

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Bob Gardner, CEO
Gardner Builders
Minneapolis

At a glance

Role: CEO

Industry: Building construction

Employees: 26-75

Vistage chair: Jack Sell

Company background

[Gardner Builders](#) describes itself as a hospitality company in the commercial construction business. The company is a general contractor focused on delivering projects—both simple and complex.

Gardner Builders creates spaces for clients that meet several factors—business need, efficiency, and aesthetic while also reflecting personality. The company employs 33 people, and is headquartered in downtown Minneapolis.

Bob Gardner's passion for building things materialized when he took a class in high school called The World of Construction. For a class he almost took on a whim, he did pretty well. Bob was named most outstanding student in the class that introduced him to building construction.

But before pursuing a degree in civil engineering, Bob learned the business by getting his hands dirty. He had a spate of construction jobs that landed him in a ditch clearing out trenches, working for a residential home builder in Virginia,



and installing periscopes in Los Angeles class submarines for The Apprentice School at Newport News Ship Building in Virginia.

With “building” in his DNA, it was perhaps inevitable that Bob would launch his own company. Aptly named Gardner Builders, Bob's company employs 33 people with stylish offices in downtown's Minneapolis Rand Tower.

From the beginning, the father of four wanted a construction company that provided a different experience for his employees, subcontractors and designers. Company values focus on transparency, trust, open communication and hospitality. “Our niche is tenant improvement work, but that's not all we do. We found a spot where we knew we could differentiate ourselves, but part of that differentiation embodies hospitality,” he explains.

A focus on hospitality

The focus on hospitality originates from Bob's days waiting tables. He explains that every table was a group of people looking for their unique experience. If he didn't engage them and deliver a memorable experience, customers wouldn't return

and ask for him next time.

He says this principle crosses into construction services. "In my mind, [construction services] is like waiting tables. You still have to know how to connect with people and these skills are more important than technical skills, because we can teach technical skills. Our value as a company is in building hospitality," Bob summarizes

Bob says a lot of people have had bad experiences when dealing with construction industry people. Usually, these experiences are marred by broken promises, and the need for customers to continually follow up on work left undone and forgotten.

"Our core is let's do what we say we're going to do, and plan our work, and be good about that. The core of that idea is a hospitality focus," he shares.

The company's most exciting project to date is a large relocation of the Star Tribune's headquarters. Bob's company moved the Star Tribune from a building they had occupied for 75 years into an expansive space in the Capella Tower, downtown Minneapolis.

The Star Tribune has been going through a major transformation, evolving from a newspaper into a digital media company. Employees are enthusiastic about their new space, according to Gardner Builders. Bob says his customer reports the new space has changed the way they do business. "Their employees are more efficient, and by some accounts they're getting the paper out ahead of deadlines, as opposed to where they were before," he says.

"Their story is pretty exciting for us as we were an integral part of the process, helping them find

their space with a design team and a real estate partner. State-of-the-art is overused, but it is state-of-the-art. Their news hub is not like anything else in media," shares Bob, enthusiastically.

On most projects, Bob's firm teams up with an owner's project manager, a design firm and an engineering and architecture company. All of these partners are "influencers" on projects, he explains. These companies don't pay Gardner Builders; the tenant, building or property owner are generally his final customer.

Growth leads to Vistage

A few years ago peers of Bob's and fellow business owners began talking to him about Vistage. He thought about it, but in his words, "I wasn't quite ready to put my feet into Vistage." Later he would realize there was a lot of value in sitting around a table with business owners with similar "scar tissue" discussing familiar problems.

Bob met his Vistage coach, [Jack Sell](#), through a friend and client. He says he made an instant connection with Jack: "When I met Jack it was almost like you were talking to Mr. Rogers. He has a calming influence, and he's someone who's interested in you and how your business is going to succeed. We had a great conversation, and I was hooked."

Bob has been a Vistage member for about 18 months now, and according to him, "It's been wonderful." The best part so far has been the monthly meetings he has with group members and Jack. "Everybody brings a different perspective on how they would handle a particular issue," he shares. Most of the time there is agreement on how to approach the problem, but sometimes a member will raise a contrarian view that "blows everything up," Bob shares. And more often than

not, that counterpoint is the right approach. Bob thinks the Vistage methodology of processing business issues is "invaluable."

He also says the most tangible benefits for him have been his one-on-ones with Jack every month, where it's the accountability check. As a result of those meetings, Bob says, "I have received feedback from my staff that that I'm focusing more on initiatives, not just trying to take care of everyone at the same time."

He also is listening more to his team. "Jack and Vistage have allowed me to get out of the way and have my people be more efficient and do their work. And realize that I was sometimes the bottleneck!"

Vistage has also helped him define and build a strategic plan that supports what Bob refers to as "mindful growth." He wants to make sure as they add key talent the company consistently delivers the same service and value to clients they have for the past five years.

"And one of the best things I've done as a business owner is joining Vistage. I've gained valuable insights, but also friends through Vistage," he summarizes. **V**