

Create What You Speak

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Yeah. And I think in the modern age, in which we live, we've really got to rethink the very meaning of winning to your point. We all grew up or read history, or you think about the Roman Colosseum, it was a kill or be killed or sports to win you have to defeat someone else, but I think in the modern world where we're all so connected where the world has become so flat and we really are a single human tribe, we've got to change the definition of winning. And the simple way I like to talk about it now is winning Isn't winning unless everybody's winning. [24:45-25:32]

Sloane: You're listening to the create what you speak podcast, where I invite you to come along with me as we shape our own reality together. My intention is to bring out the magic in you. Now let's get started. My name is Sloane Fremont, and today I'm going to talk to you about strengthening through listening.

Welcome to another episode of the Create What You Speak podcast. My name is Sloane Fremont, and I am the host of the show. And this week I have a special guest I'm really excited to talk to. I have Mr. Kevin Hancock today. And Kevin is an award-winning author, speaker, and CEO of [Hancock Lumber](#). Established in 1848, Hancock Lumber operates 10 retail stores, three sawmills, and a trust plant. The company also grows trees on 12,000 acres of timberland in Southern Maine and is led by its 550 employees.

Kevin is a past chairman of the National Lumber and Building Materials Dealers Association. He's also a recipient of the Ed Muskie Access to Justice award, the Habitat for Humanity Spirit of Humanity award, and the Boy Scouts of America Distinguished Citizen award, as well as Timber Processing Magazine's Man of the Year. And Kevin has two books he's written. The first one was [Not For Sale: Finding Center in the Land of Crazy Horse](#), which won three national book awards. And his second book, [The Seventh Power: One CEO's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership](#), released earlier this year. Kevin is also a frequent visitor to the [Pine Ridge Indian Reservation](#) in South Dakota, and an advocate of strengthening the voices of all individuals within a company or a community through listening, empowering, and shared leadership. And so we get to talk to Kevin this week and I'm really excited. Kevin, welcome to the show.

Kevin: Well, thank you so much. I'm very happy to be with you.

[02:20] **Sloane:** Yeah. All right. Well, I'm just going to get right into the questions I have for you here. So let's start out by talking about in 2010, you acquired a rare voice disorder known as [spasmodic dysphonia](#). So how did you respond to that experience? Can we talk a little bit about that and how that impacted you and your leadership style?

Kevin: Sure first, it really threatened my leadership style, and then it revolutionized it. So, that came on for me at the peak of the housing and mortgage market crisis. And for a lumber company, that was a really traumatic economic event. So right at this really kind of threatening time, I suddenly began to have quite a bit of trouble speaking. And at first, I didn't know what was going on, but after going to a bunch of doctors, I was finally diagnosed. And so something I'd always done a lot of as a CEO, talk, I suddenly couldn't really do. And I'd always taken my voice for granted, as most people do. And at first, I laugh about this now Sloane, but first I said to myself, well, what possible good could a CEO be who can't talk all the time? But that rhetorical question was really the opportunity. So let me just describe what I did at first.

Sloane: I'm really curious about that, because I'm thinking about if that happened to me. Where do you start? Like where do you, what do you even, how do you, yeah, I guess that's what I, what would I even do?

Kevin: Right. Yeah. First that kind of went into survival mode and it was really pretty simple. When it's hard to talk, you develop strategies for doing less of it. And my primary strategy was to answer a question with a question, thereby putting the conversation, the responsibility for speaking, back on the other person.

So picture this age-old setting, someone comes up to me at work because I'm the CEO or one of the "bosses" with a question or a problem. Normally I would have given a directive and an answer and an instruction. And now I started simply saying, "Well, that is a good question. What do you think we should do about it?" And while at first that was just a move to protect my voice, what really struck me over time was simply this, people already knew what to do. When I gave them the opportunity to respond, I found that they already knew what to do. They didn't need a top-down kind of leadership directive after all. What they really needed was kind of permission and safety and encouragement to trust and follow their own voice.

