

Breakfast Club

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This book is really about coming into your own voice. It's a photojournalism book that takes a bunch of my favorite pictures from over a decade of traveling out to the reservation in South Dakota. And then pairs that with 48 short meditations. And if I had to summarize what all those meditations have in common, it's really about coming into your own voice, self-awareness, really turning inward to find your strength, your purpose, your path. Where we're all living in a world where there's so much external noise, 24/7, internet wired world, that what can get lost in that I think is our sense of self. And this book is really about the idea that you've got to build your future from within. You've got to really look within yourself, connect with the essence of who you are, and then build an external life that's true to that. (12:58-14:05)

Simply put, the people who work in a company know how to make it better. They know what holds it back. And all leaders really have to do is to create a safe environment where the right questions get asked, and the people that work there feel good about just actually saying what they honestly think and know. (19:59-20:21)

Mark: The eighties and beyond WIGY 105.5, 96.9, and streaming through the WIGY app, your smart speaker, and online at wigyradio.com. It's Mark in the morning on the Breakfast Club. And these Breakfast Club interviews are brought to you by Easy Rental of Lewiston. They make it easy. You make it happen. Visit easyrent.com.

My guest is Kevin Hancock, CEO of [Hancock Lumber](http://HancockLumber.com). He's also an award-winning author and speaker. Good morning, Kevin. How are you?

Kevin: Mark, fantastic. It's good to be with you.

[00:37] **Mark:** I'm fascinated by your career. We spoke a little bit before we got on the air, and I just want to talk a little bit about your background and how Hancock Lumber came to be one of the best places to work in Maine.

Kevin: Sure. Our company's been here a long time, so that the company goes back to 1848. It's actually one of the oldest corporations in America, and I'm part of the sixth generation of my family to work for the company. So we've got this really long history. But to your question, you've always got to live in the present and really perform in the present moment. And certainly our company has become very focused on the employee experience, the people who work at the company, making sure that work is a meaningful for them. So that's really kind of what brought us down that best places to work path.

Mark: I was watching one of your speaking videos. You employ over 500 people here. And you said you want to put your people in a position to work less and earn more. I'm trying to wrap my head around that. How exactly does that work?

Kevin: Really glad you asked the question. But think about it this way. You know, as society evolves technology, productivity, they all improve. So we're constantly, everyone, all companies are able to do more. And that frees up time. Now, then you've got two choices with what you want to do with that time. You can keep making more widgets, producing more lumber, which is a good time for us. But we also can just plain work less.

We're really interested as a company in work/life balance. I talk about it as putting the work back in its place. Where it's super important, we're really into what we do, but we don't want the work experience to be all consuming where you need the whole weekend to rest just to recover for the next week. And we're at the point now where every single job in our company is a full-time, Monday to Friday, day shift job. Nobody works nights. Nobody works weekends. Everybody's working a full-time 40-hour week. But we're not working, which was the case when I started in the industry, 55 to 65 hours a week. So it's all about trying to put balance back into people's lives.

But on the income side, pay side, you've got to really come up with new systems other than overtime to compensate people. That the traditional pay systems overtime, which unfortunately rewards one thing, how long it takes. The longer you work, the more you make. And really in a great company, everybody's figuring out how to make things take less time. And that's how people ought to be compensated and reward. So yeah, we've taken on both goals. Let's help everybody work a bit less and make more.

Mark: When did that philosophy incorporate itself into Hancock?

Kevin: We've been after that for about a decade now. And it really came out of our big picture focus on the employee experience and making sure that life for those who worked at Hancock Lumber was in balance. When we're here, we want to work really hard and add lots of value. But we also want people to think of their job as one part of a bigger, broader life.

[04:53] **Mark:** For people who when they think of Hancock Lumber, they think lumber suppliers. What exactly is it, for those who might not know? It is just a tremendous organization in you have a lot going on here.

