

Quiet Warriors

And I really got focused for the first time in a long time on my own identity, beyond my roles and really got to see my role as a CEO for what it was, which was an important role I played, but not the essence of who I was. (6:52-7:14)

They didn't actually need a top-down directive. They just needed encouragement and a safe work culture to trust their judgment. (17:08-17:17)

But when you change your mission, you've got to develop a whole new set of metrics around how to measure that and a whole new set of systems to make sure everyone has a voice and everyone has the opportunity to share in the responsibilities of leadership, which we've been working on now for the better part of a decade. And it's had a big impact on our performance. But I really, now, talk about that as the outcome of a higher calling, not the ultimate calling, is to be valuable to the lives of these human beings who are working at the company. (11:29-12:12)

Tom: Welcome to the [Quiet Warrior Show](#) where we help top leaders find their pathway to incredible success and a lifetime of happiness. Here is your host Tom Dutta, the quiet warrior.

Tom: Well, welcome to the Quiet Warrior Show. My name is Tom Dutta. I am the quiet warrior and I'm excited to have on my show today, Mr. Kevin Hancock. Hey Kevin. Welcome to the show.

Kevin: Thanks for having me. It's great to be with you.

Tom: I'm absolutely excited to talk to you Kevin. And want to just set this up and tell the audience that one of the reasons I invited Kevin on the show through a contact that was made with me is because of his authentic story. There's a lot to do here. So Kevin, this show is all about you. Let me turn it to you and tell us a bit about yourself.

Kevin: Yeah, sure. So I'm the CEO of [Hancock Lumber](#) Company out here in Maine, our company goes back six generations to the 1840s and we grow trees, we manufacture lumber, and we distribute building materials. We have approximately 550 people who are part of the company and help lead the company.

Tom: Well, that's big. That's amazing. You already have my heart Kevin, because in British Columbia where I live Vancouver, Canada here, we have beautiful forests. We're very familiar with that industry. One of the things that amazes me when I was looking at this was about the whole business family business. And a lot of research says that after two generations, a lot of family businesses are sold. So I honor you for sticking it out for six generations. I want to build you up a bit before we give it back to you, Kevin, to get into your story. Everybody, here's a little bit about the background of Kevin Hancock that I want you to know. As he told you, he is the CEO of this incredible company. He's also an author of a book called the [Seventh Power](#). And the story is quite incredible. One CEO's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership. I'm sure we'll get into that. And the actual Hancock Lumber company is, as he noted, 1840s is one of the oldest and best-known family businesses in America. Also he's notable. He's a humble guy but received some recognition. The Ed Muskie Access to Justice Award, Habitat for Humanity, Spirit of Humanity award, Boy Scouts of America, Distinguished Citizen, Timber Processing Magazine person of the year. It goes on and on and it just tells me that there's a lot of wisdom in you, Kevin. So listen, you've got a powerful backstory. Why don't you get into this, that with us, tell us how it began?

[00:02:48] **Kevin:** Thank you. So in 2010, at the peak of the housing and mortgage market collapse, I acquired a rare neurological speaking disorder that I've never heard of called [spasmodic dysphonia](#). And suddenly I found myself having to come up with a very different approach to leadership because I couldn't at the time do a lot of talking. And then a couple of years later, serendipitously, I began traveling from my home in Maine and out to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, which is one of the biggest, most historic and poorest today of all the Sioux reservations on the Northern Plains. And there I met an entire community that didn't feel fully heard, that felt as if a piece of their voice had been taken or was marginalized. And the two events led me to realize that there are lots of ways for people that lose a piece of their voice in this world. That, unfortunately, when I was thinking about leadership, Tom, I concluded that historically leaders had probably done more to limit and restrict and intimidate the voices of others than to free them. And that's when I started to see my own voice condition, which I previously thought of as a liability as a gift or an invitation to lead differently in a way that dispersed power and strengthened the voices of others. And specifically at our company, I said to myself, well, maybe the partial loss of my own voice could be a way to give everyone at our company a bigger voice.

