

Human Capital Innovations podcast

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So if work becomes a place where everyone can kind of self-actualize, can test their skills, can come to know their own identity and can feel safe doing so, then work starts to become a really important social tool, not just an economic tool. I've really, to take that one step further, come to think very differently about the mission or purpose of work. I think that the economic results are an important outcome. Outcome, of a higher calling. And I think that higher calling is that work should be meaningful to the people who do it. (13:36-14:28)

But I had a gentlemen show me one day when I was at Pine Ridge, that the center of the wheel, those who know the old ways, he told me, know that seventh power also exists. And that seventh power is you. It's me. It's the individual human spirit. Which is of nature, of the universe, of the sacred spirit. However you want to think about it. And that every individual is a piece of the divine. So the real task in social justice and in rethinking organizational excellence, is about giving away from the bureaucracy, getting away from the monolith, getting away from the empire, and putting the focus back on the individual and helping individuals understand and tap into their own power. (28:34-29:39)

John: Welcome to the Human Capital Innovations podcast. Your go-to source for personal, professional, and organizational growth and development. We hope you tune in often for all things people management, organizational development and change, organizational leadership, and social impact related. Maximize your personal and organizational potential with Human Capital Innovations podcast.

Welcome to the Human Capital Innovations podcast. In this HCI podcast episode, I talk with Kevin Hancock about dispersing power in organizations and strengthening the voices of others through creating a work culture where everyone leads and every voice is trusted, respected, and heard.

Kevin Hancock, welcome to the Human Capital Innovations podcast.

Kevin: John, thank you. I'm quite happy to be with you today.

John: Yeah, I'm really thrilled to have a chance to talk with you. As we were discussing before we hit record in kind of the free discussion, we do have a lot of areas of overlap in our area of expertise and

interest and the work that we do. So I think it'll be a really robust discussion today, as we talk around issues about social justice, as they relate to organizations and working with our employees.

To begin, I want to share with the listeners a brief bio about Kevin. Kevin Hancock is CEO of one of the oldest companies in America, [Hancock Lumber](#), which was established in Maine in 1848. Today the company grows trees, manufactures lumber for global distribution, and provides building materials and construction services for contractors. The company has 550 employees and is a six-time recipient of the *Best Places to Work in Maine* award, which I just want to interject is really cool. I think it's great anytime an organization focuses enough on its employees to be able to earn those types of recognitions. Kevin is 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 in 2010.

At the peak of the national housing and mortgage market collapse, Kevin acquired a rare, neurological voice disorder called [spasmodic dysphonia](#). I'm not sure if I said that quite correctly. When his own voice became weakened, he developed a new leadership style based on strength and strengthening the voice of others. He is now a champion of a work culture where everyone leads and every voice is trusted, respected, and heard.

He is a frequent visitor to the [Pine Ridge Indian Reservation](#) in South Dakota. His first book, [Not For Sale: Finding Center in the Land of Crazy Horse](#), won three national book awards. His next book, [The Seventh Power: One CEO's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership](#), is scheduled for release. Actually, it looks like it was released just a few months ago. Again, Kevin, what a great background and I'm really excited to talk with you today.

Kevin: Well, thank you, and as I said, I'm really happy to be here. And I love the idea of talking about social justice within the context of corporation and within the context of employee experience. So I think the subject of interest to you is really important.

John: Awesome. Awesome. Before we really dive in, is there anything else you would like to share with the listeners about yourself, your background?

Kevin: No not really. Other than as you mentioned, it was really a voice condition that I acquired that got me leading differently because like I couldn't use my voice at first. But then as time went on, I didn't want it. I really got thinking differently about how a leader might lead. And I got really excited about the idea of dispersing power, and leaders, really being about strengthening the voices others, not themselves.

So what started as a bit of an unexpected hindrance or a setback with my voice condition became really an invitation that I used to think very differently about leadership and the importance of helping every human being feel heard, and how powerful that simple act can be.

05:25 **John:** I love that. I think that's amazing. And I wouldn't wish medical conditions on anybody, but I think it's a great example of how sometimes, to use the old cliché you take those lemons and you make a glass of lemonade out of it, and really leverage that really difficult life experience to transform the way you approach your leadership and how you interact with those around you. That says a lot about you, that you're willing to respond that way and you're able to respond that way, and that you do it in such a way that really empowers the people around you.

