

Kevin Hancock - The Sales Game

Connie: Welcome to [Changing the Sales Game](#) on webtalkradio.com. I'm your host, Connie Whitman, you know that I'm happy that you're here. Now as you listen to the show, my guests and I, we get that in sales in business change is always happening. And when it comes to sales you know for me, it's always about the communication and how can we communicate more effectively.

So in the show notes, you will find my link to the communication style assessment. You get two reports. One will spotlight your natural communication superpowers. You need to understand that and lean into it. Flip side, for your lowest score you'll get a secondary report. To me, this is the more important report. It will spotlight your deficit or your blind spots. Better word, 'blind spots' as you communicate. So when you communicate with people 180 degrees different than you, how is your message landing? Very important information to know. So again, that information is in the show notes, and that is my gift to you.

Now as we set up the show, I like to pick a quote that gets the vibe going of what my guests and I are going to talk about. So today's quote is by Ryunosuke Satoro, and he says, *"Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean."*

So recently I've read many articles about this new leadership skills and how to succeed in leadership, and the agility, empathy, respect, respectful communication, the importance of listening skills and listening to our employees. And as I reflected, I feel that leaders around the globe are waking up to maybe what true leadership should have been all along. And that we've been blindly using the model that has been used throughout corporate cultures - probably for the past 40 years - at least during my culture, or my career that's what I've seen. I believe the cost of not having a tangible and duplicatable leadership culture will cost organizations millions of dollars and lost productivity, and ultimately in lost revenue.

So what is this great model to follow? Of course, I have an amazing guest to share this with you. I'm beyond excited to share my awesome friend and guest, Kevin Hancock, with us today. Now this is, I think, Kevin it's maybe the fifth or sixth time you're on the show. So we've dug into this topic, and we get deeper each time Kevin comes on.

Now, Kevin is the managing owner and chairman of one of America's oldest family businesses, as well as an award-winning author and nationally recognized public speaker. Hancock Lumber is a nine-time recipient of the "Best Places to Work in Maine" award, and he just continues to grow stellar recommendations in his business. So please help me welcome my good friend Kevin to the show. So Kev, thanks for being on and taking the time.

Kevin: Honey, hello. It's great to be here. I love being on your show and I love being with you.

Connie: Yes. And I meant to mention also, Kevin is an amazing author. And you have three books now, right? [NOT FOR SALE: Finding Center in the Land of Crazy Horse](#). We could talk a little bit about that. [The Seventh Power](#), which I refer this book to every company I work with. It's that important. The Seventh Power is one CEO's journey into the business of shared leadership. And your last book, [48 Whispers From Pine Ridge and the Northern](#)

[Plains](#). All of them are amazing reads. So I do want to do that shout out Key, because your books are relevant. They're real, they're emotionally charged, but they also, I think, have this leadership model that we need to adopt across the world, not just in the United States.

Kevin: Thank you. Thank you for that.

Connie: Yeah. They're amazing. And I share your story. I was telling the listeners before Kevin and I recorded, I shared that I share his story a lot when I train and when I speak because it's just such a powerful model. So let's dive in.

You've been the CEO of one of the oldest businesses in America, Hancock Lumber, and it's been ranked the best place to work in Maine for 10 consecutive years, which is freaking amazing. So what do you attribute that accomplishment, and why the best place to work? What does that mean to you, the leader of that organization?

Kevin: Yeah, great questions. In its simplest, Connie, I think most companies, most leaders, and most humans get whatever they consistently prioritize. It's that simple. And our company now, for well over a decade, has chosen to make the employee experience our number one priority. The concept is simple, right? You could say it this way, customers will never love a company unless employees do. So you can look at that approach from the perspective of what creates a great company. And it starts with the employee experience. But then you can also look at it from a bigger human perspective.