[00:04:54] **Tom:** That's amazing. Let's get you to pause there. I want everybody to just listen to that back story. This is a teaching moment. And Kevin, I'm going to make a bold statement that the narrative of my show is based on the hero's journey. Joseph Campbell left us a library of research on this, where some people hear this call to adventure at various points in their life. In fact, many people hear it several times, but they don't answer the call. Sometimes that call to adventure happens when something not good happens like Kevin Hancock being diagnosed with spasmodic dysphonia. And so when you answer the call, you go on a journey into what they call the unknown world to seek and learn. I want to ask you this, fascinating to me that you chose to go to the remote Native American charter school. And also that you answered that call when many people who suffer things like you have, really they don't make it through to the other side. Maybe they get depressed or down and out or some of them just don't find that purpose. Take us back to that moment and just help us understand what got you through that to do something like this?

Kevin: Yeah. The whole journey, Tom, as an aside, got me very interested in Joseph Campbell and the hero's journey and that triangle of initiation, separate return that you know so well. And my own journey followed that pattern. But essentially what happened when I started talking and listening more, the biggest voice I started to hear was my own. And I really got focused for the first time in a long time, on my own identity, beyond my roles and really got to see my role as a CEO for what it was, which was an important role I played, but not the essence of who I was. Anyway, I'd always had a love affair with the American west and the history of the west and the second half of the 19th century, when our nation's manifest destiny ran into the Plains Indians. In 2012, I happened to pick up a copy of National Geographic and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation was on the cover. And going there for me, I've been there now over 20 times, was a bit of a modern-day vision quest, where I was really kind of searching for my own voice in a community that felt like it lost a piece of its voice.

Tom: That's amazing. Well, I'm glad you cleared that up because I thought you're going to tell me you're part Navajo.

Kevin: No, I'm not. There was no direct connection. But it all did get me thinking, Tom, about our shared humanity. And if you back your view of the planet up far enough, what you can see is a single human tribe.

[00:08:05] **Tom:** Yeah, absolutely. We're all connected by that thread. And I'm in a country where the history of the natives inhabiting our land and the school system that was put together to house those people. There's a lot of controversy here about how those people were treated. I always get fascinated when I see somebody like you is a CEO, a very smart man, who's built a good business, actually go

and seek the wisdom and to learn from people like the Navajo. So I'm fascinated by that. I want to ask you something about your book.

So let's just jump into that. The book itself everybody's called the Seventh Power. I encourage you to get it. We'll ask Kevin at the end to tell us how to get a hold of him and his stuff. And you've got a comment here. It says you detail the new pathway to organizational excellence, building on employee centric, building on the employee centric company, power is dispersed, leadership is shared, every voice is heard and then down at the bottom. And the last thing I've noted, as it says, break down the planet's entrenched top-down governance model. That is a huge nut to crack, and they say that leaders, good leaders, are invisible. I love the fact that you're actually empowering people to hear their voice. Tell us a bit about those principles that you've developed there.

Kevin: Yeah. So it starts with the idea that traditionally leadership has been about collecting power to the center. But really when you look at humanity, broadly, everyone is a sacred individual who's capable of leading and contributing in their own way with their own voice. So it starts, what it really started with for us was thinking differently about the very purpose or mission of our company. And we ended up changing the mission. And the mission today is first the employees, that the first priority of the company is to be meaningful and valuable in more than just economic ways to the people who work there.

So if you picture a flywheel of corporate success with employees, customers, community, suppliers, industry, and so forth, the idea is to put the company's focus on the employee experience in the belief that it leaves employees are having an exceptional experience, they will figure out how to take world-class care of the customer and the company in return. And in our case, that's been what happened. But when you change your mission, you've got to develop a whole new set of metrics around how to measure that and a whole new set of systems to make sure everyone has a voice and everyone has the opportunity to share in the responsibilities of leadership, which we've been working on now for the better part of a decade. And it's had a big impact on our performance. But I really, now, talk about that as the outcome of a higher calling, not the ultimate calling, is to be valuable to the lives of these human beings who are working at the company.

[00:11:39] **Tom:** Yeah, that's fascinating. They say sometimes that the correlation between a leader, the top leader's blind spot and the performance of the company is directly related. Furthermore, there's more evidence that leaders who aren't in touch with their people and maybe are not authentic in their own leadership that that people won't follow them. They can't empower them to use their voice. In fact, some companies still unfortunately have cultures of tyranny or people are afraid to speak. You've done a really good job, obviously with transferring your leadership to your company. I want to ask you this question though, about the dysphonia, the issue that happened with your voice. By the way, listening to you now, I'm so admiring in your ability to communicate, having gone through that. Was there any point in time and forgive me if I'm going to put it in a way that sounds like I'm talking about mental health, but I am because it's my passion. But when this occurred, were there any moments where you had some dark, they call it the dark night of the soul where you thought, why me, how am I going to, what am I going to do? Was there any time where you began speaking and empowering people where you felt things like shame or any kind of liability because of what had occurred to you?