Kevin: Yeah. We're quite integrated. So we own timber land, and we grow trees, first. Second, we've got three sawmills around Maine. One in Casco, Bethel, and Pittsfield. And we manufacture white pine boards that we distribute all over North America and in fact, the world. And then in Maine and New Hampshire we have 11 contractor-oriented lumberyards, and a roof truss and panel plant. So yeah, 15 sites and really from forest to finished products in your home, we're participating kind of every step in that value stream in an integrated way.

Mark: You also are the primary supplier for Lowe's.

Kevin: We are. One of our biggest sawmill customers as Lowe's. We supply pretty much every Lowe's store, I believe, all the way to Northern Virginia down the east coast. And we've had a really great long-term relationship with that company.

Mark: So Hancock was established in 1848. And if I have my figures correct, you've only had to plant two crops of pine trees?

Kevin: Yes. Well, I like to ask people, do you know how long it takes to grow a pine tree in Maine? And it takes 80-100 years. So even though we've been in business since before the civil war, we've had approximately two crops. It's kind of crazy when you think about our business that way, but it really is part of our DNA. You have to have a long-term view of what you're doing if you want to grow pine trees, because it takes a long time to do it.

[06:58] **Mark:** My guest is Kevin Hancock, CEO of Hancock Lumber. And we're going to have much more with Kevin on the way, including his new book, [48 Whispers from Pine Ridge and the Northern Plains](#).

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My guest is Kevin Hancock, CEO of Hancock Lumber. Also an award-winning author, speaker, and photographer. I will say, I'm looking through your new book, 48 Whispers, the photography is amazing. So this is your third book. It was just released last week. I'd like to talk about the first two, and then we can get into 48 Whispers. The first, [Not For Sale: Finding Center in the Land of Crazy Horse](#). What can you tell us about that?

Kevin: Yeah. I never imagined I'd write a single book, so to be here with three was not something I ever saw coming. But that's how life works. And these books really follow up that idea.

So two events. In 2010, I acquired a rare, neurological voice disorder called [spasmodic dysphonia](#), that made a simple act of speaking quite difficult. And I suddenly had to pivot pretty significantly in how I thought doing my job as the CEO of a company without really being able to use my voice.

A couple years later in 2012, I picked up a copy of National Geographic, and the [Pine Ridge Indian Reservation](#) in South Dakota was the cover story. I read that article and was just really blown away by the history, the place, the people, culture, their connectivity with nature, and decided on a whim I was going to go there for what I thought was a one-off trip, just to see it. I've since now been there over 20 times, taken two Lakota names, and just have lots of friends there.

So anyway, my first book, *Not For Sale*, chronicles my first six trips out to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. And really the essence of that story is this. At that time of kind of

searching for my voice from my disorder, in a community that didn't feel heard, this reservation community felt marginalized, pushed to the side and not really respected and heard. And I put the two experiences together, and it really helped me see that there are lots of ways people lose a piece of their voice in this world, that don't really feel authentically heard as they are. So that was the first book. And then that kind of brought me to the second one.

[10:13] **Mark:** And the second book, [The Seventh Power: One CEO's Journey into the Business of Shared Leadership](#).

Kevin: Right. So that book was more about implementing an idea. Which was, could we use a company as a platform to give all the people that work there, voice. Could we share leadership and disperse power and create a work culture where everybody felt trusted, respected, valued, and heard.

Going back to the first book, kind of searching for a voice. When I thought about how leaders had affected the voices of others historically, I didn't come to a great conclusion. I felt that historically leaders more often than not had intimidated or restricted or directed or controlled the voices of others, rather than to free them. So that second book is really kind of a leadership book that flips the traditional script of power to the center, and is really about a new model designed to push power out, make the voice of the leaders a bit quieter, and give a bigger voice to everybody else in the organization.

Mark: I can't imagine that philosophy would be very popular in a lot of companies.

Kevin: I think times are changing. I think historically the answer would be 'no', because traditional model is really a few at the top kind of call all the shots. But in the 21st century that we're in, times are changing. And I think more and more people are looking for in their work, yes, something of economic significance. But more too, meaning purpose, the opportunity to lead, and contribute. And today in an employment market that's really tight and difficult, where people have choices about where they want to work, I think the work culture matters. So I think that this is actually, I suggest in my book, the path of the future. In terms of what a corporation ought to look like, function like, and be about.