So Gallup, the polling company, will tell us that in America today only about 32% of all workers find work meaningful. Globally, it's about 18%. And people can talk about the economic cost of meaningless work, but what about the human cost? What about the human cost of people working decades across a career in a job? That's not personally meaningful to me. That is just not okay. And it's not necessary. It's just about focus. So our first focus is to make work meaningful for the people who do it, by prioritizing their experience by listening first to the people within our company and really caring about making their experience meaningful for them. With the knowledge that if work is meaningful for the individuals who do it, that they are going to in return take great care of their company. And that the company wins by putting the employee experience at the forefront.

Connie: I want to comment on that, and then I want to ask a follow-up question about personally, what does this mean to you? I want to circle back to that. But here the model used to be that the shareholders were the priority, then the customers, and then the employee. That used to be the pyramid back in the day, right? When I started my career.

You literally flip that upside down because it's the employees that are priority, then the customers, and then the shareholders. And the funny the trickle-down method, but it works. And so I want to go back to my... so I love that, first of all, because if we have happy employees, they are representing our company. We have to make sure they're advocating, we have to make sure that they have that positive energy there, that love to the customer. And then the shareholders win, man, big time.

So first, personally, what has that meant to you? And then I do want you to share Kevin, and maybe you could do that within this. But share with everybody the first time you and I met,

you had published the book, *The Power of Seven*. And the story was,, because you had the voice disorder that really was the trigger to all of this over the past, like what, 10 or 12 years. So if you could talk about this personal ride that you've been on for this past decade and you shifting from what your dad had built and your grandfather and great grandfather, et cetera. But also that piece of the puzzle of why that flipping model has really worked, and your personal take on it all. Because you're at the core of this change. Remarkable change, might I say?

Kevin: Yeah. So you started there with the great point that traditionally in business, the first priority has been the shareholder. The second priority has been the customer. And the third priority has been the employee. I stood up over a decade ago in a big room full of our biggest customers, our biggest clients in Maine, and I said to them, “The old saying, “the customer comes first”, I don't actually believe that's true anymore.”

Our entire sales team, Connie, was in the room when I said this, and I know they were like, “Oh boy, where is it going with this?” So I went on to explain myself. I said, here's what I do believe. I think the people who are going to take care of the customer should come first. And if they are having a world-class experience, they will provide the customer with a world-class experience. And the final outcome will be the company will be highly successful.

I like to think about it this way. Companies can soar to unprecedented heights on the wings of thriving humans at work. So you invert that pyramid, and everyone ends up having a better experience than in the old model. Now you then asked me how I got on the trail of this. And as you know, but for everybody's benefit, it was a quite unexpected twist in my life.

So back in 2010, well over a decade ago, at the peak of the housing and mortgage market collapse - which was a very challenging time for companies in our industry - I quite suddenly began having trouble speaking. So I'd go to talk and all the muscles in my throat would spasm and squeeze and contract. And speaking, something I'd always taken for granted and done a lot of as a CEO, was suddenly becoming extremely difficult.

It turned out I'd acquired a rare, neurological voice disorder called [spasmodic dysphonia](#) with no known cause, no known cure. But there I was trying to help our 6th generation lumber company through the collapse of the housing market without the use of my voice. And I had really nothing to go by in terms of a path for dealing with that.

So anyway, when it's hard to talk, you quickly develop strategies for doing less of that. And my strategy, Connie, was to answer a question with a question, thereby putting the responsibility for speaking right back on the other person. So someone would come up to me at work with a question or a problem. Prior to my voice condition, I pretty much without thinking always would have given an instruction and answer or direct him. But now, because of my voice condition, I simply started saying, “Gee, that's a good question. What do you think we should do about it?”

And after hundreds of exchanges like this, listening to people tell me at work what they thought we should do, something really beautiful, powerful, and simple struck me. And it was this. People already knew what to do. They already knew what to do. They almost never

actually needed a CEO-centric, top-down directive. What they really needed was the encouragement to trust and use their own voice.