[05:42] **Sloane:** I'm sure that also that feeling of empowerment by being asked their opinion or their thoughts, or, actually, and actually being heard, right. There's a lot of power in that that I don't think most people see or feel, most days with their job.

Kevin: You've hit the crux of it right there. Let's fast forward to what I learned and then have doubled down on again and again since. Is the simple power of respecting and including everybody's voice and treating everybody in the company as an important leader, and how it ended up changing my leadership style over time was completely flipped it. I really now

think about it executive leadership as being about dispersing power, not collecting it. And I really ultimately came to see my own voice condition as a bit of an invitation to strengthen the voices of others. (06.41-06.52)

[00:06:53] **Sloane:** Right. And so how did that, because that's been 10 years ago now. And so how did that change the culture of your company?

Kevin: Yeah, it ended up revolutionizing it long story short. Now that was a long journey, but we're a decade into this and we've been a best place to work in Maine for seven consecutive years. So our employee engagement scores are running close to 90%. Meaning 9 out of 10 people at work here consider themselves highly engaged and our corporate performance, it proved adequately doubled and it doubled again and it doubled again. So what was really interesting is as a company, as a corporate leader, I really shifted my focus to the kind of the wellbeing and the voice of the employees. And in return the employees just really talk deep ownership, if you will, kind of spiritual ownership in their own work and the performance of the company. So by focusing a bit less on the needs of the company and a bit more on the needs of the individuals within the company, the company ended up becoming a big beneficiary of that in return.

Sloane: Right. I can see that. And you know what I'm thinking, as you're talking through this, I'm picturing my own self in a position like that, to be able to ask my opinion and be heard, because I think about physicians I had over the years where that's often why I left, because I didn't feel heard. I didn't feel like anybody took the suggestion seriously, especially when often, maybe upper management would be so far removed from the person who's actually doing the job, that they, and they would make decisions, but they wouldn't really understand what that impact had for the person doing the job. And there's a lot of frustration around that. Or, it just becomes one of those things. Then you question, why am I here? Right.

And that's the flip side of what you're talking about you completely changed everything. So it is that other side where then everyone feels, no, I have ownership in this. Like I get to see my idea through, or I get to, if somebody's listening to me, which is, I think just first off. Wonderful. Awesome. If I also just, it's a, it's something that I also don't think most people think about. I think people are just used to not being heard or used to coming in and, maybe just going through the motions of a job.

Kevin: That so well said I agree with everything you just said, Sloane, if you look nationally at engagement levels work, it runs about 33%. Two out of three people are really into their job. And when you think about why I think it comes right down to this subject, it's because they don't feel authentically heard and you can say, well, what's the economic cost of that and it's significant. But to me, more importantly, you can say, should say, what is the social, human, spiritual cost that in the modern world. And I've really cut to summarize that in the form of a single rhetorical question. What if everybody on Earth felt trusted, respected, valued, and heard.

Sloane: Yeah. Oh my God. Wouldn't it be such a different place. Right, right. For sure. Well and I think, I felt with everything going on, just how much 2020 changed. To me, everything, right? Everyone's outlooks are like, I feel like, at least for me right now, I'm going through I'm questioning everything. Right. I feel like everything that I thought I knew is maybe not as I thought it was. And this question that you just asked, what would everybody feel like if they were heard, if they were actually more empowered. Right. And I think that's a lot of Maybe, what we're seeing right now is the frustration of years and years of that, right? Not being able to do that. And the shift we might have as a human race, if that happened, boy, I think that would just blow our minds

Kevin: I love that question and I think that's right up. I've thought quite a bit about the Aquarian age that we're entering and what it's all about. And I think it's really going to be a transformation from a society in which individuals were taught to sacrifice themselves for the empire, towards flipping that script, to organization is learning to serve the individuals that belong to them. I do think more and more people are awakening to the sacredness of the individual human spirit. And I think more and more individuals are raising their expectations about what life should be like, including what work should be like.

