

- **Being a successful leader is all about finding your authentic voice and standing by your values.**
- **Listen to your employees, and empower them to make their own decisions in the workplace. This makes them feel like valued and trusted team members, and it also improves their engagement and performance.**
- **Abuse of power comes with consequences. As a leader, the most important thing you can do is practice restraint and allow power to be distributed across your team.**

[Kevin Hancock](#) believes that everything happens for a reason — even the things that can negatively impact your life.

Everything changed for Kevin in 2010, in the midst of the housing market collapse, when he was diagnosed with a rare neurological voice disorder called spasmodic dysphonia. It severely limited his ability to speak.

As the CEO and chairman of [Hancock Lumber](#), a company employing over 600 people, he realized he had to come up with a new leadership model that didn't require verbal communication.

His solution revolutionized the way he thought about leadership, even though it was a simple one: Listen thoughtfully to what employees are saying and give them the power to come up with the answer themselves.

“What they really needed was the encouragement and safety to trust their own true voice,” Kevin says.

The author of books like [Not for Sale](#) and [The Seventh Power](#), Kevin also writes about his leadership strategy for his website, [The Business of Shared Leadership](#). In [episode 201 of the PR Maven® Podcast](#), Kevin joined me to talk at length about his journey to shared leadership.

“I took a disorder that is medically considered to be incurable,” Kevin says. “And [I] not only...cured it but turned it into a blessing.”

Engaged employees produce better results

At the end of the day, your company is the people who work there and what they do. Your employees are the face of your company — therefore, every one of them is an ambassador for your brand.

Work should be meaningful for the people who do it. And as a leader, it's your responsibility to make sure your team is engaged.

But a 2021 [Gallup poll](#) on employee engagement found that only 36 percent of Americans are engaged at work, meaning almost two out of three do not find their jobs meaningful or personally fulfilling.

Kevin believes that changing that environment is all about being employee-centric. **“I like to say, pretty much every company gets whatever they prioritize. If you want employees to have an amazing experience, all you've got to do is make that a priority,” he says.**

Here are two best practices that Kevin brings to his employee-centric workplace:

1. **Treat every person as a story.** It can be easy to lose track of employees at companies like Kevin's, which employs hundreds of people. But your team members shouldn't be treated as

numbers. When you have conversations with employees, remember that they are a person with a story. Ask questions about who they are and what they need, and engage with their answers.

- 2. Profit is the outcome, not the goal.** Companies need to make a profit to stay alive. But that shouldn't be their ultimate purpose. If you make it your company's "higher purpose" to prioritize and honor the people you work with, they will produce exceptional results.

An employee-centric workplace can go a long way. If your employees are thriving, your customers will notice that and have a positive experience, too.

Use leadership to disperse power

Because speaking was painful and sometimes impossible in the years following Kevin's initial diagnosis, he had to find an effective way to communicate and lead that did not involve using his voice.

That's when he began answering his employees' questions with questions — asking them what they needed or what they thought the solution was — rather than offering a directive.

At first, it was a way of putting the burden of speaking on the other person. **But he soon found that his employees already *had* the solutions. They just needed someone to empower them to use their own voices.**

In the 21st century, we need to think about leadership and power differently. **Rather than absorbing all the power, a true leader needs to redistribute it to make others feel safe and welcome.**

"What if everybody on earth, all 7 billion people ... felt trusted, respected, valued, heard and safe? What might change? I think everything would change," Kevin says.

Leadership is restraint

When visiting the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, Kevin saw firsthand what overreach of power and its long-term consequences looked like. It has been hundreds of years since the genocide of America's Indigenous peoples, but they still live in extreme poverty today.

"I concluded that those with the most power often abuse it. They go too far. And overreaching has consequences. It ultimately collapses back upon the people who do it," says Kevin.

Great leaders understand that leadership is not about using your power to control others. It's all about restraint.

When it comes to how power is distributed in nature, humans are an anomaly. Think about an ecosystem like the desert: There is no bureaucracy, and there are no presidents or powerful leaders. Every member of that ecosystem is equally important in its survival.

Humans are still part of nature, so we should aspire to organize ourselves in line with the natural order.

When Kevin created a work culture that evened the playing field and strengthened voices rather than controlling them, "that's when the company really started to take off," he explains.

Find your authentic self

When you're someone as busy as Kevin — CEO of a large company, public speaker, thought leader and author — organizing your strategy across projects can get complicated.

But Kevin says the answer is simple: It's all about living by your values across your brands. Consistency makes a huge difference.

Before you can dive into branding yourself, you need to decide on your values. The best way to do that is to give up on what the world expects of you: Listen to your own inner voice to find your authentic self.

Only then can you begin living, sharing, and spreading that message.

This is based on episode 201 of [The PR Maven® Podcast](#), a podcast hosted by Nancy Marshall. Weekly interviews feature industry leaders, top executives, media personalities and online influencers to give listeners a peek into the world of public relations, marketing and personal branding. Subscribe through [Apple](#), [Spotify](#) or wherever you listen to podcasts.