

Kevin Hancock, First Human podcast

As a CEO, my primary tool had been my voice. And suddenly I couldn't use it. Long story short, when it's hard to talk, you quickly develop strategies for doing less of it. (03:37-03:53)

And that's when it hit me that maybe I own voice limitation, which I only ever thought of previously as a hindrance or a liability or a pain in the neck, was actually a bit of a gift or invitation to lead differently in a way that pushed power out away from the center and gave others a stronger voice. (05:41 -06:12)

I got this giant shot across my bow in the form of a voice condition that forced me to change in a way that was a blessing. And really, when you oversimplify it, when you talk less, you listen more. And the biggest voice I started hearing more clearly was my own. (28:01-28:32)

Richard: Welcome to this week's episode of [Being Human](#). I'm delighted to say I'm here with Kevin Hancock. He's the CEO of the [Hancock Lumber Company](#), one of the U.S.'s oldest family businesses. He's also the author of this book, [The Seventh Power: One CES's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership](#). And the quite a journey it is I'd say. And you are joining us from Casco in Maine, which is a couple of hours north of Boston in the U.S. Kevin, welcome to the show.

Kevin: Richard, hello. I'm quite happy to be with you. Thank you.

Richard: And just before we came on air, I had this sort of slightly awkward moment where I was asking Kevin is there an issue with his mic? So for those listening, it might sound a little choppy. So Kevin, I wonder if you might just tell us the situation now.

[00:58] **Kevin:** Yeah, really the impetus for the book actually, Richard. So back in 2010, a little over a decade ago, right at the peak of the big housing mortgage market collapse, I began to have trouble speaking. I had no idea what was happening at the time, but I'd go to talk, and my voice got very choppy and broken. It felt like when I spoke, someone was putting a seatbelt around my neck and tightening. Turned out I'd acquired a rare neurological voice disorder that I never heard of called [spasmodic dysphonia](#), which has no known cause, no known cure. So there I was in 2010 trying to help lead a lumber company through the collapse of the housing market without really being able to use my voice. So if my voice sounds a bit unique, it's because it is a bit unique. But one of my messages from that is, every voice is unique by design. Anyway, that's the quick story.

Richard: No, that's good. Maybe that's a good sort of segue to your job then. So you're leading this lumber company, the house building market is going into free-fall, you're losing your voice. Should we pick up the story from there?

[02:35] **Kevin:** Yeah. So it really was in hindsight stress related. You mentioned our company, Hancock Lumber, is one of the oldest companies in America. Which in British terms makes us probably a young company. We only go back to the 1840s, but part of the six-generation of my family to work for the company. Anyway my voice condition kicked in quite quickly. I had to come up with a different approach to leading. I hadn't thought about it this way before, but as a CEO, my primary tool had been my voice. And suddenly I couldn't use it. Long story short, when it's hard to talk, you

quickly develop strategies for doing less of it. And mine that I adopted, Richard, was essentially to answer a question with a question, thereby putting the conversation back on the other person.

But this is where it started to become a leadership epiphany. So someone would come up to me or because I was the CEO or one of the leaders of the company with a question or a problem. Previously, before my voice disorder, I would have given an answer and directive and told someone what they should do. But now what I started doing because of my voice is saying, “Yes, that is a good question. What do you think we should do about it?” And then that person would tell me, and I would then say at first, just to protect my voice, “Okay. That sounds good. Let's do that.” And off he or she would go with his or her solution to the problem that they'd identified.

Now, what really struck me over time, having done this hundreds of times, is that people actually already knew what to do. They didn't, it turned out, need a top-down CEO sent directives. What they really needed was the encouragement and the safety to trust their own voice. And that's when it hit me that maybe I own voice limitation, which I only ever thought of previously as a hindrance or a liability or a pain in the neck, was actually a bit of a gift or invitation to lead differently in a way that pushed power out away from the center and gave others a stronger voice.

Richard: Wow. Yeah. And I'm just thinking, you talked about the number of generations this business has been your family. And presumably this was a huge shift. I'm guessing you were raised to be the director of this company, the guy telling people what to do. Am I right there?