[00:11:51] **Sloane:** Yes. And you know, I thought the same back in March when everything shut down for what was supposed to be two weeks, and here we are, six months now. But practically overnight everybody went to working from home. And I remember thinking about that. Wow, this has to change everything for people, right? People who were maybe wanting this and now they were getting it, or all the money that companies spent to allow people to do that. It's not that happened overnight, and it happened so fast that it was almost one of those things like. I'm not sure that people had a chance to process it. Because it happened so fast, but just what you were talking about with people being more awake to that, there's a different way to do things I think is what I sort of been feeling like 2020 is about right. Like getting that 20/20 vision on things. Seeing things more clearly than we ever have in the past. And now while things are crazy - maybe that would be the word to solve it or sum it up - I mean, but it's taken that to get people to be able to see that, I guess, is one of the ways I've been feeling about it

Kevin: Yeah. I feel the same way. I think there is an awakening occurring across society globally. And I think that it creates an opportunity and a necessity to begin to think very differently about the place of work and its mission and purpose. And simply put to me, the place of work should be meaningful for the people who do it. It is an economic exercise, but it should be much more than just an economic exercise.

[00:14:312] **Sloane:** Right So you also, one of the things that I read about you, and I know you have a book, I think your book is based on this, on your experience at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Can you talk a little bit about that? What brought you there and what did you learn from your time there, or have you learned?

Kevin: Yeah, it was quite unexpectedly delightful. So around 2012, when the economy had stabilized, and I could see that our company was going to be fine and go forward, I really felt this desire to kind of take a bit of time for myself and search for my voice, if you will, on a

literal and spiritual level. And I didn't know how I was going to do that. But I'd always have love up there with the American West, and particularly the second half of the 19th century history when America's kind of Western expansion Manifest Destiny ran into the Plains Indians.

Anyway I picked up, in the summer of 2012, a copy of National Geographic, which was focused on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. And I read that article and I just decided on an absolute spontaneous whim that I was going to go there. I wanted to see what life was like for the people who lived there. A few months later, I did. And then I went back, and then I went back, and I've now been there over 20 times.

But here was the connection that really hooked me at Pine Ridge. I met an entire community that didn't feel fully heard. And as a result of my own voice condition at the time, I understood what it was like to not feel heard. And in a very different way here, it was this community that had been really historically, egregiously, marginalized and felt as if a piece of their voice had been taken from them. And it really got me thinking about the fact that there are lots of ways for humans lose some of their authentic voice in this world. And that unfortunately Sloane, across time, leaders of established organizations had often done more to limit, restrict, and direct the voices of others than liberate them or free them or encourage their authenticity.

Sloane: Yes. I agree a hundred percent with that. Yes. And that's unfortunate. I feel like when those things happen it's almost human nature, or the first reaction is to feel like where do I turn now? What can I do? I don't have control over this. So you know, that loss of control, which makes you feel even worse about the situation. Because you feel like there's, you have no say in it. And I think that's as a human that's, one of the worst things that we can feel or experience is just feeling like we don't have a say in.

Kevin: That so well put and so appropriate for these tribal communities in the Northern Plains. So before the Reservation era, they were free and self-govern and self-sufficient and prosperous you know in their own world, but post conquest that colonization and genocide, generations of being governed from away and being remade as white people, they lost a lot of that sense of autonomy and personal power. It still dwells with everybody there. But oppression, those with power going too far and abusing it, it really can have a deep, systemic, generational impact on those that are being taken advantage of.

Sloane: Yeah. And as you talk about this and I think about this kind of stuff, these kinds of things seem to happen like they just get chipped away. It's something that at first, maybe doesn't seem, maybe it's a kid. I don't like this, but then it's over time that continuous chipping away at whatever it is. Even in anything, for any human experiences having that. And then you look back and it's, wait a minute, how did we get here? And it seems that those you're talking about those voices that are there to supposed to help are the worst offenders of these kinds of behaviors.

