

SPOTLIGHT: Employee Compensation, Benefits & Development

Group Therapy for Executives

Vistage gives C-level execs understanding shoulders to cry on

By **Gwen Moritz**
GMoritz@ABPG.com

Nick Brown, the CEO of Southwest Power Pool in Little Rock, is a believer in the practice known formally as “peer learning,” although he has a different name for it.

“I kind of call it ‘crying on each other’s shoulders,’” Brown said last week.

First he spent nine intensive weeks in Harvard University’s Advanced Management Program. Then he hooked up with four other executives for an informal “support group.”

Then, after two of his group members moved away and the other two retired, Brown found that he was receptive to an idea that he had previously rejected: Vistage, a 58-year-old company that has had an active group in Little Rock for just more than two years.

“It’s just fun listening to people who are at different stages in their professional growth,” Brown said. “It’s just fun putting those people in a room and saying, ‘Hey, what issues do we want to dig into today?’”

Brown was one of the first CEOs to join a Vistage group in Arkansas. Although the company was founded in 1957, Arkansas had no “chair” — the Vistage title for a trained contractor who acts as facilitator — until Barry Goldberg of Little Rock signed on in 2012. Goldberg, an executive coach with an international client roster, has been a contributing columnist for *Arkansas Business* since 2003.

Another founding member of



Nick Brown, CEO of Southwest Power Pool, is a member of one of two Vistage CEO groups in Little Rock.

[PHOTOS BY JASON BURT]

Goldberg’s first Vistage group is Brent Staley, CEO of Staley Inc. of Little Rock, which does business as Staley Electric and Staley Technology. A more recent addition is Darrin Williams, CEO of Southern Bancorp of Arkadelphia and former state representative from Little Rock.

Goldberg now has two CEO groups and two more Vistage groups, a “Key Executives” group of C-level execu-

tives and vice presidents and a “Trusted Advisor” group for the principals of smaller businesses.

Every month, the CEO and key executives groups meet for a full day. The day, as they describe it, typically starts with an outside presenter, and the members are allowed to invite guests to that part of the program.

But after the speaker, the members get down to business. They identify per-

sonal and professional goals — “must-win battles” and “can’t-miss opportunities,” Goldberg says — and they help each other tackle problems large and small, personal, professional and spiritual. (The Trusted Advisor group does not have speakers and meets for only a half-day each month.)

To start with, Vistage members check their egos at the door.

“There’s nothing more humbling than being a CEO in a room full of CEOs,” Staley said last week. “There’s nothing like it.”

Actually, there are other peer learning groups that have a similar mission, including one that has an even longer history and many prominent members in Little Rock: YPO, the Young Presidents Organization. But Vistage is very different from the networking and lead-generation groups that are common in every sizable city.

Vistage requires a significant commitment of time and money, Goldberg said: For CEOs and Key Executives, it requires 15 full days a year, including the 12 monthly meetings and a retreat, and \$15,000.

The members are carefully selected to make sure there are no competitors and no conflicts of interest, and Goldberg said a couple of years of experience have also taught him how to put together an effective group.

“If there’s a primary mistake I’ve made, it’s that I haven’t screened people enough to make sure they fit in with the culture of the group,” Goldberg acknowledged.

‘Bond of Secrecy’

Rhonda McKinnis, vice president of legal affairs and general counsel for Arkansas Children’s Hospital since 2010, joined the Vistage Key Executives group in December, three months after it was formed.

Like every other member, she signed a pledge of confidentiality. But what she called the “Vegas Rule” — what happens in the Vistage room stays in the Vistage room — is only one of four fundamental rules of the group. The others, she said, are:

- ▮ The Aretha Franklin Rule: Respect your peers;
- ▮ The Airplane Rule: No electronic devices; and
- ▮ The Disney Rule: If it’s not fun, it’s not worth doing.

Darrin Williams, CEO of Southern Bancorp, says he brings ideas back from every Vistage meeting.



While trusting others not to spill corporate secrets might sound like a big hurdle, McKinnis, Staley, Brown and Williams said that wasn’t so. Everyone, they said, has the same stake in making sure the Vegas Rule holds.