Kevin: Yeah. So I didn't see it that way growing up, like I oddly didn't notice. But as I reflect on it, I would say that's exactly right. And I watched as a child, my father and even my grandfather, both who led in a very traditional way. And I started out in my career doing exactly the same thing, because that's what I had saw and followed. So this was a huge shift for me personally. And then it became a big change for our entire organization.

Richard: And what did the leaders around you, how did they react to this? Were they like, “Come on, Kevin, we want the old Kevin back, enough of this stuff”?

Kevin: Yeah, I think it took, like any corporate or organizational change, people stand by and watch for a while to see if this is really going to stick. But in my case, I had no choice. Like back then, if you were kind enough to invite me to ever talk with you, I would say ‘no’. My voice sounds unique now, but I can totally do it. It doesn't bother me if people understand me. Back then, I couldn't have even done it. So I had no choice but to go at this differently. But it was a really big change at first for our management team, because you have to start thinking very differently about power. And the simple idea that we adopted was that power was something to be given to others, not taken from others.

We talk a lot now about dispersed power, shared leadership, and respect for all voices. And those are very different concepts from the traditional approach to leadership, as you well know. And that really, as you also know because you read the book, became the basis for the book, *The Seventh Power*. This idea of flipping the script on the traditional command control power to the center approach to leadership.

[08:56] **Richard:** Right. So it took people a while to get used to it, but it sounded like you were self-aware here, and you were starting to have an open conversation about this shift in power as you observed it. Is that right?

Kevin: Yes. For sure. And because two things have to happen for that leadership model to change. One, the leaders have to change. And two, the “followers” have to change. Because our approach

now, which we've fallen in love with and we would not even consider walking away from, is that everybody leads. Power is meant to be shared and dispersed.

So we have 620 people that work in our company. And the concept is, the company's going to be led by all 620 of them. And when everybody is leading, leadership gets lighter for everyone. You picture everybody picking up a boat or a heavy object, when everybody does it, it's not that heavy. And more importantly than the business component of it, that approach is really honoring the individual human spirit. So come to think about using the plates of work for a higher calling, which is to really help everybody come into their own true voice. Which for me is a phrase that really represents the idea that every individual is unique by design. No two souls or spirits are ever going to be the same. And instead of trying to be a company that forces everybody to conform, we just want everybody to be themselves. And it sounds so simple, but when you start accepting everybody at work as they are, management gets so much easier.

Richard: Right. And it's a beautiful thing you've said. That honoring each individual's soul and spirit is unique. And that's not the way CEOs tend to describe their employees. Right? So I'm touched that you're using that style of language. And this is kind of a leading question, but when did you start to... did this coincide, this shift in leadership style, had you started to view people differently? Like when did that emerge in this process?

[11:46] **Kevin:** It started with my voice condition. And then two years later I had a second transformational event. I began traveling from my home in Maine and on the east coast all the way out to the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota in the Northern Plains of the United States. It's one of the biggest, most historic Indian reservation. And it's now been over two dozen times, but here is the connection. There I met an entire community that didn't feel fully heard. That felt marginalized. That felt as if a piece of their voice had been taken or stolen. And in the oddest of ways, I could relate through my own voice. So what that got me thinking about essentially is this. There are lots of ways for humans to lose a piece of their authentic voice in this world. That got me thinking actually, Richard, about the very purpose or meaning of life on earth, that unanswerable question that we all ponder. And I said to myself, maybe it's self-actualized. Maybe the one commonality all humans have is we're just trying to come to know, love, and honor our authentic self as we are.

But then I got thinking about leadership. And I said what role has leadership played in helping people self-actualize. And I concluded, not a good one. So all that got me thinking about leadership and the impact across time that leaders have had on helping people self-actualized. And I concluded, unfortunately, that leaders had done more in total to limit, restrict, direct coach, and manage the voices of others, than to free them. And that's what really stuck me what I wanted to do with my voice condition. Because I had a company that I was running. So at the opportunity to not just think about leadership, but to actually put it at play. And I committed to a very different approach. And I said, our company is going to be about helping people find their authentic voice and make it safe for them to be who they are and say what they think. And I've since come up with a really simple, powerful, thick rhetorical thought that capsulizes all of this, and that thought is this. What if everybody on earth felt trusted, respected, valued, heard, and safe. What might change? I think everything might change.