I like the way you said 'dispensing power to strengthen the voice of others'. I'm a strong believer in shared governance and in letting go of power as a leader through more delegation and providing more

autonomy to your people. And that's something that a lot of leaders really struggle with. But I think is pretty key if you want to have a really successful, innovative type of organization that's going to be sustainable in the long run.

And speaking of sustainability, your company is clearly one of the oldest companies in the country, best place to work repeatedly I think all of those are a great testament to not just your leadership, but those who have preceded you as well.

Kevin: Well, it's interesting you mention that. At the core of our business, we're very much connected to nature. So the first thing we do is we grow trees. And of course, to even say it that way is a misnomer, because all you need to do to grow trees if you're human is nothing. You just need to be willing to do it for a very long period of time. It's about leaving land undeveloped and letting trees grow on their own. But when it comes to leadership, I've thought quite a bit about trying to align the future of leadership with nature's fundamental rules. And one of those rules that I've thought quite a bit about, is when you think about it, nature itself disperses power.

I was actually out in the Arizona desert one evening a couple of years ago for a walk when this hit me. And the idea was simple. In nature, power is dispersed. and I stopped, John, at sunset and I looked around and I posed a series of organizational questions to the desert out loud, all by myself. I said, "Where's the capital of this desert? Where's its headquarters. Where is the CEO? Where are the managers and the supervisors? Which one of these cactus is in charge of all the others?" And the answer in every case was just crystal clear. In nature, power is dispersed. That secret sauce, that sacred energy of the universe, actually lives in all its parts and pieces. And humans, who are a part of nature not separate from it, I believe ultimately want to organize in this way. And in the 21st century, in the query and age, I think this is where you see the disconnect. So people are awakening to their own sacred power as individuals. But institutions are still often locked in this past-based approach to leadership, which is about collecting power to the center, having a few speak for the many, and taking a bureaucratic approach to get things done. And while that model might have been the dominant model for centuries looking backward, I do not believe it's going to be the dominant model going forward.

John: Yeah. And I completely agree. I think organizations today need to be much more agile, they need to be responsive and flexible, and that simply doesn't happen in a heavily top-down, bureaucratic organization with many levels. Your flatter organizations is the trend. And that necessarily means dispersion of responsibility and increased voice for everyone. Because now instead of having to go through five rungs of the hierarchy to go from the lowest entry-level employee all the way up to the top, now there's maybe one or two rungs. And now everyone is sharing in responsibility to have those discussions about product development, the services offered, new efficiencies, products revisions, and new iterations, to be responsive to customers. And that's what the global marketplace requires for organizations to be successful today.

The big behemoth organizations, they're not going to be going away anytime soon, of course. That's not what we're suggesting. but most people don't work at those organizations. 80% plus percent of individuals work at small businesses. And so the vast majority of us are going to be trying to leverage employee voice in a way that will help lift everyone as we move through our careers, and as we try to develop our people, and strengthen our organizations.

Kevin: That's so true. And I think even if you look at big organizations, say large public companies or governments for that matter, that what they, too, really need to figure out how to do is how to act and operate like a small, community organization, how to de-centralized power and act locally.

And really when you look at data today, like on the employee experience, the writing is on the wall. Gallup will show us that perhaps one in three Americans today finds their work experience meaningful or considers themselves to be engaged. And what an unfortunate reality that is. That 2/3 of all people who work in this country, it's simply an economic exercise. I go and perform functions, I get money and benefits, but that's it. Beyond that it's empty.

And I just think that too many people on this planet work and spend lots of hours and years and decades doing it. And the work needs to be meaningful in more than just economic ways for the people who do it. And the pathway to that, I believe, is creating structure that gives everybody a voice. So if work becomes a place where everyone can kind of self-actualize, can test their skills, can come to know their own identity and can feel safe doing so, then work starts to become a really important social tool, not just an economic tool. I've really, to take that one step further, come to think very differently about the mission or purpose of work. I think that the economic results are an important outcome. Outcome, of a higher calling. And I think that higher calling is that work should be meaningful to the people who do it.

14:42 John: I completely agree. I think there's lots of ways to design meaningful work. You can increase autonomy, you can give people a challenge, allow them to develop new skills. There's lots of different things that go into meaningful work, and providing purpose and helping people really get excited about getting up in the morning.