And that's when it hit me that maybe my own voice condition, which I'd only previously thought of as a hindrance or a liability or quite literally a pain in the neck, but that maybe it was actually a gift and a blessing and an invitation to lead differently, in a way that gave other people a stronger voice. And that put me on this path of what if modern leadership is about dispersing power, not collecting it. And creating a work culture where everybody feels trusted, respected, valued, and heard. Wouldn't that, or might that produce a better business performance? And two, more importantly, might that be more generative for humanity if people were really feeling valued and heard at work.

And we've now been on a 13-year journey down that path. And it's transformed our company, transformed our employees work experience as defined by them, and transformed my own experience as a leader in really wonderful ways. None of which I saw coming until my voice issue showed up out of nowhere. And here I am.

Connie: You know what's interesting, Kevin. And this is why I love talking to you, and I love your story because let's face it, how many humans would have got - especially CEOs - because let's face it, at the level of running a business, what you do. And yours was a multi-generational business. So how many people were you responsible for? But there's an element of ego involved in that because you are responsible for so many lives, and your ancestors the same. And here you have this event. How many people could have said, "I can't, and I can't, and I can't", and become almost bitter about it.

So this is why I love you so much because you took this almost, it was painful, right? When it first started, the spasms, it hurt you. So here you're coming, you're running this organization by the way, because your dad had passed suddenly, too. So you, as a young man, were thrown into this position. And then bam, you lose your voice. And you came out of that from this whole different perspective.

So the ripple, and I know you call it this too, but it was this divine malfunction of your voice. But it was divine because the ripple effect over the past 13 years has been nothing but stupendous and miraculous. It's almost a miracle because, and you're humble but I do want to brag about you right now. Kevin didn't share that during this past decade, your company has made more net profits than in the previous hundred and whatever years of your ancestors. Am I saying that correct? Hold me accountable here, Kev.

Kevin: You are. The performance of our company ended up taking off to levels I never would have thought possible before. But it all makes sense, right? If in our lives, when you put others first, it gives back to you in ways that are so much richer than when you just put yourself first.

And some of it is to me, you use the word 'ego', is really about leaders separating ego from role. Before I acquired my voice condition, upon reflection I really believe that I was that. My personal ego or sense of worth was too tightly intertwined with my role as CEO and with the performance of the company. The success of the company was the way I determined my own self-worth, value, and identity. And in the years that followed my voice condition issue,

something clicked and again flipped. And I really came to see my own identity and personal worth as completely separate from my role as CEO.

That is a role I play now. I love that role, but it's a role I play. And once you get ego out of the way and you really show up to serve others, leadership gets a whole lot easier. And it's got a whole lot more potential for good again, we get in life, whatever we consistently prioritize. And

Connie: Kev, here's the thing. Because let's face it, I work with a lot of corporations. And it's fascinating the ones that find me are like you, they're value driven through people, not just looking at numbers. Not saying numbers aren't important. Of course, numbers are important. We have to measure things. But you can't drive a number. You can change behavior of the human who's going to drive the numbers.

So why are we looking at numbers all the time and punitive of 'you didn't make your goals' versus 'why didn't you make your goals'? Hey, let's dig in to see where do you have a deficit, right? Communication. What I said, pay attention to the blind spot. That's where you can really create some magic and make good quality change. So this flipping this model and making humanity the core mantra for you. That the human potential or the human capital is really where the value is. And then ironically, the profits came exponentially because you put the human, the employees, first.

So I'm just curious now, looking back on this 13 years since you've had the disorder event where it came to fruition for you. Personally, what has been your biggest... how can I phrase this? What was your biggest takeaway for self now, your own personal growth, over the past 13? The corporation is doing remarkable, right? So the proof is in the pudding. The money is there. The profits are there. Amen. Everybody should adopt your leadership model. But for you personally when you look back, what's that feeling that you get as the CEO - accidentally or not - but creating this new model of leadership?