Kevin: Yeah, that's such an important question, thank you. Initially, when the conditions set in, it scared me and I wondered if I would be able to continue in my job. I laugh about this now, Tom, but at the time I said, well, what possible good could a CEO be who can't talk all the time. So it definitely threw me off, but I kind of just hung in there and I never felt judged for how my voice sounds and over the years I've been able to improve it. And people around me have been super supportive, but ultimately what this really became something that I built on. Over time I saw this as a gift. I had a dream a few months back where an angel appeared and offered to back me up 15 years in my life prior to the onset of SD. And I got super nervous in the dream. I said no to the angel, if you back me

up, I might not acquire this disorder. So I long ago crossed over to seeing what looks like a limitation, as a blessing and a gift that's given much more than it's taken.

Tom: Well, thank you for sharing that. I love you and your story. That is what I absolutely see as not only resilience, Kevin, but you know, quite frankly, humility. I'm sure you'd been told this, but I can tell you just spending time shortly on this call with you that when you speak now, I believe that people see you as a more powerful and authentic leader. It takes a lot of courage to get up after a setback like that, but I think it makes you real and relatable and empowers people. It gives people hope that if he can do that and carry on, gosh, we can overcome our challenges. My mind went in a different direction when you were telling me the last piece, I thought about this. It's pretty compelling in my mind too, to think what it would be like, especially when I became a CEO at a young age, myself too, to not have a voice? It makes you really reflect or if you've never thought about that, that might happen. And then you have to rely on other skills. Give me a quick couple nuggets on what you had to do to take care of your voice or make it stronger. Was there any kind of physio or something specific that made a difference?

Kevin: Yeah, in the short term, it was just talking less. So I, early on defensively, started just answering a question with a question, thereby putting the conversation back on the other person, but this is what opened my eyes to the leadership possibilities. People would come up to me at work with a question and I started saying that is a good question. What do you think we should do about it? And what struck me there in a big way over time was that people already knew what to do. They didn't actually need a top-down directive. They just needed encouragement and a safe work culture to trust their judgment. But then to the other half of your question, Tom, and really to the nature of your podcast in the long run, what really helped my voice was settling myself spiritually and physiologically, really going back to learning how to breathe differently and calm my body and anything that was meditative or immersing myself and nature, those types of things really helped soothe my voice. So it kind of brought me in a direction of looking inward and really calming myself and centering myself from the inside out, which also turned out to be a gift.

Tom: Well, thank you. It is a gift. And I feel like we're connected in our souls after hearing that. I think you watch my Ted talk. I want to just mention to the audience that Kevin's done a TEDx talk. If you want to find it and watch it, it's incredible. Knowing what it took for me, Kevin, to actually plan and prepare and rehearse for my Ted talk, it was six months of work and seeing you stand on the stage and do it with the challenges that you've been through is really amazing to me. And when I went through my fall, my Ted talk talks about mental health because I slipped and fell and had a brain injury. I'm still two years into that. I had to literally turn to my faith in God and find ways to calm myself. I was sent to a psychiatrist and courses on cognitive behavioral therapy and learning things like what you said which is brilliant mindfulness and stepping away. I didn't know that the brain has the power through neuroplasticity to actually relearn itself how to think.

And so this is one of the things I see in your story. You've done something that a lot of people don't know they have the power in themselves to do. That's why this is so incredible to hear. I want to ask you one more question and then we'll just turn it to you to tell us how to get a hold of you and your body of work. And this is more of a reflective question, Kevin. So if you need a moment. There was a Canadian study done for 90-year-olds and the study was what is your biggest regret at age 90? And after all the data came in, the result, the top three was, I didn't reflect enough, I didn't leave a big enough legacy, and I didn't take enough risks. So tell me when you're done with this world, with everything you're doing now. What will the world look like? And what was your biggest regret, if you had one??