[12:45] **Mark:** And this brings us to *48 Whispers*, which was just released last week. From Pine Ridge and Northern Plains, written and photographed by Kevin Hancock. What can you tell us about this book?

Kevin: Yeah. This book is really about coming into your own voice. It's a photojournalism book that takes a bunch of my favorite pictures from over a decade of traveling out to the reservation in South Dakota. And then pairs that with 48 short meditations. And if I had to summarize what all those meditations have in common, it's really about coming into your own voice, self-awareness, really turning inward to find your strength, your purpose, your path. Where we're all living in a world where there's so much external noise, 24/7, internet wired world, that what can get lost in that I think is our sense of self. And this book is really about the idea that you've got to build your future from within. You've got to really look within yourself, connect with the essence of who you are, and then build an external life that's true to that.

Mark: 48 Whispers in this book, each thought 248 words.

Kevin: Correct. I had some fun with that. I wanted to keep them short, and I really built off the number 48. The book is dedicated to the Oglala Holy Man, Black Elk, who on his sacred vision was escorted by the 48 horses of the four directions. So I knew I wanted to use the number 48, because it's sacred in Sioux culture. But 48 words was too short. 148 was a little too short, and I ended up at 248. But every whisper is exactly the same number of words. So there's some hidden kind of symmetry within the book.

Mark: As I'm looking through this, I can't help but wonder as a photography enthusiast myself, what gave you more pleasure here, the writing other photography, or was it equal on both?

[15:07] **Kevin:** The original idea was to share that photography. And the meaning of that to me, again, it's really honoring the essence of who you are, not who others expect you to be. So I'm, for example, the CEO of a lumber company. And you wouldn't really think a lumber company CEO in the middle of his career would be off on a Northern Plains Indian reservation taking pictures. Like, how does that fit the role I'm expected to play?

And one of the core purposes of this book is to really encourage people to break out of those patterns. Others expect us to be in and just come in and. To you, you know, and do your authentic self. And so this was a bit of a rebellious book in a little bit of that sense. And that's what I like about it.

[16:08] **Mark:** Do you consider yourself to be in that position now, or is it still a work in progress?

Kevin: That's a great question. I think everything is still a work in progress, and it's always a work in progress. I'm totally a work in progress. And yeah, one of the themes in this book actually is the idea that nothing is static, that everything's in motion and that we as humans need to constantly. Give ourselves permission to not get stuck in a static state and to continue to grow and evolve and change. When you look at adults, when does our learning really end? Well, only if we end it, is really what it comes down to. And so it's never too late to come into a deeper or new essence of who we are.

[00:16:28] **Mark:** My guest is award winning author, speaker, and CEO of Hancock Lumber, Kevin Hancock. And we're going to have much more coming up in just a bit. You are listening to the breakfast club on WIGY the eighties and beyond WIGY 105.5, 96.9, and streaming through your smart speaker, the WIGY app, and online at wigyradio.com.

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My guest is award winning author, speaker, and CEO of Hancock Lumber, Kevin Hancock. And we covered Kevin's career and the three books that he has written and photographed. And right now I would like to talk about a subject Kevin is very comfortable with. In fact, he

spends a lot of time talking about it to various groups throughout New England and beyond. And that is leadership. One of your favorite quotes is, “Don't confuse being busy with being successful.” What does that mean to you?

Kevin: Yeah, well it's easy to do. I would say earlier my career I was typically more busy than I was successful. And I really got caught up in the thought that the more ground I covered, the more stuff I touched, the better I was doing. But that's not really at a leadership level, the right way to think about leading or performing. Because really leadership is not about what you do, it's about what you enable others to do. And it wasn't until I started thinking that way, that I stopped thinking about how many things I had to do and really started focusing on how do we just create a culture at our company where everybody can thrive and everybody can lead. And my job, really, if I do that, it's going to get very simple. It's going to be more about getting out of the way than in the way.