“I’ll talk [to my wife] about things that happen at Southwest Power Pool from time to time,” Brown said, “but I sure don’t talk about things that happen at Vistage.”

Williams said the assurance of confidentiality was essential to creating value for the members.

group members have lost a combined total of about 800 pounds. Losing weight is a common personal goal, he said.

Another common goal is aligning professional lives with personal lives.

“Everyone who is in a high-pressure job struggles with work-life balance, and it’s been helpful to sit around the table with people who have the same issue,” said Williams, who is a deacon at Central Church of Christ in downtown Little Rock. “One thing from a spiritual standpoint has been to really spend more time reading and studying God’s Word,



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[BRENT STALEY, CEO OF STALEY INC. OF LITTLE ROCK]

“The bond of secrecy in that room — it’s been very helpful to me to be able to bring up issues,” Williams said.

Personal goal-setting is part of the Vistage program, and Goldberg said his

and having other Christian businessmen holding me accountable — having to report to them every month — has been very helpful.”

That’s because each member’s specif-

ic goals are listed and reviewed at each meeting.

"The accountability piece is quite wonderful," McKinnis said. In fact, just since joining in December, she's already met some of her initial goals and has started to set new ones.

"You would not fare well [in Vistage] if you were not comfortable with accountability, both from a personal and professional viewpoint," she said.

Questions and Answers

McKinnis also mentioned another character trait that doesn't fit well in the Vistage model: "People who already know it all would be very frustrated by this group."

Goldberg agreed.

"This is a great environment to get your questions answered," he said. "But it's a much better environment to get your answers questioned."

Although no one else in his CEO group is running a bulk electric network, Brown says his Vistage peers often see things at Southwest Power Pool more clearly than he does.

"I'm blinded by all the details in my business, but these people aren't blinded by all these other intricate details. It's kind of like the old saying, 'Out of the mouths of babes.'

"When they offer a suggestion they don't always know whether it will be valuable or not, and when you hear it, sometimes in a different context, suddenly the lightbulbs go on and I think, 'How beautiful is that?' Sometimes I'm embarrassed that I didn't see it."

A new perspective on what he thought he knew is exactly why Staley sought out Vistage. Friends in Colorado had "explained to me the process that Vistage uses to work on issues and solutions, and it was really blunt and to-the-point and you didn't waste a lot of time getting to the point," he said. "And that was really intriguing to me."

In fact, he had tried to sign up in 2010 only to find that the nearest group was in Memphis. That extra distance would add at least an extra half-day a month to the time commitment, and Staley said that was just not feasible.

By the time Goldberg's first group started meeting in late 2012, Staley had been elevated to CEO of the company his grandfather founded in 1951. Now

Rhonda McKinnis,
general counsel for
Arkansas Children's
Hospital, is part
of the Vistage Key
Executives group.



38, Staley has spent virtually all of his working life in the family business, and he recognized that his limited exposure had left voids in his knowledge and skill set.

"The only industry I knew and the only company I knew was Staley, and the most important reason to join was to learn how other businesses run and how they operate," Staley said.

"When we bring an issue up or a topic up for discussion ... it directly relates to me even though it's not my business we are talking about. I get to use that information in running our organization. It's beyond helpful to me. The return on investment to me has been spectacular."

And by ROI, Staley means hard cash: "In terms of dollars value to the bottom line at Staley, it's definitely paid for itself many times over."

The investment in Vistage, not surprisingly, is a common theme among executives who have forked over thousands of corporate dollars.

"The formality and the fact that my company is spending money for me to

participate in this means, by golly, I'm going to be there," Nick Brown said.

"I have no intention of leaving the group as long as I continue to see business benefits and can justify the expense to the organization," Darrin Williams said. "The executives I work with know when I've been to a Vistage group and heard something I like because I come back with ideas to try them out."

Seeking Diversity

Vistage, in Little Rock anyway, is currently dominated by white males, a reflection of the CEO ranks and something Goldberg is actively seeking to rectify.

There are, finally, women in all of the groups, but Williams is currently the only African-American member of one of Goldberg's groups

"Obviously, I think diversity is positive," Williams said. "It brings a variety of viewpoints. I am happy that we also now have a female in our group."

After all, he said, "All of us work in companies that are not just white men." ■