

Family Business

THE VOICE OF FAMILY COMPANIES

www.familybusinessmagazine.com

MARCH/APRIL 2022

KEVIN HANCOCK

lost his voice, but not his purpose. Inside, the CEO's journey overcoming adversity to find success and peace.

THE

ADVOCATE



How **CEO Kevin Hancock**
found his voice as an
advocate. By Margaret Steen

VOICES CARRY

The collapse of the national housing and subprime mortgage markets in 2007 put tremendous pressure on many businesses that supply the housing market — including Casco, Maine-based Hancock Lumber Company, which saw demand for its products dry up.

As Hancock Lumber's sixth-generation family leader during the crisis, Kevin Hancock felt the weight of the generations of family history — as well as a responsibility to those currently involved with the company.

Then, at the peak of the economic collapse in 2010, Hancock lost full use of his voice. The diagnosis: spasmodic dysphonia (SD), a condition with no known cause or cure.

"I'm convinced that the way I experienced that period, and the pressure I put on myself, triggered it," says Hancock, 55, who today is chairman and CEO. "Having since met lots of people with SD, it often manifests at a particularly stressful time."

As the business recovered, Hancock embarked on a journey to rediscover his voice and his sense of self. What he learned revolutionized the way he led Hancock Lumber — with the result that the company has been named a "Best Place to Work in Maine" for eight straight years.

FROM COACHING BASKETBALL TO COACHING EMPLOYEES

Kevin Hancock never planned on leading the family business, which was founded in 1848 and today has 620 employees. The company serves over 10,000 customers annually and operates three sawmills, 12 retail lumberyards, nine kitchen design showrooms and a truss manufacturing facility. The company grows trees on more than 7,500 acres of land in Southern Maine.

All this gave the company a high profile in Casco, where Hancock grew up while his father ran the business.



“I don’t want to write a corporate script for the future that binds family members to a life path. Life is more dynamic than that.”

Kevin Hancock

DENNIS WELSH PHOTOGRAPHY

“Only family members had ever run the company, so it was perhaps inevitable that it would all come calling for me someday,” he says. “But none of that really dawned on me.”

Instead, Hancock graduated from Bowdoin College with a major in American history and began a career as a prep school history teacher and basketball coach.

Then, in 1991, when Hancock was 25 years old, his father got cancer. For the first time, his father asked him to join the business, which is entirely owned by family members.

“I abruptly changed plans and came to work for the company,” Hancock says. He started at the sales counter at the Yarmouth, Maine, store. Then he ran the store in Windham, Maine, for three years.

Hancock’s father died in 1997, and Hancock became president in 1998. He has been CEO since 2000 and is the only family member working in the business today.

A NEW VOICE

In the absence of a cure for spasmodic dysphonia, Hancock tried the only mainstream treatment: Botox injections in the larynx.

“It tricks the muscles into not overfiring when you speak,” Hancock says. “I did that for a few years, but then it really felt like my path to a cure was more spiritual and holistic. So I left the Botox and went after a deeper-level cure — a bigger commitment to following my own voice in my life. I needed to individuate from my role as CEO of the family business.”

As he regained his inner sense of self, his speaking voice improved.

“I’ve gotten back to the point where I can say whatever I want to say and it doesn’t hurt or wear me out,” Hancock says. “When I began to accept my voice as it was, it began to heal.”

Before he reached that point, though, Hancock found talking so difficult that it forced him into a new approach at work: listening more and talking less. People would come to him with a problem and ask what they should do.

“I would respond, ‘That is a great question. What do you think we should do about it?’” he says. “People already knew what to do. They didn’t actually need a CEO-centric solution to the vast majority of challenges they faced.”

A VISIT TO PINE RIDGE

By 2012, the economy had stabilized, and Hancock could see that the company would survive. His voice, however, had not recovered.

“I hadn’t taken the time to work on myself or work on it,” Hancock says.

One day, he saw a *National Geographic* article about the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota: “Nothing I’d ever read before had grabbed me like that,” he says.

The American West had captured Hancock’s imagination since a summer vacation to the Grand Tetons when he was in middle school. He had a particular interest in American history of the second half of the 20th century, “when our nation’s Manifest Destiny ran into the Plains Indians.”

He decided to go to Pine Ridge. There he found a community that had, from the late 1800s until almost the 1970s, been through “almost 100 years of overtly being remade as white people,” Hancock says.

In searching for his voice, Hancock found a community of people who didn’t feel fully heard. On that trip and subsequent ones, he built deep connections with people in Pine Ridge.



Left to right: Erin Plummer (Chief Marketing Officer), Kevin Hancock (Chairman & CEO), Paul Wainman (President & CFO), and Wendy Scribner (Chief People Person).