Kevin: Yeah. Exactly, exactly. It's the cumulative weight of everything that's done across time that can produce a dramatically harmful or challenging impact upon a community like the people at Pine Ridge have experienced.

[00:19:47] **Sloane:** And so your time there and you've been back there many times. So what was your, what keeps you coming back, and what was your maybe if there's a lesson you learned from it or something that you take with you each time you come back from there, what would that be?

Kevin: Yeah, really. It was two things. One from my own voice experience, I really became a bit of a champion of communities that didn't feel like they had a voice. Whether that sort of employee group or a Tribal Reservation Community and really makes me want to advocate for leadership change transformation in the way leaders engage communities.

But the second part of it was, that place and those people and their history and their spirituality was just really generative for me. And I actually have come to believe that they are the keepers of some really important indigenous wisdom that the modern world actually needs. I've gotten really interested in any community that lived intimately with nature, lived and died with nature. And I think that when a community is to immerse themselves that way, that you end up really synchronizing with kind of the sacred rules of nature and how nature works and flows and how we're a part of it. And I think that those understandings are actually super important for the human race and the 21st century.

[00:21:37] **Sloane:** Right? No, I agree with that. And I think those kinds of things that, you know, nature, I think means different things to different people, right? Depending on where you grew up. So nature might mean just going out in the yard to someone, or it might mean thousands of acres that they're able to roam free in. And I think whatever that means to anybody is fine. It's their experience with it. But when we forget things like that over time, we lose a big part of I think who we are as people. Because that's part of the rhythm of life. I guess I've always felt that way, at least.

Kevin: Right. I share that and I'll just share one quick example. The Sioux believed that everything that exists and is interconnected. They use the phrase *hatakúya wíchówe*, which means 'we're all brothers' or everything is related and really not reconnected to that idea that humans are a part of nature not above it. I think it's an important concept for us all to remember in the modern age.

[00:22:52] **Sloane:** Right. I agree. And I think that, I'm actually reading a book on that right now that talks about that connection with humans and plants. And it's really interesting to think about plants as we may or may not eat plants for our diet, let's say for example. But then the book was talking about some different things about just that connection and how there's messages or energy in that, right. That over civilization has been transferred, but in the modern era when we don't participate in that kind of lifestyle or eating in a more plant friendly way, I guess, eat more plants essentially that we're missing a lot of that wisdom maybe, or that, that energetic messaging, I guess I would call it.

Kevin: Yeah. I liked that example. I think kind of the big picture is becoming disconnected from nature, is really easy for humans to do today. But it's got consequences, because we lose track of the rhythm of the larger field that we are within and a part of.

[00:24:14] **Sloane:** Right. And that's what you were just saying about we are all brothers. I can't remember the term that you use there that they said, but we are all one right. Everything is energy. Especially now, it's so focused on 'us versus them'. But we are all the human race. And we all have, we all share common things. And, forgetting that I think makes things difficult, especially now, I think.

Kevin: Yeah. And I think in the modern age, in which we live, we've really got to rethink the very meaning of 'winning', to your point. We all grew up or read history, or you think about the Roman Colosseum, it was a kill or be killed, or sports to win you have to defeat someone else. But I think in the modern world where we're all so connected where the world has become so flat and we really are a single human tribe, we've got to change the definition of winning. And the simple way I like to talk about it now is that winning isn't winning unless everybody's winning.

[00:25:33] **Sloane:** Yeah, I can go on about that, but I'm going to switch gears a little bit. I want to talk about your new book, *The Seventh Power*. Can you tell us a little bit more about that, and what drove you to write the book?