Kevin: Yeah. Wow. What a powerful question for anyone. Thank you for asking that. I think that for me it was in fact altered by my voice. Earlier in my life I really had become much too associated with my ego and my role. So as the sixth generation CEO of a family business, my personal that really the

corporate performance and that was not a healthy track and my voice disorder kind of shook me out of that, of which I'm really thankful for. Now, my goal is to keep listening to, and following my own voice in as low an ego way as possible and to see my role as CEO at something far broader than just a measurement of my personal performance.

[00:20:06] **Tom:** Wow. Well, thank you. I'm digesting that now. I'm literally feeling chills on my chair here. I've got to tell everybody that listened back to this what you just heard from Kevin. Kevin, that's an honor moment, a teaching moment on this show. We always talk about when we have leaders come on to my show. I say, and I think he might've listened to my introduction episode to qualify to talk to me because I wanted to make sure that you're comfortable with the narrative, but I think I said something like, when leaders come on, I want them to check their ego at the door. This is one of the first times somebody has said, you know what, Tom, throughout my career, I found myself having too much of an ego and through this shift it became a gift. So really proud of you, Kevin, for sharing that. I think there's many CEOs out there who will hear that and say, you know what? I don't have the courage to say that, but you know, I've gone through that myself and I relate to that a hundred percent.

So now Kevin, before I move to wrapping up, I want to honor you with some leadership words. I wrote these down on my paper here as we're talking, they're not scripted. And the first one is courage. No question about it. The second one is resilience. The third one, I put the word pivot, and then I put beside it, transformational. Your leadership style, I believe, is that when you inspire people around you now, you're getting them to look beyond just the lumber company, but you're getting them to look at a bigger purpose where you're effecting change in the world and people's lives, particularly people who are below the top leaders. Last one is humility, sir, it's there. So Kevin, on that note, back to you to tell us how we can get ahold of you or your body of work.

[00:21:48] **Kevin:** Well, thank you so much for your kind words and for the amazing work that you do with the show and the authenticity you bring. My book is available anywhere books are sold. So Amazon or Barnes and noble.com for example, or my own website, which is KevinDHandcock.com. And you can also communicate with me there. And I always make time to be available to connect with anyone that's reaching out to me. So thank you.

Tom: Oh, that's awesome. So everybody you heard that direct from Kevin is KevinDHandcock.com. I'll be going there and bookmarking and staying in touch with Kevin. And I want you to pick up his book, the Seventh Power. I think it's a book I'd like to ask you all to read, send a review. By the way, reviews for authors are gold. It helps them get noticed in their work and their mission. Kevin I'll publicly commit to posting a review for your book for sure. And then the last thing I wanted to do before I let you go is I usually don't do this on the show, but there's something in my heart that wants to do it today. And that is, I don't know if they told you about the award that I'm going to give to you. Have you heard about this?

Kevin: No.

Tom: All right. Well, here it comes, a little bit of a backstory, so I'm not sure if you're familiar with the challenge coin. These coins were started in World War II, where soldiers carried these coins in their pockets to commit to community with each other. Today, they're used all over the world by first responders, the police by alcoholics anonymous, anywhere where there's community. When I started this show, I said to myself, I want to bring on authentic leaders who have the courage to share their backstories. Sometimes we learn from that. And so I had a coin made for my show and I had it minted and handmade in the U.S., hand painted. The coin at the front has the artwork of my show, the back is a hero's journey narrative by Joe Campbell. It's beautiful. It comes in a cherry box and as soon as we release Kevin, your show, I'm going to be inducting you into the Global Quiet Warrior Tribe. Forty of these a year are going out, that's just through the select few. And just know, Kevin, by your amazing

story, you're now connected to all of us Quiet Warriors. As you listen to my show, you'll hear more of them coming on with stories like yours, but forever brother, we're sort of connected in our souls. And so congratulations, I'll be getting that out to you in the near future.

Kevin: Tom, that's lovely and knowing your story. I'm honored. So thank you.

[00:24:25] **Tom:** Alright, you're welcome. Well, everybody there, you heard it. Live that life that you deserve and desire. Find the true passion like you hear in Kevin's voice and that purpose behind your story and thank you for listening to this show. Kevin, thank you for being here.

Kevin: Yeah, Tom. Thanks so much. I loved it.

Tom: Same here. Thank you.