Kevin: Great question. I'd say from me, Connie, two things come to mind. One is when you really commit to sharing leadership responsibility broadly, leadership gets a whole lot easier. In that old model prior to my voice condition, I was kind of on that traditional hamster wheel of I get up earlier, if I stay later, if I preside over more. That is not a winning game. And once I realized that when leadership was shared the lift gets lighter for everyone, work became a whole lot easier. We make it much too difficult in that traditional power to the center commanded control model. There is a much easier way to do this. That's the first realization.

And then the second realization is that when you know that company is impacting lives, that the people who work at your company are now having different, better lives because of the approach. The rewards of leading a business just get exponentially bigger. I now think about profit for the company, not as the goal. The goal is the human experience at work. And the improvement in profit performance is a really cool outcome of a higher calling.

Connie: And this is the thing too Kev, not only because a lot of people come up with these models and they're like, "Oh, that's interesting. Yeah, that's fascinating." Not only yeah, it's funny because you actually stumbled upon this model because of the voice disorder. That was the catalyst, not that you woke up one morning going, "Oh, I'm going to flip the table upside

down.” That wasn't the thought process. You would love to say you were that genius, right? You were genius in how you responded to the disorder.

But at the end of the day, your profits speak for themselves, right? And the third-party surveys where you have a 97, it's a 97 percent approval rate. I don't know if I'm using the right word by the employees, and you have literally very low turnover at your organization too.

And I just want to share, and then I want you to weigh in on that. But a lot of my organizations, the turnover has been exponential because people are thinking, I can make the same money and I could work remotely. I don't have to do the commute and that whole rat race. Where most of your business, they can't work remotely. And yet your retention rate is still so high. So I really want you to talk about that because, it's the nature of the beast. Is it the nature of the beast or is there something that we can do internally, change our leadership model, to have this wonderful ripple effect?

Kevin: So when a company decides to make the employee experience a top priority, the company then needs to come up with some new metrics that it probably hasn't had or prioritized in the past. So what we're really after statistically is deep human engagement at work. And as everybody probably knows, engagement is measurable. There are great ways to do that. Companies around the world, like Gallup again for example, who really have perfected the art of measuring employee engagement through surveys. So the employee experience is knowable, statistically knowable, and we've made it a priority for well over a decade now to take confidential 3rd party employee engagement surveys where we really are getting data about the human experience at work.

And I mentioned globally that engagement nationally runs around 32% right now at our company. Today, across 730 employees on 16 different sites in Maine and New Hampshire, it's 90%. So 9 out of 10 people who work in our company will confidentially say, yep, I'm engaged in my work, I find working here meaningful. And when you think about the difference, I think everybody can picture this to two identical companies in the same industry and the same market. For sake of example, one has 32% engagement. Meaning 68% of the employees there don't find work meaningful. The other company has 90% engagement. Who's going to win? Which company is going to win? There's no question.

So it's also the best path to winning. And what companies are winning, they're generating money, fuel, confidence, momentum, to keep making their company better. At the end of the day we need to win in business. And this approach, this employee-centric approach, is for me clearly the best way to win on a sustained basis.

And I'm saying that not from a professor's office on a campus somewhere. I'm saying that now from well over a decade of empirical work, applying this to our company and seeing firsthand the transformation.

Connie: And the proof is in the pudding. Again, the measurements are there. The numbers are there. And we just talked about them, right? Your profitability, the 90% engagement. And it's funny because to me, that three out of 10 employees, right? So seven out of 10 employees are not happy at their job. And you hear things like it's soul sucking, they have the boss from

hell. This is the Gallup report that they shared to me. That's a tragic testimony when the solution is actually easier than what they're currently doing in their leadership models within these organizations.

And I'll share with you. I remember when I was coming up through the ranks and my sales manager, he shouldn't have been dealing with humans, period. He was an abomination in my opinion. But I'm serious, Kev. I would come in and I remember, we would go on a sales call and he would do things a little illegitimately, too. So I didn't know, because I was new, and I would say to him things like, "I don't know what you just did there." I'm learning and I'm going to figure it out because I'm a numbers person. And the numbers, the way he was projecting them. I'm like, that's not going to work.

