ends up actually in Kyiv in the Ukraine. And I make seven stops on this journey in this book acquiring what I believe are seven different lessons for a new age of shared leadership. And this book really promotes the idea again, of leaders figuring out how to disperse power instead of collecting it.

Marty: Kevin, so we want to go through a few of the seven stops. I mean, we're going to go to a quick break, but maybe when we come back, you'll pick out one of them. I don't know if you want to give away all seven and because we want people to buy the book but pick out one of them and dig into that. I frankly didn't know about Kyiv, and I'm interested in that. I need to know also how you got initially connected with the Oglala Sioux Indians. I certainly don't have any contacts there. I'd love to learn more about how you initially made that connection. So we'll be right back with Kevin Hancock, Chairman and CEO of Hancock Lumber.

Welcome back to the Grow Maine show with your host, Marty Grohman at FM 98.5 and AM 560 news radio WGAN.

[00:19:54] **Marty:** Hi, this is Marty Grohman. Welcome back to the Grow Maine show. If your leadership journey is taking you on a trip to add to your company's product lines or to go out on your own and start something new, now is the time to do it. There's nothing like a big shift in the marketplace to expose new opportunities. And if you're sitting there thinking, sometimes you have this idea as an entrepreneur, you think why doesn't somebody do that? That idea is so obvious. Well, you know what it's obvious to you. It isn't obvious to other people. You're the person who has the magic of that idea and jump on it and move on it. The world needs you to move ahead with your idea and start at [mainetechnology.org](#). Even if an MTI grant isn't the initial way that you start your, in fact

there were 144 companies that came to MTI last year and they were actually deemed not to be a fit, but that doesn't mean that they got turned away. They got hooked up with other great Maine entrepreneur resources, like the [Top Gun program](#) or SCORE counseling and so forth. So that's a great way to get started over at [maintechnology.org](#), and tell 'em Marty sent you.

So my guest today on the Grow Maine show is my good friend, Kevin Hancock, Chairman and CEO of the Hancock Lumber. We go back quite a ways, Kevin. We've had a lot of fun together over the years, but I don't know much about this journey that you've gone on. Would you start out by telling us how you made an initial connection with the Pine Ridge reservation of Oglala Sioux Indians.

Kevin: Yeah. So, it was 2012 and I'd been recovering from my voice condition, and we were just recovering as a company and industry and a nation from the mortgage and housing market collapse. And I had this feeling, Marty, that I tried to fight at first, which was I needed to serve myself a little bit more and kind of maybe regain my balance from my voice, and I didn't know how I would do that.

But that summer I picked up a copy of National Geographic and the Pine Ridge Indian reservation was on the cover. The article's title was, ['In the Spirit of Crazy Horse - The Rebirth of a Sioux Nation'](#). And I'd always had a love affair with the American west, and particularly historically with the west in the 19th century when our nation's Manifest Destiny ran into the Plains Indians. Anyway, I read that article and it was every character past or present from that story came out of that yellow magazine and gave me a big hug and I leaned over to my wife who was sitting right beside me when I finished and tapped her on the leg and said, I'm going to go there. I want to see what life is like for the people who live there. And one trip became two, two became ten, and then I was just there last fall for the 20th time. And I have lots of friends there now, and it's a place that's really given a lot to me and enriched my life in a lot of ways.

Marty: So what's different. Why is it so enriching? What do you find out there?

Kevin: Well, a couple things. One, I am really fascinated with communities whose spirituality and sense of social structure comes from a deep connectivity to the earth. So these were nomadic tribes that moved seasonally with the weather and the Buffalo and their approach to living and their approach to spirituality and their approach to community, it was just really closely linked to the most fundamental rules of nature. And I actually think that communities have endured so much, but part of the ultimate reason why is that they are the keepers of some really important wisdom that our planet has lost track of.

Marty: Let's talk about it in light of coronavirus. Have you talked to people out there, and what are they thinking and doing differently than we are?

Kevin: Right. Well, I haven't talked to a lot of people out there yet about it, but I pretty much know what they will say, because I've listened to their wisdom and insight for so long now. And what I expect I will hear when I go back and ask about this is this, their oriented frame of reference is really powerful, Marty. It's such a significant, simple paradigm shift. Humans are a part of nature, not above it. So what happens to humans is a manifestation of what's happening to nature. And to me, that simple paradigm change is really powerful. The Sioux also believe that everything that lives is related and connected, they use the phrase *čhiyé wičhówe*. Which means 'we're all brothers' or everything is one thing. And that what happens to one is happening to the whole. So when you see the virus and start to think about it from an ecosystem, planetary perspective, I think there are some pretty powerful lessons and implications there about a connected world that's moving faster in a global way. And our social systems haven't been able to keep up with it.