Kevin: Yeah, so I had this real epiphany because my own voice condition and how leadership might invert itself and gives power to others. And then I had about a decade to actually test that approach on our own company. And I saw how transformative it was for us and the people who are a part of the company. And so that led me to kind of get out in the world and test some of these ideas or research them a bit more broadly. So the book is a bit of a travel learning experience. It actually starts on the Navajo Reservation in Northern Arizona, and it ends up in Kyiv in the Ukraine. I had no idea at the time where I was going to start this book, but that's where it took me. There are seven stops, which accumulate what I've come to talk about in the book as seven lessons for the age of shared leadership

Sloane: I love how you talked about when you went to the Indian Reservation on a whim, and how you just followed it. And even with this book, you didn't know when you started where it was going to end. But being able to follow that inner voice or that inner guidance that you got, and actually, I love stories like that. Because I think to me, that's the best way to learn. That's the best way to experience life is not to have it all planned out in a map, right. To be able to follow those nudges and be like, "Hey, yeah, this feels good to me right now. I'm going to go here and then I'm going to go there". And then you end up with a book.

Kevin: Yes. And I've come to talk about it the way you just described it. I talk about it as learning to follow. When I was a bit of a younger "leader" before my voice condition, I tried to constantly be scripting out the future. But you can't really do it that way. It's more about turning inward, listening to your own true voice, and kind of releasing yourself a bit to the

care of the universe and be willing to jump on those seemingly whimsical things that speak to you.

Sloane: Yes. And we talk about that, or I do on the show a lot, about being able to just trust. There's a lot of trust that comes in that's not necessarily something most of us enjoy. We want to have that map, we want to know that I'm going to be safe. But there's the element I trust that, I think it's almost, it's a required part of living, right? If otherwise we're going to do it. I don't know. At least for me, I felt stuck.

Kevin: Yeah, I might even say, just to build on what you've been talking about, this is another piece of re-learning. We've been almost engineered now socially as humans to lead with our brain, and to kind of be very disciplined and secure in our approach. And while certainly pieces of that are important, I think we are ultimately aspiring to follow our hearts in a bigger, deeper way. And that's where the real growth lies.

[00:29:29] **Sloane:** Oh, I agree for sure. Can you give us an example from your book of one of the stops where maybe something, I'm sure the whole thing surprised you, but maybe one of your favorite stories about your process of writing it or anything that stands out to you?

Kevin: Yeah, sure. Well, I think, the least expected stop I ended up making was in Kyiv in the Ukraine. I had wanted to write a chapter about this idea that overreaching has consequences. What that meant to me is, leaders with the most power and the upper hand are abusing it. So I ended up reading a bit about an event in the early 1930s in the Ukraine called the Holodomor, which translated means, 'forced starvation'. And as crazy as this sounds, or maybe doesn't when you think about human history, Stalin and the Soviet Communist party decided to essentially starve the Ukrainian peasants to death. And over the span of about 24 months in the heart of the breadbasket of Europe, somewhere between five and seven or eight million Ukrainians died of starvation. And I actually was able to interview a couple of the last remaining survivors. These would have been people now in their nineties that were five or six years old when it happened, just old enough to have remembered it.

And I think what sticks with me is there is these leadership choices have consequences, and those consequences have a long tail. Here I was almost 80 or 90 years later and dealing with an event that just had a massive impact on millions of people's lives. And it was all really needless, just wasted activity created by leaders trying to gain too much control.

[00:31:55] **Sloane:** Wow. Those kinds of stories, it's almost that cognitive dissonance, I think is the word. It's just almost too much to believe. You know what I mean? It's so terrible, you can't hardly believe it when you read things like that. And to think that what you just said, yeah, leadership has consequences, and it matters. That's, I'm sure that was difficult to see and talk to them about and be there.

Kevin: Yeah. And to your point, what it did for me is it made it very real. It really humanized something that took it from history book to here are real individuals who remember that.

They remember watching their parents starve to death, siblings starved to death. It really humanized it.