Richard: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. How many people out there, especially in their businesses or in their work context, could say 'yes' to all of those questions? I guess we know from the stats, in terms of how disengaged people are at a workplace. What is it, like 60 something percent people disengaged in the workplace? I'm guessing all of those would say 'no' to at least one of those.

Kevin: Let me use that data point. I think in America, disengagement is close to 70%. Our company engagement runs about 90%. We do a third-party survey every year and we run right about 90%. And

I have a thought on that, too. People look at that disengagement and say, what a lost opportunity, which is true. But I look at it and say what a human lost opportunity. People who work spend a lot of time and energy working. And for that to be nothing more than an economic exercise in the 21st century, this is not the industrial revolution. In the 21st century, that's just not necessary. And it's not just to improve corporate performance. It will improve corporate performance, but that's the outcome of a higher calling. That higher calling is honoring humans at work.

[17:26] **Richard:** And we could get, I'd love to get a little bit more into the core performance impacted. Because I think for some part, some people listening, that may be what gets them into this conversation. But I'm also just a way back a little bit. How do you find yourself visiting, Pine Ridge? Like, I'm just interested in that.

Kevin: Yeah. I had always had a love affair with the American west, the history, the landscape, the bigness of it. In about 2012, the economy stabilized, and I could see our company was going to be okay. And I had this growing feeling coming from the rugged individualism of Maine that I tried to fight but couldn't. I feel it was I needed to serve myself a little bit more. I needed to take some time to try to regain my voice, both literally and spiritually. Anyway, that summer I picked up a copy of National Geographic and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation was the cover story. And I read it and I've never been swept away before I read that article. I turned to my wife, and I sat up and said, "I'm going to go there. I want to see what life is like for the people who live there." And that turned it. One trip, which became two. And I've now taken to Lakota names, have lots of friends there, and have been there over two dozen times.

It was really, though, a chance to serve myself. And that's another big point in my book, is that in order for any of us to lead, the first thing we've got to do is make ourselves strong. And this idea of constantly sacrifice saying for others has short legs, because we end up running out of gas. I thought a lot about how change happens and I've, from my own view, put it in three circles. Change happens with us, then beside us, then beyond us. And this was a big management transformation for me and our company as well. The point there is, if you want to create change, you don't first look at other people. You first look at yourself. And that classic, timeless thought from Gandhi, 'become the change that you wish to see', however it is you like to see your company, family, community school, or planet change, just become that change.

And I found that very liberating, very empowering. But that also flips the script a bit, Richard. Because at that approach you've got to first serve yourself. So it's really about making yourself light up. And when you light up, you then become something of value to others. So Pine Ridge became for me this place where I lit up that gave me power, that gave me energy, but nothing to do with my expected roles or where people expected I would be spending my time or using my time.

[21:29] **Richard:** Yeah, I can imagine. And just talk me through walking into this reservation, and then how did this experience help you light up? How did that work?

Kevin: Yeah, it took a while. That plays rightfully full of mistrust, because it's a community that has been taken advantage of in big and small ways for 150 years. Chief Red Cloud from their tribe once said essentially of white America, and at the time the American government, he said, "They made us many promises, more than I can remember. But they never kept but one. They promised to take our land, and they took it." And this community again, I remember once I got to know the community and its history, I got thinking about the word 'genocide' and I Googled it. And this is a low admission on my part. I only ever thought that genocide was something that had happened somewhere else. And when I looked up the UN United Nations definition of genocide, every criteria had happened to these people, right here in our own country. Which like yours, holds itself up as a beacon of freedom for all. And yet we've got this really dark part of our history that doesn't fit those values. These people had

their voice taken from them. And so to put it all together for me, I just really developed this big affinity for communities that have had a full voice. Whether its workers within a company, or a tribe like on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation.

Richard: And so was it something like it clarified for you, what your mission was going to be? Is that what the experience gave you?

