

Leadership Reimagined Podcast - Kevin Hancock

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And around the outside of that wheel, Jane, they will say live the six great eternal powers, the power of the west, north, east, south, sky, and earth. But the center of the wheel lives the seventh power, and that seventh power is you. It's me. It's the individual human spirit that Sioux believes and understands that everything that exists in the universe is connected. It's related. (12:04-12:43)

In that old approach we always say someone didn't fit that got let go from a company, people would say, well, he or she failed. He or she wasn't good enough, he or she couldn't cut it, but that's just plain wrong. (21:27-21:49)

Jane: Welcome to leadership re-imagined. I'm Dr. Jane Lovas, your host. During each episode of leadership re-imagined we take a look at leadership from the vantage point of what it's going to take for leaders to lead their organizations forward into a new future.

And in this episode, we're creating that new future. Today I'd like to introduce Kevin Hancock. Kevin is the CEO of [Hancock Lumber](#), a 173-year-old company. Wow. That is amazing. Now Hancock Lumber is unique in that they grow trees, and then they manufacture the lumber, and distribute it. In addition, they have been recognized as a Best Place to Work in Maine for eight years in a row. That is an amazing accomplishment. And they are focused on advancing the lives of their employees.

Kevin is also the author of three books, [Not for Sale: Finding Center in the Land of Crazy Horse](#). We're going to hear more about that. [The Seventh Power: One CEO's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership](#) and Kevin's third book, which was just released, [48 Whispers from Pine Ridge and the Northern Plains](#).

Kevin is 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. Kevin is also the founder of a nonprofit organization called The Seventh Power dedicated to advancing economic sovereignty in native communities across America. Kevin, welcome to Leadership Reimagined.

Kevin: Jane, Hello! I'm very happy to be with you. Thank you.

Jane: You're welcome. So I know you obviously did not start Hancock Lumber. And in this day and age, for a company to be 178 years old, that's a real accomplishment. And you've been a real part of that.

Kevin: Yeah, no, it's kind of overwhelming when I think about it. Our company began doing business before the first cannonball was fired in the Civil War, and I'm part of the sixth generation of my family to work for the company. So correct, there's a lot of history there.

Jane: And in addition to that history, I'm sure there've been a lot of challenges and a lot of things done right. Willingness to look at things and look, there's got to be a different way.

Kevin: Yeah. Yeah. I really encourage people in family businesses or long-standing companies to think differently about the word 'entrepreneur'. We typically associate that with the founder, and the founder would get that credit. But every generation also earns that credit. Because within any human generation, humanity and society evolve tremendously. We know this. So for a business to keep up, it's constantly got to be changing and evolving. And that's certainly been true in my 30-year career with our company.

04:13 **Jane:** Wow. And especially over the last few years. It was so fortuitous, because I hadn't even been thinking about this. And this morning I was reading an article on a new company that's doing some manufacturing of furniture, and it was trying to reduce the supply chain and the transportation. Because, you know, in a lot of cases wood gets harvested here in the United States, sent to Korea, to Vietnam, to East Asia, and then comes back. And they were saying how crazy that is. One, from a logistics, from an environmental, from all of those aspects. And it takes something to re-imagine that.

Kevin: Yes. Yeah. Great topic and super relevant today. You know, global supply chains are so dynamic and complex in the 21st century. To your point, many products are made in Asia, for example, but not all the right raw materials are in Asia and not all the buyers are in Asia.

So, furniture is a good example. Lots of furniture is made in Asia today, but the raw material doesn't grow there. So that raw material might be shipped from North America to Asia, where it's made into a product and then put on a boat and shipped back to its buyer, not in the US, and I don't know that a lot of people have really fully thought through that dynamic. We talk a lot about wanting a green planet and green systems for living that are going to create a healthy planet, but our buying patterns don't support that, they're supporting something else right now, which is a lot of transportation.

Jane: And there's two pieces to that. Because in all that transportation, there's an impact to the climate, and we have become a nation that wants to buy the lowest price.

Kevin: Correct. I wrote an op ed a few weeks back on this very subject and I titled it Jane, 'America always gets what it pays for'. And if you look at what's happening right now, globally, and economically, all it is following the patterns of what we buy. We want to buy the lowest price products, but I don't think we've reconciled the environmental impact of that buying preference.

