

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Bob Hildreth, CEO
ESP
Minneapolis

At a glance

Role: CEO
Industry: IT services and consulting
Employees: 26–75
Vistage chair: Jack Sell

Company background

ESP specializes in connecting IT professionals to great opportunities at leading companies in the Twin Cities metro area. Since 1968, the company's

experienced staff has advanced the careers of thousands of IT professionals while filling its clients' consulting, direct hire, and contract-to-hire needs.

ESP's staffing expertise is in software, web, and mobile development; network and systems support; business intelligence; project management and business analysis; IT leadership; and ERP/CRM

Quick Facts

How has Vistage helped you become a better leader?

Vistage helps me in a number of ways. First of all, I don't feel like I'm alone in running my business anymore. I now have a network of people who



know and care about my business—a board of directors of sorts.

I am constantly learning from other members, the speakers and my Vistage chair, and I can rely on them to respond quickly if I need an opinion or help on an issue.

Getting out of the office once per month helps me be a better leader. That one-day out helps me gain a renewed focus on the business. I come back from a meeting all jazzed up and people see that. I often share what I learned with members of our team and develop action plans to improve our company.

How has Vistage helped you make better decisions?

I learn from Vistage speakers about everything from finance to company culture. I also learn from other CEOs and the problems they have faced, which helps me address or avoid similar issues at my own office.

One issue I brought to our group was how to

handle an improvement to our customer feedback system. We were heavily leaning towards a fully online system. I presented this issue to our CEO group, who preferred the current system we were using and suggested we also increase our contact via phone to gain feedback more directly. We are early on in the implementation; however, we've already seen an improvement in the feedback we've received—both positive and constructive—using this more personal approach.

How has Vistage helped you achieve better results?

With the help of my Vistage chair, Jack Sell, and guest speakers, I've developed a strategic planning methodology that has unequivocally helped us improve the business performance of our company. The plan methodology is a mish mash of planning techniques from the Entrepreneur Operating System (EOS), the Rockefeller (Gazelles) one-page strategic plan, and a few other systems.

Jack has helped me stay focused by tying our strategy to our mission and vision and holding people accountable to quarterly goals through better tracking of our metrics and consistent check-ins.

A flexible and fun work culture

When Vistage caught up with ESP's CEO and founder, Bob Hildreth, it was a 90-degree day and a lot of the office staff was appropriately dressed in shorts and flip flops. Earlier in the week he sent an email to his headquarter's staff of 18 announcing the new dress code during the heat wave.

This kind of flexibility is one of the reasons ESP is continually praised by its employees for being a

fun place to work. In 2013 the company made the Minneapolis St. Paul Business Journal list of Best Places to Work, for the second time. Earlier in the year Minnesota's Business Journal named ESP to its list of Best 100 Companies to Work For in Minnesota.

In a Tweetable 140 characters, Bob says what makes ESP a great place to work:

A fantastic team, flexible and fun work culture; everyone is valued equally and our ideas count! Plus, happy hours, great offices and #dogsatwork.

As a testament to employees' commitment to the company, Bob notes the high tenure levels for ESP's staff in an industry known for high attrition. "We have a lot of people who've been with us 15 years or more." Besides its headquarters' staff ESP has some 60 consultants deployed at organizations across the Twin Cities. ESP serves companies ranging from high-growth start-ups to Fortune 500 firms in a wide range of industries—including software as a service, financial services, transportation, healthcare, and manufacturing to name a few.

Bob was first introduced to Vistage during the tech boom in the early-90s. He had just launched his sister company, ESP Software Services—growing it from 0–200 employees in less than nine years. During this time, he found Vistage an essential organization for learning from other CEOs, guest speakers, and his Vistage chair. Bob sold ESP Software Services (the consulting business) in 1996. He left Vistage in the early 2000s after appointing a president to run ESP.

Just years ago he took a sabbatical to rethink his options for new growth and a relaunch of the consulting division. Bob returned reenergized,

motivated and brimming with a new sense of purpose.

A constant state of learning

Upon returning, one of the first things he did was rejoin Vistage. Bob connected with chair Jack Sell at a local Vistage event and dove in headfirst. “I was missing something—I wasn’t learning,” he said.

Bob cites learning as one of the best benefits of joining Vistage. “Till I joined Vistage I thought I was the only one who had my particular business problems ... now I know I’m not the only one.” He added, “My issues and challenges are not a whole lot different from other Vistage companies, some of which are significantly larger,” referring to his \$7.5 million and growing enterprise.

Just recently Bob saw a presentation by Vistage speaker David Friedman about corporate culture, behavior and values. Bob thought ESP’s corporate culture was great. But he learned from Mr. Friedman that there was still room for improvement, and there are some actions he could take to align better ESP’s culture with employee behaviors. Bob is in the process of developing and launching these activities in the fourth quarter.

Finding just the right employees to work at ESP is important to Bob, a fact apparent from the company’s tagline: “Placing people first.”

“I like to hire the best,” he said matter of factly while describing how he prefers to manage the company. Indeed, when asked about his leadership philosophy, Bob intones four simple guidelines:

1. Hire the best
2. Set mutual expectations
3. Give people the right tools to do the job
4. Get out of the way

He notes his flat organization as another reason people like to work at ESP. “We’re all ‘important’ here,” Bob says, explaining how every one of his headquarters’ team members has a say in who gets hired. Yes, everyone interviews job candidates and has an opinion in the hire or not to hire decision. Only on rare occasions does Bob invoke his veto powers.

Bob’s experiences with Vistage have helped him mold and shape the company into what it is today. In fact, he sometimes thinks of Vistage as a personal trainer for business, alluding to the valuable lessons learned over the years.

He knows he’s becoming a better leader as a result of Vistage and ESP is growing stronger, too. He’s got the results to prove it. **▼**