Kevin: Yes. Yeah. No need to expand, that's exactly what it gave me. So I say no need to expand it, now I'm expanding. What I was going to say is what a gift clarity is. Deep clarity. And what I got from my voice and my time Pine Ridge is deep clarity about what mattered to me about the change I wanted to become and see in the world. And that liberated, too. When you have that level of clarity, you are set free to just go. Which is what I've been doing, going at that for the last 10 years.

Richard: I get it. And so when did you first start expressing this? I'm just imagining this scenario where you start saying this to your staff.

Kevin: Yeah. Give it close to 10 years ago. And I do think at first, people were like, "Okay, what's going on here?" I tell people what someone said to me once, "Kevin, you had the best midlife crisis I've ever seen." But it really is. I have a friend who made a spiritual comment to me one day that served as the basis for that concept of a "midlife awakening". She said that what happens is at about the halfway point in life, think of it as half time on the soccer pitch that the soul calls time out and really takes inventory of how things are going, and assesses whether or not that spirit is on its proper trajectory. And if it's not, tries to give it a nudge to move in the right direction. Now I needed a big nudge. So I got this giant shot across my bow in the form of a voice condition that forced me to change in a way that was a blessing. And really, when you oversimplify it, when you talk less, you listen more. And the biggest voice I started hearing more clearly was my own.

[26:49] **Richard:** Yeah. You heard your voice more clearly, and you talked about lights. So are you also experiencing light? Is that part of this, your own light, or?

Kevin: It was all very stress-relating, I would say that. I have said before that it all made me feel physically lighter. Like when you know you're on your path, you found your voice, you know it. Like in the deepest part of your essence. And when you know that, I think there's a great sense of calm and trust that comes with it. I was before this classic - nothing wrong with it - but this classic, traditional, always trying to plan and control. And letting go of that is really liberating. And to something you mentioned, our performance as a company took off.

I'll say it this way just not to brag about the company, but to promote the concept of shared leadership. We ended up in the 10 years that followed, for lack of a better term, making more money than the company had from 1848 to 2010. And the company had always done well, or it wouldn't have been around. But we truly went from doing good to doing great. And people have questioned me, businesspeople, and said, "Kevin, okay. Explain this to me. If you give everybody their voice and more freedom, what about corporate focus, discipline, efficiency, productivity, all that? What happens?" Our experience, which is now a decade on across a fairly good size company, it all gets better. And our safety director summed it up best when he explained why by saying, "People are much more apt to support that which they helped to create."

And what we found is when everybody feels like they have a voice, do have a voice, we make better decisions. Put a price on making better decisions. When you're hearing the voices of the people who actually do the work in a safe setting, you make much better decisions. Second, what we found is people don't expect to have their exact way. They understand this is a company with lots of

perspectives. What they really want is to be heard. And if they feel like they were heard and authentically in a decision-making process, there will support the outcome, really authentically support it. It goes way up.

So one of the great ironies to me, Richard, is when you disperse power, discipline improves.

Richard: Yeah. Beautiful. Yeah, beautifully said. And we hear that again and again, on this show. We've had a number of leaders who've taken this perspective where their businesses and they're often challenged in the same way, and it does become chaos. How do you deal with performance management of individuals? How do you fire people? What do you do when people are under performing? And again, and the answer is you just trust the people and these things work themselves out. They make better decisions. You become more productive. You become more profitable. If you start from this basic principle of honoring the individual.

Kevin: And you take even the example of an individual underperforming, or let's say an individual who's not thriving at our company. The old model would be, well, that individual can't keep up here. She's not a good enough person for our company. And that's just such a terrible, skill sick approach. The new model is so much simpler. If someone's not thriving in our company, you just talk to them about it and say, "Hey, it feels like you're not thriving. We know you're an amazing person. So what do you think's at the root of that?" And often it might be that person's highest calling is going to be doing something else. But that doesn't mean that's not an amazing person. So when you change that perspective, even the process of helping people leave the company has a whole different spirit to it. Once you've refit your lenses in terms of how you're going to see people at work.