[00:07:51] **Jane:** Yeah. So how do you deal with that? Because you're actually, you're almost your full supply chain in a certain industry. How have you reconciled with that?

Kevin: Well it ties to one of my favorite subjects right now, which is I think we really have entered an age of localism, where power is dispersing on this planet. And I don't know yet that the consumers have fully realized the power they have. So if you think about it this way, consumers, the general public want overwhelmingly corporations to become more holistic in their goals, to be about more than just profit, to be about humanity, about the environment. I agree with all of that a hundred percent, but corporations ultimately have to respond to their customers, you know, and I'm not sure that citizens realize the economic power that they have.

So I think for example, on the subject when you make buying choices, thinking about where that product's coming from. Not to be anti-global, that's not the point. But it's to make the smart purchase from an environmental standpoint, not just a short-term economic standpoint. Because businesses are gonna respond to whatever buyers do. So it ultimately is the buyer in a free-market system that holds

the power. And I think if more Americans realized they held that power and acted on it thoughtfully, that they could change the economic patterns on this planet.

10:12 Jane: So I'm just going to throw something out, because this is a conversation on leadership, also. It's individuals taking control of their leadership and as an individual, because leadership is about having a vision and enrolling others in helping you get there. It's not just about owning a company, and that's really important also, you know, to be a leader in an organization. But what we're kind of talking about, and this then expands out, is if individuals said, you know, saw a vision of sustainable marketing, sustainable products and said, this is important, and this is what I'm going to do. And I'm going to enroll others in doing this with me, some of it's going to come kind of innately because you start buying things, companies follow. And we have to share with our friends and families and others, we get to be the leaders of that to say, this is important.

Kevin: Yes, no, exactly. I love that idea of the individual coming into a recognition of one's own power. That is, really the title of second thought of the seventh power. That's what the seven power represents and actually is a Sioux Indian concept I've learned about from my time on the reservation, their most sacred symbol is the medicine wheel. And around the outside of that wheel, Jane, they will say live the six great eternal powers, the power of the west, north, east, south, sky, and earth. But the center of the wheel lives the seventh power, and that seventh power is you. It's me. It's the individual human spirit that Sioux believes and understands that everything that exists in the universe is connected. It's related. It's all actually one thing. Separateness, as we think about it, is an illusion. And here is where I'm going with that. If we consider the universe sacred or holy, then everything in it is sacred and holy. And because the individual human is a subset of that universe, a manifestation of that universe, each individual is also sacred and holy as well.

Sorry to run on about this, but it's really become my leadership passion. I think for centuries, organizations have really tried to take that power from individuals, really downplay it and make sure that the organization itself was the center of power. And I believe the 21st century is about reversing that trend, dispersing that power, and really helping individuals reclaim that innate power that lives within us. Whether it be as a consumer, or a variety of other topics or places where individuals have a huge influence.

Jane: Oh, I love that. And I hadn't thought about it from that direction of, you know, the native American, that belief in the oneness of everything. And I have that from a spiritual background, too. So it's like they all come together. And that's where this definition of leadership that I have, that I did not create, I expanded it a little bit, came from. Is that I really believe that when we're enrolled in a vision, whether it's our vision or someone else's vision, we want to do everything we can to support it.

Kevin: Yeah. Yeah. So I'll give you a good example of how I'm thinking about that for our company, and world of work more broadly. We've adopted the or the mission or the vision of being an employee centric company, whereas the company's first priority is the people who work there, their experience in a holistic way, more than just economically. The idea there is that the company will then soar to new heights, but as the outcome of a higher calling. That higher calling is the well-being and the experience of the people who work within the company. And the purpose of that higher calling is not because they're employees, but because they're human beings who spend a big part of their life at work.

So think about this paradigm shift. That traditional paradigm is that the employee exists to serve the company. The new leadership paradigm that inspires me is that the company exists to serve the employees. And that is to make a mission or a vision that everyone who works in a company could gather behind because everybody is the beneficiary of it.

Which brings me to another belief I have in the modern age. And it's simply this, that winning isn't winning unless everybody's winning. That old model, say in the industrial age, would be, does the employer at the upper end or is it the employee winning? Is the customer winning or is the seller winning? And I think that is an outdated model. The new model is either everybody's winning, or we aren't really winning.