So I would get in the car and say, "I don't want that piece of business. I can't tell you why definitively, but something doesn't feel right. So give it to one of the other sales reps." And we'd be driving back to the office. He'd be screaming at me. I was a moron. I was useless. I was a piece of garbage. The F bomb was used several times within that 20, 25-minute ride back. So I was an idiot, but I never ever stepped away from my own internal morality, barometer, integrity, whatever you want to call it. And at the end of the day, insurance back in the eighties, they were flipping policies, and it wouldn't work. The numbers didn't work. So see, isn't that funny how intuitive. But yet that's how business was done. Scream at your employees, look at the numbers.

And another quick story. I remember I sold my first million-dollar policy to this business owner. He was a delight to work with. I was a kid. What did I know? But he trusted me. We built this really nice relationship. But a million-dollar life policy. And when I got back to the office, I was so happy. I thought, oh my goodness, a million-dollar policy. Like back in the eighties, that didn't happen all the time. And my boss said to me, "Why didn't you do \$2 million?" So this is the model.

And I'm sorry, Kev, I still see it. That's just two examples. I still see that currently at a lot of organizations. They don't work with me because I don't want to work with leadership like that, that comes from this punitive, beat up perspective. Because I know it doesn't work. Plus, it's not comfortable for me to be in that environment. I don't want to subject myself to that type of environment.

But your leadership model works, and all the measurements are there. So to me, I keep having this reflection of, so why isn't every organization - let's just talk about the U.S. forget about globally - but why isn't everybody using your model? Not only do we know it works, not only do you have it organized and perfected right to rinse and repeat, but the results, the analytics are on the backend.

So my last question, with all of that said and the buildup. You have expanded your mission now to include this executive coaching so that you could get in because it's got to start at the head, right? It's got to start at the top and work its way down. Talk to me about that. And we're going to put the link in the show notes for anyone that's interested. But talk to me about why and what... not why, I know why you've done it. Because you understand the need, especially in corporate America. But how has that transformed other businesses that now are working with you with this executive leadership?

Kevin: You nailed it in what you set there, Connie. Essentially, all organizations take on the personality of the leader. So if the leader is stressed, the company is stressed. If the leader is impatient, if the leader is angry, if the leader is making work uncomfortable, then that becomes the vibe of the organization. So leadership matters. It matters, and it doesn't have to be what it's traditionally been. There is a better way to do this. Work can be generative. It can be energy giving for the people who do it if leaders are willing to transform themselves.

I've grown fond of saying that leadership is an inside job. I did not really make a move in my own career until I started creating change from within. So having seen this and tested it at Hancock Lumber, and thought about it and wrote about it, and been on podcasts with amazing people like yourself, I here in the last couple of years have partnered with a great consulting firm out of Long Beach, California called Door to Consulting. And we put together an executive coaching program that we talked about. It is transformational leadership.

And the idea is what we've been talking about today, which is to create employee-centric companies where the employee experience comes first, where leadership is shared. And this is a 4-day intensive program where we really help leaders acquire the tools, the vision, and the support, to make work something different than it's traditionally been.

I think a lot, Connie, about advancing humanity and how humanity advances, and not taking humanity's future for granted. I remember when I was young or starting in business, one of the most common phrases I heard was, "stay in your lane." So in our case, lumber, lumber, lumber. But I don't know that the place of work in the 21st century can afford to delegate humanity's trajectory.

And when you think about influencing the future of humanity, you've got to do it at the adult level where adults hang out. And in America, 155 million adults work. And the place of work is an optimal place to transform humanity. And it's got the added benefit of dramatically improving corporate performance as the outcome of a higher calling.

And our executive coaching program is all about showing leaders how to do that. And it's really pretty simple at the end of the day. Because as I said, leaders get whatever they prioritize. And any leader who were to authentically prioritize what we're discussing today, could and would move their company in this direction with wonderful outcomes for everybody.