[32:27] **Richard:** Yeah. Yeah. That makes so much sense. And it links to something you said moments ago when we were talking about how the traditional approaches to try and coach people. And that's something I engage in, and sometimes companies pay me to coach their executives. And what's interesting to me is you even challenged my own thought process there. Because even coaching in a sense can be a kind of subtle, or more humane form of control here. And what you said, this is about setting people free to share that light to be in their uniqueness. And it sounds like that's what you're doing in this example. And sometimes setting people free and allowing them to express that uniqueness might be not coaching them to better performance within the company, but go finding their calling elsewhere.

Kevin: I saw a great article the other day about how a baby learns to walk. And the point was that is an authentic example of our humans ideally learn. So that baby didn't go to a training program, didn't open up a manual. A little bit of guidance, a little bit of protection, but they simply learn on their own, for their own reasons, but watching the world around them.

And then you look at how we go about teaching in school or in business. And we're so far off that track. And so it's really about giving more freedom back to the whole approach to learning and growing and developing. All you really need, I believe, is set to up high-level core values that are really visible, that are going to define who we want to be within that. You don't need a lot else.

We've been a *Best Place to Work in Maine* for seven years. And people ask what training program did your managers go through to facilitate that. And I struggled with the answer first, but now I've come to embrace it. It's none. Other than the idea of let's push power out, let's share leadership, and let's honor everybody where they're at.

Richard: Yeah. Beautiful. Yeah, no manuals, no guidebooks, no induction programs. Yeah. Just honor the individual. I can imagine some people listening to this and thinking, yeah, but how do you

then solve the coordination problem? If everyone's being free spirited, you've got some lumber to cut and to ship and to get out the door to customers and fulfill orders. Yeah, just respond to that. How does the coordination get solved in that context?

Kevin: It gets lot easier, is the long story. That the old model of controlling what everybody says, that takes a ton of work. That takes a ton of bureaucracy, and hierarchy, reporting, and record keeping. And it doesn't work very well. The new model is a lot less work and a lot more effective. So with any work group, take a production team in one of our sawmills, they huddle every morning, we've agreed on what our core metrics are going to be. That we've agreed. We've got core metrics there on the board, by the minute they're updating. And that team is working together on how to continuously improve their segment of the operation to best achieve those metrics. So there's no lack of discipline or data or accuracy in that model. It's a really funny idea to think about it. It goes to the heart of the problem. That if we trust people more, that must create poorer results. Think about what that implies about how we think about humanity. And what I'm here to say is if we trust people more that creates better results, more accuracy, more buy-in, and more discipline.

Richard: Yeah, more discipline and more order. So precisely against what the preconception would be, which is you create chaos and a lack of coordination, and the lack of focus. You're saying you create more discipline. By trusting more, you create more discipline. And that I think is what are the kind of, the counter intuitive for some, messages here.

Kevin: Right. Because I think about this, too, I don't think it's talked about enough. When a company is inaccurate, [inaudible] audit, unsafe, lots of production breakdowns. Who suffers from that? Of course company performance does. But the real people who suffer are the ones in that value stream doing the work. They have to live it.

One of my favorite questions about accuracy, or its opposite, rework. Going back to do rework. I'll get up and say to a group, "How many of you enjoy rework?" Nobody raises a hand, nobody enjoys rework. So again, it's shifting perspective. This is about proving the workplace, for the people in the workplace, as led by the people in the workplace. It's such a simple approach. And of course they want a smoother, more accurate, more consistent workplace. Of course they do. They know best how to create it because they're living in their segment of the value stream every day.

Richard: Yeah. Yeah. No, that makes complete sense. That they feel the consequences that, and you give them the power to do something about it.

Kevin: Yeah. Yeah. I think it w over, but two ways to live or manage one would be with an eye level of fate vanity. And the other would be a hot level of doubt. That level of doubt would say we need more control. We need more supervision. We need more management. At the approach you and I are talking about today is no, we need more trust. We need more support. We need more listening. We need more encouragement.

[40:19] **Richard:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And it makes complete sense. One of the points in your book, one of the six lesson here I thought we might touch on is overreaching has consequences. Overreaching has consequences. I wonder if we could talk about that a little bit?