I think that actually connects really well to the other thing I wanted to explore with you today. And that is the social justice aspects of the work that you do. I do a lot of that related work as well. A lot of times we think that business is over here, and social justice issues, social impact, environmental issues, those are all over here, and that these are discrete things they're separate, and more and more organizations are starting to blur those lines. And they're starting to see that employees want to be engaged in work that makes a meaningful impact in the world. They want to see that their work makes a difference and better the lives of those around them.

And so I think it's a really great opportunity for organizations, for multiple reasons. To strengthen the bottom line, better PR, for all of those kind of business case reasons. It's good for organizations to get involved in social impact, social justice work, but there's also the human component that it's just the right thing to do. It's the right thing to use our power to benefit those who are disadvantaged and for those who may be butting their heads up against glass ceilings or against brick walls as they're trying to just get a fair shake in life, and fight against systems that are built against them.

And so let's talk more about that. How have you integrated some of these social causes, social justice and environmental types of issues, into your organization and diffused it throughout your people?

Kevin: Yeah, great subject and question. Let me start quickly by talking about how I really became connected to social justice in a personal way.

I began traveling about eight years ago from my home in Maine, out to the [Pine Ridge Indian Reservation](#) in the southwest corner of South Dakota. Pine Ridge is the largest, most historic, traditionally most disenfranchised, and today the poorest of all the Sioux reservations on the Northern Plains. And this is a community that was essentially overrun in the second half of the 19th century during America's Manifest Destiny from sea to shining sea.

And what really struck me when I was there based on my own experiences, is there I met an entire community that felt like it didn't have a voice. An entire community that didn't feel fully heard. And combining that with my own voice condition, I really got thinking about the fact that there are lots of

ways for people to lose their voice in this world. And that the heart of social justice really is the reality that somewhere along the way, those who have the most power overreached. They abused it, they took advantage of it. And in the process, made certain communities or groups feel as if their voice was left at less important.

So for me, on the simplest level, social justice is about restoring everybody's rightful, sacred, beautiful voice. And I think about it this way in terms of a very simple question. And it's this, what if everybody on earth felt trusted, respected, valued, and heard? What might change? And I actually think everything might change.

So for me, social justice starts with trying to create that type of culture and environment right around you. Which for me, first, is in the place of work. Workers are often groups that have not felt heard, or powered, or valued, or trusted or fully respected. And I just think that social justice is a bit of a wave where you've got to live values that promote respect and trust in others, regardless of their background or place of origin, and hope that is something that spreads and grows and manifests. And it would be easy, we're up here in Maine, and Maine's a very rural state. It's traditionally a very white state. And it might be easy here to say, well, we're not really in the middle of a quest for social justice. But I think that in this day and age, everybody's got to figure out how to get in the middle of the quest to advance social justice. And so I've really tried to do it through my time at Pine Ridge and advocating for indigenous communities, and then to try to create a culture within our company that shows great respect for all voices.

21:20 John: Yeah, I love the way you frame that. Because we can get into the specifics of any given issue or topic. I mean, right now we have lots of discussions around the country about race and systemic racism. We just finished Pride month, so we have discussions around LGBTQ+ advocacy and rights. We have environmental issues. We have, I mean, there's so many different things. And within each of these different pockets, there's complexities, and it can be a challenge to talk through those issues. But what you said is really at the crux of all of it. It's not rocket science. You basically just need to treat people with dignity and respect, help everyone feel valued, help everyone feel heard. When you do that, most of these other perplexing problems and challenges start to take care of themselves because we're respecting each other. We're valuing each other. We're giving everyone an equal seat at the table, where they get a chance to contribute. And they see that contribution is valued and will actually be considered.

If we can create that kind of an environment within organizations or in society at large, then a lot of these other more complex things don't go away, but we're now in a space where we can start to really tackle them, where we can start to really make a move, positive movement towards improvement and change. But until we can get diverse voices around a table where we can respect each other enough to listen, none of that other stuff can happen.

Kevin: Yeah, that's so true. I had two thoughts as I was listening to that. The first is that I do think it's super important for everyone to really understand the systemic underpinnings of a lot of these issues. So why it's Pine Ridge the poorest place in America? Is that random? It's not random. Is that them? It is not them. When you go back and look at the history of how they were conquered, and how they were oppressed, and the genocide that occurred. This is not coincidence. It's just not coincidence. It's so easy to want to say, well, in a community like that, let's speak to something that they're doing wrong. And while we all need to learn to look within to find our strengths and path as a society, we've got to recognize that our systems absolutely have favored certain groups and disfavored others. And to not see that and acknowledge it is not okay anymore. And so I think that's one of the big things that's changing and changing for the better.