The big, simple thought to me today, Marty, is that our biggest issues as a human race are global, but all of our structural systems are tribal and local. It used to be that what happened in China didn't impact what happened in Boston or on the Northern Plains. It used to be, not that long ago, that what happened in Maine had no impact on the Northern Plains. But today, what happens in one place impacts everybody ultimately in every place. And I think it really changes the definition ultimately of winning, in that there is no winning anymore that doesn't include anyone because any part of this planet that gets left behind or is not prepared or is disadvantaged, is ultimately going to have ramifications for everybody else. So I think there are a lot of opportunities to see the world differently that can come out of our experience with this virus.

Marty: Yeah. You're giving me chills while you're talking about that. It all hits, exactly with what we're going through.

Kevin: Yeah. So, right now we've all been focused on the short-term best strategies for getting through this, but then what's really going to interest me when that happens, which it will happen, we'll get through this, does the whole world just go back to business as usual? Or does a critical mass of people start to create change and this, which I think really ties right into the spirit of your show, Marty is something I'm really passionate about. I think we're in an age today, where it doesn't make sense to just wait for or expect governments to change? We can start to create change in the here and now on a local level. And I think businesses, with the right values can be a great vehicle for change, but we've got to think more broadly about the purpose of business, the mission of business and its ultimate mission really needs to be to advance humanity and profit corporate performance, which is really important, needs, however, to become the outcome of a higher set of callings, not the mission itself, but an important outcome of a higher set of callings.

Marty: Couldn't have said it better myself.

Marty Grohman host of the Grow Maine show. We're going to be right back with Kevin Hancock, chairman and CEO of Hancock Lumber.

Welcome back to the Grow Maine show with your host, Marty Grohman at FM 98.5 and bam five 60 news radio WGA.

[00:29:48] **Marty:** Hi, this is Marty Grohman, welcome back to the Grow Maine show brought to you by the Maine technology Institute. I think my guest today, Kevin Hancock, chairman and CEO, Hancock Lumber just gave all of us entrepreneurs a great nudge to think about if we come out of the other side of this crisis, what we need to be doing to run our businesses differently, to operate our businesses differently. Why don't you get started by talking to the Maine technology Institute? They can help you transform your product lines. They can help you start from scratch your new venture that will change the world. Mainetechnology.org. Tell him Marty sent you. So Kevin, tell me about your first bike.

Kevin: Say that again Marty?

Marty: I know it's a curveball question, but I thought it would be fun. Tell me about your first bike.

Kevin: Like an actual bicycle? Yeah. Oh my goodness. I could picture it now. Well, it wasn't much to it, I'll tell you that Marty. Maybe three gears and handlebars. But I do remember, I think it was my dad, pushing me, holding onto me and then suddenly letting go. And there I was biking on my own. I can actually glimpse that with this unexpected question.

Marty: And what a moment? What a moment. Yeah, I know one of the most rewarding moments that I've had as a parent is my son. He was slow to learn to ride a bike. He fought it and I think he just wanted to be good at it. He didn't want to go through learning it and it frustrated him and his sister, his older sister, was a great bike rider and he could tell, he just didn't want to be compared to her. And he resisted. And I finally got him started. And he's this great rider now, he can hit these huge jumps and it's, he's insane. He can do all these tricks that I never can imagine, but that's really quite a moment to think about when I finally got him on that bike and pushed them down the road. So let's use that for some jumping off points for you and your career. What do you remember your first time in a Hancock Lumber lumberyard?

Kevin: Yeah, I do, it's so funny. I'm part of the sixth generation of my family to work for this company. But I never planned on it, Marty. So when I grew up I went to the Lake Region High School up here in Naples, and then I went to Bowdoin College and I studied history. And I wanted to teach and coach, which I did. I went to Bridgton Academy and taught American History there, and also Russian and Soviet history and coached the basketball team. And four, five years later, I was all set to go to law school. And my dad got cancer that summer in 1991. And for two reasons, including that one, I didn't go to a law school. I kind of on short notice, came to work for the company. I started working right on the front counter of our store in Yarmouth, knowing essentially nothing about the industry. I grew up around it and worked summer jobs, but never thought about it as a profession. And now 30 years later here I am. And it's been a blessing. It's been a lot of work and it's not been easy, but overall it's been a real blessing.