Kevin: Yeah. So I saw this on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. In the second half of the 19th century our country, America, and this idea of manifest destiny to have a country that went from mesa to shining sea. And we ran over the people who already lived here. Our country is still dealing with the

consequences of that. That overreaching has consequences, not just for the people who have been overreached against, but for the people who do the overreaching.

So in this book, *The Seventh Power*, I wanted a fresh example of that. And I was down in my basement one Sunday looking for a movie to watch, and I came across a movie called [The Bitter Harvest](#), which was about the Ukrainian Holodomor, they call it in the early 1930s. Holodomor means 'starvation'. And essentially in the early days of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian countryside was quite recalcitrant, not really very into the idea of a Soviet Union. Stalin and his crew decided to starve that population to death. It's quite a hidden story. But in the course of two years, something like 7 or 8 million Ukrainian peasants in the breadbasket of Europe died of starvation. Soviets went door to door, took all the food sources from every home, and then blockaded large regions of the country. So there was an example of overreaching. And of course you can think about the strife today in the Ukraine. But I wondered, long story short, if there was anybody still alive from that Holodomor found the Memorial in Ukraine, Kiev. And went to Kiev, went out and interviewed a couple of the last survivors of this event and used it in my book as an example of overreaching and its consequences.

Richard: Right. Something that strikes me as a big part of your story coming through here is your willingness to follow your intuition. The first with going to Pine Ridge, then going over to Kiev. Is that something that's always been a quality of yours, or is this something that's sort of awakened along with this condition? I'm just interested to know.

Kevin: It really awakened as a result of my voice condition. Prior to that, I was more about what am I supposed to do? What do people expect me to do? And now I'm more about, what's my heart telling me to do? Now what's interesting about that though, it's my view but you'd really have to talk to people at our company, is following my heart made me a much more effective leader, manager, and executive. For me it wasn't about going to business school and getting it. Not that those things aren't great. I'm not saying that at all. Because that would be following their heart. But for me it was about acquiring different kinds of wisdom, and then incorporating that into our work world.

But I really would say my journey in the last 10 years has been, I measured it once, it's about two feet from my head to my heart. But the toughest two feet of ground in life, is to go from living dominated by the head to dominated by the heart. We need both. But I think this is really about learning to follow the heart. Which to me translates that to this notion of helping everybody commit to their true voice. When I say that, that's what I really mean. If it was safe to delve into your heart and be exactly what resonated there, that is authenticity. And what the world needs is authenticity. There will never be another you, there will never be another you. And only you can bring forth the fullest, authentic you. But leaders can have a huge impact on supporting that or thwarting it.

Richard: Yeah, absolutely. It goes back to what you were saying with the Ghandi quote, 'be the change'. But it also, as you say that, for me it relates to trust, right? If you're following your heart and you're following it, you've developed a deep trust in yourself. And how can you have trust in others at a deep level, if you don't first have deep trust in yourself? And do you remember the moment when that first happened? Because it's not necessarily obvious that you go from, "Oh, I can see this is a better style of leadership. I ask questions, they run with their own initiative", to, "I need to follow my heart more". Was there, do you remember a breakthrough at some point?

[46:54] **Kevin:** It took years. I remember I was making plans in Chicago on my first trip, to Pine Ridge on a Sunday morning, and I was so unnerved, kind of scared, that I almost turned back around in Chicago and came back home. To really break out of the conformity is scary and it takes time. It took me years to really gain the clarity which I'm trying to talk with you today. And I think that's such an important point. This kind of journey is not something that's actually realized over a weekend or a single retreat. And also, that journey never ends. There's no finish line, there's no goal. The whistle

doesn't blow whenever you reach a certain point. The amount of growth still available is infinite. So you don't ever finish, but you get to a point, I think, where you trust the universe and your place in it. And when you start to trust the universe and your place in it, you can look at everything that's happening to you and see it with different eyes.

So the other thing that's happened is, I can't remember the last time I was stressed at work. I'm telling you it's been over half a decade if not closer to full. I can't remember the last time I saw someone at our company raise their voice. I can't remember it. And to be clear, we're super competitive and driven and excited about work and growing. But now we've squeezed like 99% of the pressure out of it.