DENNIS WELSH PHOTOGRAPHY

“I see it now as a period of searching for my voice — on both a literal and a spiritual level,” Hancock says. “One trip became two, and two became three. Now, almost a decade later, I’ve been there 24 times.”

This work led Hancock to become an advocate for groups that haven’t felt like they have access to their full, authentic voice — both in places like Pine Ridge and in the workplace.

“I’ve tried to translate all of this into a leadership philosophy that honors people as they are. The goal is to make everyone feel trusted, valued, respected and heard,” Hancock says.

This new path, he says, was brought about by his voice condition: “What on the surface is just a medical condition came to have a much deeper meaning.”

A NEW LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY

Today, part of Hancock’s career is public speaking, on topics such as employee engagement, shared leadership and creating an employee-centric company.

At a TEDx Talk in 2019, for example, he described wanting to create “an employee-centric company, where power is dispersed, leadership is shared and every voice is heard.”

To reach this goal, Hancock Lumber needed to change the company’s mission. The first mission of the company is now the experience of the people who work there.

“I remember a few years ago standing up in front of a roomful of our biggest clients,” Hancock says. He told them that he no longer believed in the adage “the

customer comes first.” “I went on to say that the people who take care of the customer should come first. If the company creates an employee experience filled with meaning, those employees will then create a world-class customer experience.”

His position as a CEO allowed him to put his ideas into practice.

“I had the opportunity to not just contemplate new leadership models but to actually deploy them,” Hancock says. “So we set out a decade ago on a deliberate mission designed to put more power and a stronger voice in the hands of the people who worked here.”

CHANGES AT THE LUMBER COMPANY

To implement these changes, Hancock knew he wanted to change the culture of Hancock Lumber.

The first step was bringing employees into more decisions and allowing more time for process and dialogue. This included, for example, having truck drivers participate in decisions about which new trucks to buy.

“The expectation is for all employees to be able to make decisions and lead,” says Paul R. Wainman, president and CFO. “We’re very deliberate in our hiring process — we’re looking for people who fit in with our culture or who can quickly adapt to it. We view our culture as a key differentiator.”

Hancock and other senior leaders also worked to change the way they listened, making it safe for employees to say what they think.

“We don’t need to pass judgment on what everybody says,” Hancock says. “There is no single truth about any company.”

Hancock realized they also needed to measure whether they were successful at changing the culture.

“The traditional corporate metrics were solely focused on the health of the business,” Hancock says. “We know if we’re more profitable. But how do we know if the employees feel that they have actually been given a bigger voice?”

They settled on employee engagement as the primary measurement of the culture. To measure it, they started participating in the “Best Places to Work in Maine” annual survey. Today 90% of Hancock’s employees describe their work experience as meaningful or engaging.

“Kevin is ahead of his time as it relates to workplace culture,” Wainman says. “For him, it is always people over profit. You hear that often, but it’s not always the case that the person really means it. Kevin does. For example, he would prefer slowing production to create a better environment for employees, as opposed to getting every last bit of production out of the sawmill. He firmly believes that if we make it right for every employee in the business, they will do the right thing for the customer, and ultimately that will result in the right outcomes from a financial perspective.”

THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Hancock’s new vision extends to his vision for the future — of Hancock Lumber and of the Hancock family. Hancock is the only family member working in the business, and his two adult daughters are following their own paths.

“In the old model, it felt like you had to work there, or those that worked there had extra importance within the family,” Hancock says. “I think that idea’s time has come and gone. There are many ways that family owners can play meaningful roles in the success of a family business.”

He cites his mother, who is one of the company’s main shareholders, as an example.

“She has never actually been employed by the company, but as an owner she has been an amazing steward,” Hancock says. “I don’t want to write a corporate script for the future that binds family members to a life path. Life is more dynamic than that.”

A top long-term priority, Hancock says, is for Hancock Lumber to remain locally owned. This could mean continued family ownership, employee ownership or some other model. Family ownership is a high priority, but they want flexibility for the company and the family. The company already has an independent board of directors and a non-family president.

“I’d like to be flexible around what participation in a ‘family business’ could mean in the future,” Hancock says. “I don’t want our company to be dependent on any one family member or generation playing any specific type of role for the company to prosper.”

He sees a connection to the more distributed model of leadership Hancock has been developing: “In a traditional family business model, typically one or two family members really carry the load of responsibility. But in a model where everybody’s leading, it gives everybody more flexibility as well.” **FB**

Margaret Steen is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to Family Business magazine.

“The goal is to make everyone feel trusted, valued, respected and heard.”
Kevin Hancock

DENNIS WELSH PHOTOGRAPHY