The second point I wanted to mention, I used to have a tough time describing what I did at Pine Ridge. I've been there over 20 times and I don't represent any government agency or non-profit. It's got nothing to do with my core business. So people would say, "What do you do there?" And I finally just started telling the truth, which is I don't actually do very much. I just travel around the community, and I sit and talk and visit with the people who live there.

But what struck me over time, and I've written a lot about this in both my books, is that in and of itself is powerful. So the way I've come to talk about it or think about it, is that awareness and connectivity, in and of itself, are powerful acts. I see you. Let's just start with that. Like I know you're here and I know what happened. I know the story of this reservation. And I think the people here are beautiful and powerful and important and have lots to contribute. Just that connectivity, listening without judgment, or without trying to change or remake or fix or solve. That in and of itself is reconciliatory, if you will, and it can create change.

26:10 John: Absolutely. Taking a systems approach to looking at these challenges is essential. And the first step in that is listening to the living experts who are a recipient of the outcomes of that system. Too many times people get this idea that I'm going to go in, I'm going to fix everything for this disadvantaged population. And they go in, and they're educated, they have lots of great experience. And they say, I'm going to go and I'm going to just fix this. And they forget that they need to listen. They need to go and actually talk to people. The people on the ground who live in those communities, they're the ones that are living it and dealing with it every day. And whether it's socially at a reservation or whether it's within an organization, going and talking to and listening to your line workers, the people who are on the front lines interfacing with customers, that's absolutely essential. Because they're going to have the key insights that are going to be necessary for you to make positive change.

And for far too often, leaders have a little bit too much hubris. They're arrogant about their ability to perceive all of the troubles that are happening within their organization, and they think they've seen it before. They think they have the answer, and they forget the simple truth that you need to go and listen. You need to go and talk to people, you need to observe, and you need to learn as you go. You can't take anything for granted in this world that's messy and complex.

Kevin: Right. This is right at the heart of what my recently released second book is about. The book's title is, [The Seventh Power](#). And that same Sioux concept that comes from their most sacred symbol. The medicine wheel honors the powers of the west, north, east, south, sky, and earth. The six great external powers.

But I had a gentlemen show me one day when I was at Pine Ridge, that the center of the wheel, those who know the old ways, he told me, know that seventh power also exists. And that seventh power is you. It's me. It's the individual human spirit. Which is of nature, of the universe, of the sacred spirit. However you want to think about it. And that every individual is a piece of the divine. So the real task in social justice and in rethinking organizational excellence, is about giving away from the bureaucracy, getting away from the monolith, getting away from the empire, and putting the focus back on the individual and helping individuals understand and tap into their own power.

John: I think we're about out of time. So maybe we leave it at that. I think you summarized it really well. Let people share their own power, let their voices be heard. And collectively we can lead organizations in a people-centric way that will leverage the capacities of our people, help them feel empowered, help them be innovative, and help the organization to be successful. And more broadly in society as we do the same thing, then we can get past this divisive rhetoric that's so prevalent right now. It's almost like collaboration is a dirty word in politics right now, people aren't willing to cross the aisle or they're seen as traders, that makes for dysfunction. We need to get voices together. We

need people to feel heard, and we need to share power. So thank you so much for the really great discussion today. Before we close, I want to give listeners a chance to know how they can get connected with you and learn more about what you do. Would you mind just sharing that for just a moment?

Kevin: I would love to. I'd love to hear from anybody who listened to this discussion today. And you can reach me through my website at kevindhancock.com. And I have a bunch of resources there, including access to the [books](#). But also a contact link, so that anyone who wanted to connect with me it would be able to do so. And I always answer anybody that checks in with me, that's right at the heart of our discussion today. So I really appreciate this opportunity and thank you for helping share a little bit of my voice, John.

John: Well, thank you again. It's really been a pleasure talking with you, Kevin. The time has flown by. We haven't had enough time, and so perhaps we can do this again sometime soon and continue the dialogue. I encourage my listeners to look you up and to get connected. Kevin's doing great things and can help your organizations do great things as well. Thank you, Kevin. And thanks everyone for listening today. And I hope everyone has a wonderful week and that you stay healthy and safe.