[00:33:00] **Sloane:** Oh boy. Yeah. We're almost out of time, and I could talk to you for a long time because I love how our conversation has been. Especially when talking about just your change in leadership style, and how that shifted from something that initially sounds like a terrible thing, but has transformed your life, it sounds like, in such a positive way. And all the employees, and I'm sure everybody that you come in contact with.

Kevin: Yeah. That's what it feels like for me. This was originally something I only thought about it as a liability or hindrance or a problem, that really was a big gift and invitation in disguise.

Sloane: Yeah. And I think, but you chose it to be that, right. Because somebody else could have had the same thing happened and not went the way you did. I think the power of choice in your story is so amazing, because you chose to look at it that way.

Kevin: Yeah. So that's what the phrase, the Seventh Power stands for. It is actually a Sioux phrase, but it honors the power of the individual human spirit. So stuff that's happening to us all the time externally that we can't control, but we always have choices that we're in every day, all day, about how we act and respond.

[00:34:29] **Sloane:** I agree. A hundred percent. Okay. So before we wrap up, is there a piece of advice you would give the audience members, something you'd like to leave them with or something maybe they could do today to start looking at things differently?

Kevin: Yeah. I love that question. I've been thinking a lot in this kind of crazy, overwhelming time we're all navigating about that lovely thought from Gandhi about 'becoming the change we wish to see in the world'. And that when change feels overwhelming, I think you can really ground it by just turning back inward and trying to become it.

[00:33:20] **Sloane:** Yeah. Yeah. I love that. And so simple too, right? We often think these things have to be these big, oh, it's going to be too much. But it's that decision inward every day, all day, that really is what I think helps people with change.

So well, Kevin, awesome. It's been so amazing to talk to you. I want to talk about your contact information and where the readers can find your books. So your website is kevinDHancock.com, and I'm going to link to all this in the show notes so the listeners can get to this, but I'm and both of your books are on Amazon as well.

Kevin: Yes, that's correct. Yeah. The web site, it's actually KevinDHancock.com. And you can reach me there, find lots of resources there, and access the books there, as you can on Amazon.

[00:34:12] **Sloane:** Awesome. Okay. I'll link to that in the show notes. And so before I close out, as I do with all the guests, I want to talk about the songs that you picked this week. So the intro song is called Guardian by Alanis Morissette. So can you talk about that song and why you chose it?

Kevin: Yeah, it reminds me of Pine Ridge and the people there. I'm looking at the first two lines, "You who has smiled when you're in pain, you who has soldiered through the profane". And then the sole promise that our country made to be their guardians and how that whole promise was to begin with was messed up and poorly executed. So that's why that song is meaningful for me.

[00:36:56] **Sloane:** That is so powerful. I don't think I'd ever, I love Alanis Morrissette, but I don't think I've ever listened to the lyrics of that song until you picked it, and I was looking at it before the show. So that's a great pick. I like that. And then your outro song was Imagine by John Lennon. Do you want to talk about that one?

Kevin: Yeah. That one to me is just about recognizing the human constructs we boxed ourselves into, and that imagining a world without them and what might be possible. It reminds me of that small but powerful question we contemplated today on your show of, what if everybody felt trusted, respected, valued, and heard. So that's why I like that one.

Sloane: I was just thinking that when you said that. I was like, yeah. that's such a great tie in. I agree. It's totally true. Well, Kevin, it's been amazing talking to you and learning about your leadership style and just your perspective I think is so needed right now. So I want to thank you for coming on the show.

Kevin: I loved it, Sloane. It was great to be with you. Thank you.

Sloane: Awesome. All right. Okay. That's it. For this week on our topic of strengthening through listening, I'd love to know what you think of the episode. If you have questions, you can email me Sloanefremont@gmail.com and you can visit my website Sloanefremont.com. You can also find me on Instagram at Sloane Fremont. And if you liked the podcast, remember to subscribe, rate, review, and tell all your friends. Thanks for listening and I will talk to you next week.