Jane: I like that. Because the previous model is based on lack. And everyone wins is based on abundance and that there's enough. And that doesn't mean things are not going to change, you know, things, they're time ends, and new things come. And imagine a world where, and we're actually living in this right now, where the way we work is changing. It's going to take some retraining of people, some really looking at what works and doesn't work. And if we looked at that from the point of everyone wins. And what I consider winning may not be what you consider winning. They can be parallel. It's not, if I win, then you lose. Well, you may not even be playing the same game.

Kevin: Correct. I love how you just said that, Jane. I'm really interested in encouraging the business community about playing a different game. I love the way you phrased that. The game to me, in the 21st century, is that a business, regardless of industry, should in the end advance humanity. That's the mission. Now I've thought a lot about this, back to the seventh power. How has humanity advanced? Well it's advanced one human at a time. So, if you want to advance humanity at an adult level, you've got to do it where adults hang out. And where do adults hang out? Well, a lot of them hang out at work. They work. And so work has got to be about more than just an economic machine. That's important, but that really needs to be the outcome of a higher calling.

I love the idea of using the place of work as a platform to help everybody there self-actualize, commit to their own true voice and identity and power, strength and confidence. And if everybody in a company did that, what do you think would happen to the performance of the company as a by-product of that? Of course it would expand, improve, and grow.

20:42 **Jane:** And I know there are people that, and I've had this, they're afraid, so does that mean I have to keep everybody, even if I've got an employee that's not working out or something like this. And we so often going into that negative fear. And one of the things that I like to say is, no, you may just not be the fit for that person. And, can you help them thrive someplace else?

Kevin: That's exactly right. So again, it's all about seeing the human in everything we do. In that old approach, if someone didn't fit and got let go from a company, people would say, well, he or she failed. He or she wasn't good enough, he or she couldn't cut it. But that's just plain wrong. It's really what you said, that if someone at work is consistently unhappy, consistently unfulfilled, and consistently feeling unsuccessful, that's only an indication that that place is not the highest and best calling for that person. If that person is an amazing performer, then we're not doing her or him any favor to let that person spend a large chunk of his or her life on something that's unfulfilling or unrewarding. So it's really thinking differently about why someone would transition out of the company and doing it in a way that is human based and not denigrating to that individual, but really opportunity creating.

Jane: Yes, because imagine, just another way of, you're the CEO and you've got your human resources department and you've got a good idea of the people that you're looking for. And who they are, not just the skillset, but who they are as individuals. And so now, another company and the CEO and that HR division and what they're looking for and say, you've got six colleagues that are all looking for different kinds of people. And so now you have an employee that just, it's not a fit, it's not the right fit. And you've gotten to know that person or your HR person, or somebody gets to know them and says, "I think you'd be a much better fit over at this organization. So we're not firing you. We're calling them and we're going to set this up."

Kevin: Yeah, there is definitely a whole bigger and better set up of possibilities around how people exit companies. Think about HR, all the work goes into the people onboarding and getting into companies. That is super important, but ought to be as important as how people leave companies. We, in history, are not good at that yet. But it could be a very healthy humanity advancing process done differently.

Jane: Yeah. Just expands from one company, the humanity, to a larger community.

Kevin: Yeah, one simple way of thinking about it is if we put as much energy into helping people move on as we did come in, that would produce much better outcomes.

Jane: The reality, what's so funny is, all of these things that cause stress and turmoil in organizations, if they were flipped to look at the humanity, would expand the companies.

Kevin: Correct. Correct. Learning to put the humans within a company first, and if you do that the right way, you will also improve the company, in the process, but it's flipping that script of the employee exists to serve the company, the company exists to serve the employees. Any human organization should advance the well-being of the humans within that, or what's the purpose. And is it sustainable? If you've got an organization that's not advancing the well-being of the people who are in it, is that organization really sustainable for the long haul? I think not.