Marty: Did anyone tell you you couldn't do it?

Kevin: Well, that's a great question. Well think when you come into a business, particularly a family business, and you follow the footsteps of my Dad, who had been so successful. And my grandfather there is, I think there's always a proving period there where everyone's watching to see if this new kid can do it. And the trick of course is to learn to respect the tradition of the business, but ultimately in keeping with our topic today, to come into your own voice and your own beliefs and your own philosophy about business and culture and put your own stamp on it because in a multi-generational business, every generation is going to have to be entrepreneurial because you cannot get from one generation to the next, without massive change because the world is changing. There's often a thought that the inventor or the founder is the only entrepreneur, and the truth is every generation an institution transcends, but people who are leading it are going to have to be entrepreneurial or that business won't make it.

Marty: Yeah, I think that's a really great perspective. My guest today, Kevin Hancock, chairman and CEO of Hancock Lumber, and Kevin has a great new book out called the Seventh Power: One CEO's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership. And if you think about Hancock Lumber now in its seventh generation since 1848, I'm just trying to list in my head all of the crisis, a few that I've known that, many that I haven't, that could have put this company out of business, that your predecessors have managed through going back to the Civil War. It's pretty remarkable.

Kevin: Yeah. Oh, it is. And then even coming forward to this generation, when I started in this business there was no internet, there was no [Home Depot](#) or [Lowe's](#) or mass retailers. There was no globalization. There have been four or five trends in the last 30 years that when they first emerged people said, oh, that'll be the end of companies like Hancock Lumber. So, that's one thing I've really learned across my career is that you can be really good within your own organization, but there are going to be forces that come to play or to bear that are bigger than you are, and you have got to be agile and change responsive and financially strong in order to constantly be readjusting and reinventing your business. Which of course, as Marty is what actually makes work and business so fun.

Marty: Yeah, I love that attitude. And I remember you managing through the Lehman Brothers crash and everything of the late nine, ten. And my company certainly hit the skids and I feel like you, that came out of that as stronger overall.

Kevin: Yeah, we, I mean, we did, that was super painful, and we weren't as prepared as we should've been, but I couldn't see that at the time, but I see it now. And I think really, when all of us think about our growth moments in life, they almost always come from difficulties.

[00:38:08] **Marty:** Yeah, actually, that's a good segue to a question I want to make sure to ask you, do you have any core life beliefs?

Kevin: So, yeah.

Marty: Right. That's a silly question, right? Who says no to that? That's true. It's a good point.

Kevin: What if I said no, what a terrible answer that would be.

Marty: No, actually I don't. I like a good gulp and a hot dog. That's about it, which is okay.

Kevin: Yeah. So I would say the big one I have is that the path to growth for us humans lies within. That the external world is really consuming and distracting and full of external stuff. But the only real way to create change is to take a deep breath and look within ourselves and that we are each really well as the great American mythologist Joseph Campbell was fond of saying, we are the truth we seek to know. And that leadership, as to leadership, it's really not about directing others. It's really about focusing on what self and becoming that, which you'd like to see the world be. And all of that might sound very, somewhat utopic, but I think it's real. I think that's what we're all here to do is to self-actualize, really come to know our own voice and path and try the best we can to live it. And I think businesses can be a place that encourages that kind of individual growth or discourages it. And I definitely want to be on the side of encouraging it.

Marty: I love it, Kevin, and tell us where to find the book.

Kevin: Yeah, so the book's published by Post Hill Press and it's distributed by Simon and Schuster. And so it's pretty much available anywhere books are so old, which today, for most people, is right online. On Amazon or Barnesandnobles.com or here in Maine I know for a fact it's available in pretty much all the major local independent bookstores.

Marty: So which Hancock Lumber yard, if we came in to buy some pine, are most likely to see you at?

Kevin: That's a great question. I would say honestly, probably Yarmouth. This is Casco, but I go through Portland quite a bit, and the Yarmouth store is right on that route. So I would say the Yarmouth.

Marty: We're going to pop in and see you, Kevin. We're also proud of you. The book is wonderful. Thanks for coming on the Grow Maine show.