Connie: And again, it's proven. So this is why. And it's not just proven over a year, it's proven over a decade. And Gallup had a survey that just came out, sales specifically. And they interviewed CEOs and they asked the question, "When salespeople come to you, what's the vibe? What would be your takeaway?" And 84% said that when they meet with these salespeople, 84% of them - so 84 out of 100 people that they meet - they're ill prepared. They're not trained. They come in and they wing it. But that all starts at home, right? In essence, back at the corporate model. So that if the CEO is scattered and disorganized, the employees are going to be scattered and disorganized. So we're leaving money on the table all the time.

So that's just another example of some of the ripple effect of what we're talking about and why your leadership model, and now what you're working with on this executive leadership training that you're doing, it's so needed. And I can't imagine CEOs that are looking at this like it's not going to work. Because the proof is in the pudding. Again, the results are there financially and with the analytics.

We're going to, just a couple of things. And if people listen, I think you need to talk to Kevin. That's the bottom line. So if you want his website and you could contact him through there, it's thebusinessofsharedleadership.com. And then in the show notes, we're going to put a couple of links for you. One will be for the books. I read every one of Kevin's books, they're amazing. And they really are transformational.

I love that word, you use that a lot, Kevin. Because I do think your ideas and your examples and your strategies that people can then take and apply in their real life as leaders, it really is transformational. So I'm going to put those links as well. And then we're going to put the link for that leadership program. So if anybody, you're intrigued, I'm going to put that link as well so you could get in touch with Kevin. And 2024 is here, man. This new year is upon us. Is this maybe going to be your best year yet by changing your internal model? So if any of this has resonated with you, you really do have to check out Kevin.

And additionally, he's just a great human. I love you, Kevin. You know that I think you're, that's why I keep having you back because I think not only you, the human, is amazing, and I think you're just lovely to hang out with. But what you're doing out in the world is making such an impact, and they're the people I want in my life, in my orbit. So truly thank you again for being on. Is there anything else you want to say before we sign off about the program, the books, anything, please?

Kevin: No, I just want to say, Connie, that you're amazing and I really appreciate you and the passion you have for your work and advancing humanity. Broadly, I know all that is really important for you. I love your personal energy, and I appreciate the platform you give me every time I'm with you to share my voice. So lots of love and blessings to you, my friend.

Connie: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. And you know what, Kev? If we have to change one person, that is all we could do. One person at a time. And if our ripple effect together can impact that, like to me, that's where the magic happens. You and I together. I think we're magical, by the way. Tell your wife that when you go home, I would tell my husband that too. Kevin and I were magical.

Kevin: Oh, I love it.

Connie: Thank you, my friend. Thank you so much. And again, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to hop on and have this conversation. It's an important one. I really do think it's an important one on a global level. And thank you all for joining in and listening while we discussed our conversation today. And again, please check out Kevin's website, check out the books, all the links that I'm going to provide.

Because if you feel that your organization or you, the individual leader, even if you're not the CEO per se, but one of the players, one of the executives perhaps, or even just a midline

manager, read the books. Reach out to Kevin. Maybe do the leadership program. Whatever's right for you. But it has to start with self. Otherwise we can't affect. And I mean that in a good way, the employees and what's happening out in the world, we really can make a difference and we can do it. Certainly we could do it together.

Kevin, thank you again. Thank you all for tuning in. You've been listening to Changing the Sales Game with me, your host Connie Whitman, on webtalkradio.com. I truly wish you all an inspired week. Pick the change, or choose the change, or choose the strategy, or re-listen to the show. Whatever it is for you. Information is a beautiful thing. If you do nothing with it, it's simply information. You have to take some of the ideas that Kevin shared, read the book, join the leadership program, whatever it is for you. But you have to take that information and put it into action. Otherwise, no change will ever happen. You are really responsible for the change and changing your sales game. Thank you again for tuning in. I love you all. I love you, Kevin. I'll see you all next week. Have a great week, everyone.