Jane: Yeah. Yeah. I was looking at some studies about the Fortune 50 and Fortune 500 companies. And, there's a turnover in them in those lists. I think it's about average, about 10 years, 10 to 12 years, which means companies are growing and expanding and they're not maintaining it. They're getting taken there. So even if their revenue stays the same, somebody else is doing something and passing them on the list. And what I'm hearing from you is that you start taking care of your employees, really taking care of them, not just in oh, here, we did this today, but really taking care of them and supporting them. Because it's even less than they need to be taken care of. It's more than they need to be allowed to be. Imagine what that could do for your organization.

Kevin: Yes. And then imagine what that could do for the planet. You've hit my favorite rhetorical question which is, what if everybody on earth felt trusted, respected, valued, and heard, what might change? I think that might change. But if that's the case, if we want to get at that, the place of work has got to be a participant because so many humans hang out at work. In the U.S. alone, 160 million adults work, and globally 3 billion people work, and so the place of work has a unique opportunity to help people commit to their own voice, help them know their worth, help them feel amazing exactly as they are. And that will not just transform companies, that would change the trajectory of humanity.

But that's a different very subject than many companies historically have focused on. And one of the other things I like to emphasize is most companies get whatever they prioritize. So if we aren't getting this, it's only because we aren't consistently prioritizing this. Helping people feel their worth is actually way easier than talking people into feeling unworthy.

Jane: Oh, that is so true. It takes a lot of work.

30:04 **Kevin:** Yeah. Sometimes people, when I talk about this vision, they're like, oh, that sounds nice, but how do you do it? It sounds like so much work. And I said, no, depriving people of their innate power, that takes work, making them feel small, making them feel powerless, that takes a crazy amount of work. Helping them feel powerful honestly only takes, I was gonna say two things: trust and love. But really, it's one thing, love, because trust is a huge component of love. And we've got to

be willing to bring love into the workplace. And now people will then say, yeah, but what about discipline and best practices and efficiency?

And I'll tell you, Jane, because we've been working on this for over a decade. What we've found in our company is the more voice we give to our people, the more disciplined, accurate, and efficient we become. Our safety director described this best for me once when he said here's why people are much more apt to support that which they helped create. So when people have a voice, they don't always have to have their quote/unquote "way". If they feel authentically heard and that the processes are sincere, they're going to buy into the outcomes and it actually creates more discipline, not less. More efficiency, more teamwork, better productivity, not less. You don't have to be afraid of letting people come into their voice and feel like your whole organization is just going to become chaotic. It's the opposite that really happens.

Jane: That is so good. I hope everybody that's listening to this is paying attention to that. Because that is something they can start doing immediately because it's listening.

Kevin: Correct. And it's trusting everyone. Everyone can do that tomorrow. Everyone can go to someone in their organization and say, you know, I really trust you. And I believe in you, and I know you're fabulous at what you do. I really want to encourage you to feel great about who you are. Great about what you're doing, trust your own voice and just go, go, go. And when I can help you let me know, but otherwise just go, just trust yourself.

Jane: Okay. Kevin, you have shared so much today. I just, I really want to acknowledge you for all that you've shared and your commitment to the world, the environment, and your employees and your company. Because it isn't an either/or commitment.

Kevin: Correct. Jim Collins, the great business writer, calls it the power of the "and", A-N-D. I love that, Jane, we can have more humanity in the workplace *and* more efficiency, more productivity, better outcomes. It's not 'or, it's 'and'.

Jane: Oh, thank you. So we have come to the end of our time. This was such a fabulous conversation. I mean, we actually, there's no going over time, and we had a really great conversation. So is there any last thing you would like to share with our listeners?

Kevin: Well, I would just say I've got a website that is devoted to the topics we discussed today. And it's called the thebusinessofsharedleadership.com. There you'll find a lot of resources around what we've discussed, and you can find my book, and you can find me. You can reach out to me, and I'll reach back to you. But I loved being on your show, Jane. Thank you so much. It's been a joy.

Jane: Oh, this has been a fabulous conversation. You just have great wisdom to share, Kevin. So thank you so much for sharing today.

Thanks for joining us this week on Leadership Reimagined. Now is the time to reimagine your leadership. Take a minute and go to reimagineyourleadership.com and I'll call you. We'll have powerful conversations. You'll take action. Yes, there are always actions to take. Your business will expand, and I guarantee you'll have fun at the same time. I know, shouldn't it be fun? If it's not fun, why are you doing it?