[19:15] **Mark:** I've also heard that on occasion you'll walk around and ask your employees what is wasting their time.

Kevin: That's one of my favorite questions and I typically phrase it this way. If we're in huddles, I love this question, “Does anything at work ever waste your time?” There will be a quick pause, and then laughter. Because of course in the workplace, all kinds of things that aren't really productive happen, and they happen repetitively. And one of the pursuits therefore, I think at any great company, is to help people identify those things that waste time and let's figure out how to remove them. Simply put, the people who work in a company know how to make it better. They know what holds it back. And all leaders really have to do is to create a safe environment where the right questions get asked, and the people that work there feel good about just actually saying what they honestly think and know. I call that ‘the answers to the test’. The people who work at this company know exactly where it's weak spots are. And we just have to, as corporate leaders, be humble enough and trusting enough to let that come out.

[20:38] **Mark:** What are some of the more interesting answers you've received when you've asked that question?

Kevin: It's often just systems that don't really make sense that are kind of broken to begin with and aren't very complicated to fix. But if you don't have a power dispersed culture, people feel like they have to just live in dysfunctional systems. Which my key point there is, fixing that is not just about making companies perform better, it's about improving the lives of people work. You know, who likes to work constantly and systems that don't function, right? All that creates typically is frustration and negative energy. And work should be a positive experience, emotionally, spiritually, not a frustration drill. It's not necessary.

Mark: For folks listening right now that maybe have aspirations to climb the corporate ladder, what would you say to them? What are the qualities that make a good leader?

Kevin: Yeah, I would say is just follow your own heart and get yourself connected to a company whose culture mission aligns with your own. Because I think when you're in the right environment where you just feel comfortable, feel trusted, feel valued, you're going to thrive and you're going to grow. So I would really say, be empowered about where you want

to spend your career. Get in a spot that serves you, the kind of company that serves you. And what you get there, the rest will probably take care of itself.

[22:32] **Mark:** What have you learned about yourself, and how has your philosophy changed since you have been CEO?

Kevin: Yeah, I've learned so much about myself, and my philosophy has changed 180 degrees. I am literally facing the opposite direction I would have faced if you interviewed me 15 years ago. Fifteen years ago, before my voice disorder, I was a very traditional CEO who was everywhere, doing everything, talking, directing, and really being on center stage. And then when I acquired my voice disorder, I couldn't do that. And then the lessons I learned from my voice that made me not want to do that. I want this to be a company where the CEO is not center stage, it's the people who are actually doing the work that are center stage.

And so I've really learned to let go. This is the big thing that's changed. You know, I used to try to control everything. And now the only thing I really try to do at this company is get myself, right. Which for me, is pretty close to a full-time job. But again, I think for a CEO, it's really just trying to be what you want to see. And if you want a company filled with authentic, trusting people, then be authentic and trusting yourself. And when I gave up trying to control everything, my life got a lot easier, and our performance got a lot better.

Mark: It's a liberating feeling, isn't it?

Kevin: It is. Learning to let go and daring to let go. And that's really trust in humanity. You know, I'm going to try these people and I'm going to let go. And when you do that, the possibilities get bigger. It's simple. Again, we have 600 people in our company now, and what are the 600 capable of compared to what I'm capable of? The 600 are so much more powerful than one. So it's really about tapping into the 600, not the one.

Mark: And it's no wonder why Hancock Lumber has been named a six-time recipient of the Best Places to Work in Maine. Kevin, thank you so much for your time today.

Kevin: Mark, it was a pleasure. I'm really happy to have been with you.

Mark: I really appreciate it. And I'm inspired. I'm going to go take on the world right now. Kevin Hancock CEO, also an award-winning author and speaker. *48 Whispers from Pine Ridge and the Northern Plains*, it was released last week. And one of the things all three of Kevin's books have in common, five-star reviews across the board. You are listening to the Breakfast Club on WIGY.