

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

*Frank Altman, President and CEO
Community Reinvestment Fund*

Vistage Chair: Wayne Serie

Company background

[CRF USA](#) (Community Reinvestment Fund) improves lives, creates jobs and strengthens communities. And they do it in a big way.

CRF fills a gap in community development funding by bringing a larger amount of capital to the communities that need it most. This has a powerful impact, creating a huge ripple effect and improving more lives of disadvantaged people in distressed neighborhoods all across the country.

Together with lending partners, CRF provides small business loans not found elsewhere for people living in underserved communities so they can:

- Grow a business
- Create and preserve jobs
- Make a business more energy efficient
- Improve cash flow
- Since 1988 the nonprofit has served 790 communities in 46 states.

Quick facts

How has Vistage helped you become a better leader?

Vistage has taught me such fundamentals as delegate and get out of the way. Every morning “I eat the frog; I do the difficult stuff right away.” [Editor’s note: Mark Twain said “If you eat a frog first thing in the morning that will probably be the worst thing you do all day.” Brian Tracy wrote the popular business book [Eat That Frog! 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time](#)].



My job is to set the vision and Vistage has helped me get the vision out in front of people.

I’ve also learned a lot from guest speakers at our meetings. Recently we heard from the former CEO of Porsche, Peter Schutz, who said to “Plan democratically and enforce dictatorially.”

How has Vistage helped you make better decisions?

I’ve received lots of welcome advice from other CEOs in my group. I’ve been able to run ideas by others and have received good insights. Also, [Wayne](#) [Serie], my Vistage chair, is an expert in strategy and marketing and he’s helped me ripple the strategy throughout the organization. That strategy has led to better decisions about the business because it keeps us focused on our critical objectives.

How has Vistage helped you achieve better results?

Over the last several years we have increased our net assets every year except one. Vistage has helped us achieve these results. Recently, we’ve been implementing lean manufacturing principles and cutting inventories. To do this we’ve received a lot of advice from

other CEOs in my Vistage group.

Frank Altman, CEO and founder of Community Reinvestment Fund (CRF) is emphatic when he says the mission of his firm is to improve the lives of low-income people. “We are just not lending money ... we are helping people reach a whole area where people could not access before,” said Frank. He calls it gap financing. Across the country local business owners and community leaders are looking to expand operations and hire more employees.

To find money to help propel these businesses forward—\$19 billion since 1988—CRF teams up with partners to deliver loans. They focus on projects that create jobs; and loans that support low-income communities. The loans empower true neighborhood heroes—while creating jobs that are life changing.

To keep the nonprofit growing as fast as it has, Frank turns to innovation to help drive growth. “Innovation is in our DNA,” he said. “We are trying to get jobs and opportunities into areas where capital does not flow.” As an example, CRF has made more than 90 loans in the Phillips area of Minneapolis.

Frank’s experiences with Vistage have helped him cultivate both new ideas and new contacts that have ultimately added value to CRF as it continually strives to deliver more loans to more businesses in more communities. With coaching from fellow CEOs and Vistage chair Wayne Serie, Frank is in the process of introducing lean manufacturing principles into the nonprofit. He hopes to trim steps and speed the process from loan application to getting money into the hands of eager entrepreneurs.

“The SBA [Small Business Administration] is a forms intensive system,” he says. “We’ll see benefits from any process improvement.” With 40 employees working with a multitude of partners from local, state and federal government, plus scores of private banks, the benefits of process improvements could mean tens of thousands of dollars flowing to where it’s needed much

faster than ever before.

In order to pull this off, and run all the other elements of his business, Frank has turned to strategic planning to align his corporate hierarchy and structure with his corporate goals. Wayne helped him create a plan containing five key goals that are shared throughout the organization, and which are used to measure Frank’s performance by the CRF board of directors.

“We spend a lot of time on process,” Frank intones, explaining his organization’s hyper-focus on quantitative analysis. He employs S.M.A.R.T. (An acronym for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) goals throughout the company. Wayne introduced him to the Rockefeller system of strategic planning, which encourages leaders to condense and simplify their plans down to a single page.

To be sure, everyone at CRF has seen the plan. Transparency is a huge part of the company’s culture. “I want everybody from our interns to the CFO to the board of directors to see what we’re doing,” said Frank, adding “I want to empower the staff to make their own decisions; I want people to own the plan.”

To accomplish that goal Frank holds monthly all-hands meetings to keep employees on the same page.

Frank’s top job is to set the vision for the company. And for him, that vision is all about changing lives. **V**