Richard: Yeah. And you look at it. And I work with a lot of senior executives and they just, oh it's heartbreaking sometimes to see it. Especially, with the pandemic, they're zoomed out right there, the zoom calls all the time, they're constantly stressed. They can't catch a breath. It's the norm. That's the thing is it's the norm for so many companies and executives, senior executives in companies. And it's just, yeah. And it does beg the question, how can people get out of this cycle, especially when they're in an existing culture that pushes them in this direction?

Kevin: right. The weight of that traditional leadership model is very heavy. I haven't yet seen enough examples from mentoring something different, which is what really inspired me to write the book and want to be on the show with you. I never planned it this way. But it's obvious in hindsight when you share leadership, leadership gets so much easier.

Like I still am really into work. I spent a lot of time at work, add a lot of value. But I'll go in now and my phone doesn't ring. I don't get a lot emails. Sometimes I got to look around and find things to do because everything's been dispersed. And at this overload that a lot of executives feel, is self-imposed. It's like let everybody fully own their job. Let everybody fully own their job.

Richard: And that comes back to your lesson number three, right? That change is created first from within. You've got to do that. If you're not in a place where not yet can you fully trust everybody in your team to make all of their own decisions, to do whatever they feel needs to be done in their area, if you're not at a place where you could do that and you can completely let go and fully trust, you've got to do the work inside you, right?

Kevin: Correct. Yeah. So earlier in my career, I was totally focused on how other people needed to change in order for our company to change. And that didn't work that well. It worked okay. Now I'm pretty much fully focused on how I need to change. I like to say it this way, I have a full-time job - pretty close - getting myself right. But that's not simple or easy or easy. But it's quite liberating to become the change, to just be what you want to see. That's actionable. The only person that you really can influence is yourself.

Richard: And of course, as you said, especially true of leaders, right? This is true of everyone, right? If you want to evolve and develop as an individual, you've got to do the work. But it has a far greater payoff when you're a leader. Absolutely. Now your last lesson was broaden the mission. And you've touched into that already a little bit in this conversation. What does 'broaden the mission' look like to you now?

[53:10] **Kevin:** Yeah, I think in the 21st century, pretty much every corporation should have the same mission at its highest level. That is, to advance humanity. That's the mission. Now in order to do that, we've got to be efficient, productive, profitable. All those metrics are still a really big deal, because we can't sustain ourselves without them. But here is the subtle difference. Profit is not the top goal.

Profit is like the fuel that powers the top goal. Top goal is advancing humanity. I've thought a lot about how humanity is advanced. And I've concluded it's one human at a time. Advancing humanity seems overwhelming until you break it down into how it actually happens. You advance one human at a time, so you have to change the world right beside you.

Now if we want to advance humanity through adults, we need to go where adults hang out. And where do billions of adults on this planet hang out? They hang out at work. So the place of work, surprisingly, it's I think in the best position to advance humanity. Because I also am a big believer in the potential of free markets, entrepreneurship, capitalism, but done with a higher mission. And that mission again, to me, is a mission of advancing humanity one human at a time, starting with the people in your own company. I talk about this as becoming employee centric. I've stood up in front of a room full of our biggest customers, and you know that old saying the customer comes first. I don't actually believe that's true. The first time I said it to customers, I was sweating, Richard. I was so nervous, but I went on to explain myself. I said here's what I do believe. I believe the people who are going to take care of the customer come first. If a company were to create a culture where the people that work there thrived, I pretty much guarantee you that customers will have an amazing experience. This is a good example of how change is created. If you want to help customers, you don't start with customers. You start with people in your company who are going to make the product for the customer or interact with the customer.

Richard: Yeah. It's the same principle, just applied at a different scale. I want to change the people beside me, I've got to work on myself. But an organization is going to improve the lives of the people beside it, i.e.: customers, it needs to do the work on itself as an organization. And yeah, so that makes total sense.

There's a brilliant example of a company in Holland called Viisi, it's a mortgage advisory firm brought on very similar principles, and the leader there has been on the show a few times. But they just won the Zero Distance Award, which is a measure of how responsive a company is to its customers. And they have exactly the same principles, their customers don't come first, their people come first. And yet they win the Zero Distance. Yeah. It's absolutely true.

I really appreciate what you're saying about advancing humanity. And what came to mind as you were speaking, I guess the common trope, or maybe for some, is that influencing if humanity is giving us all this great technology, sending us to the moon. And the picture that formed in my head as you were saying that, yeah, sure, we can send some people in the moon, but they're all fucked up and neurotic and controlling each other. It's like, what have we achieved? We just put some fucked up humans on a different planet. How does that help? But if we could do this work, as you say, one by one, and then go to the moon, but much better outcome.

Kevin: Yeah. That story you just told hit such an important point. I think we've gotten lost in thinking that technology is our salvation. Technology is a tool, but the real game is what it always has been and will be. Which is the liberation of the human spirit. And that, to that question we pondered earlier, what if everybody on earth felt respected, valued, and heard. And then to your point, then let's go to Mars, right? But until we get the human spirit right, there is no amount of technology that can undo that. And in fact, there are components of technology that can coupled with a broken spirit, become downright dangerous or regressive to the future of humanity. Our future is not a first through technology. It is first through the liberation of the human spirit.

Richard: Yeah. And then we could do wonders with this technology that we have at our disposal. But first, focus on liberating the human spirit. Yeah. I love that. Yeah. Wow. This has been a wonderful conversation. Is there anything you felt like we haven't touched on, either from the book or your wider journey, that you'd like to leave people with?

[59:47] **Kevin:** Yeah, one story to wrap things up. I was in the Arizona desert a few years back, contemplated leadership, when these five words came to me and stopped me in my tracks. And those words were this; in nature power is dispersed. I stopped, surveyed, and began out loud asking a series of rhetorical questions to the desert itself. I said to the cactuses around me, “Which one of you cactuses is in charge of all the others? Who's the boss here? Where's the headquarters? Where are all the managers? Where's the CEO? When you look at nature, it disperses power. The leadership power of nature is everywhere in creatures big and small. Humans are part of nature, not detached from it. And as such, we ultimately aspire to organize it that same way. There is a basis big for our longing, for this type of path. It really is reuniting with the essence of nature flows that works. And I would say that the universe has done pretty well growing and expanding, and that model has worked okay for it. And it's a lot easier to follow nature's energy then to fight it.

Richard: Yeah, no I love that. And what a waste of illustrate it with the cactuses. It's one of the big accounts I got the bus. Yeah. It's a wonderful way to illustrate it and everybody, but an article I once wrote about when we organized, I was just reflecting on me and my friends organizing a ski trip. It's not so easy now right now with the situation, but how do you organize a ski trip? Somebody says, okay, I'll put this hotel. And somebody is like, all right I'll organize the flights. And then maybe somebody else does the transfer, but nobody says I'm the boss of the ski trip, but you're going to be the, like the financial director of this project that, you're going to do the operator, it just happens. And people volunteer. And if someone's not pulling their weight, somebody will have a word. But it all just happens. You have a beautiful time and the ski trip happens. Did you come home? Naturally. And this is to your point, naturally when we just have important projects to do in our lives with other people that we trust and we have affection for, it just happens, no stress. People tend to just do their fair share and it's so simple, isn't it? We need to make it so complicated.

Kevin: No, it's really about surrendering to the energy of the universe and trusting a lot more than our traditional leadership models do. But as you said, that really with learning to trust ourselves. A lack of perceived trust in others is really a reflection of the work we've got to do inside. Change starts within us.

Richard: Yeah, brilliant. Okay. Thank you, Kevin. It feels like a tour de force we've been on for the last 90 minutes. I hope the audience appreciates it. I look forward to hearing their comments. So if people want to buy the book, it's [The Seventh Power](#), and we'll put a link to the book in the description. Anywhere else you would send people, Kevin?

Kevin: I've also got a website titled, [The Business of Shared Leadership](#), and you can find lots of resources there, and you can also reach me there. But I've loved being on your show, Richard. Thanks a lot for everything, this was fabulous.

Richard: Thank you. It's been fabulous having you and what a way, this last bit of work I've got to do before Christmas. So it's really a great way to end my working year, so I appreciate that.