

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Heather Jones, President and CEO
City Air Mechanical, Inc.
Bismarck, N.D.

Role: Small business owner

Industry: HVAC contracting

Employees: 26–75

Vistage chair: Jon Jennings



Company background

[City Air Mechanical](#) is a full-service design and build plumbing, and heating and air conditioning contractor with 55 employees serving commercial customers from its Bismarck, N.D. headquarters. The woman-owned family business was established in 1999.

Heather Jones is part of a family business that goes back several generations to her great grandfather, who emigrated from England and wound up in America via a circuitous route through Canada. Her “baby,” as she stated it, is the most recent addition to the family business, City Air Mechanical in Bismarck. She’s the president and CEO of the 55-person contracting company, which is a near twin of the family’s other company in Minot. Heather and her brother are part owners in both concerns.

City Air Mechanical got its start in 1999 when Heather’s father was heavily involved in the business and she was a vice president. At that time she was a minority owner, but in 2005 she started buying out the business, the

same year she became president and CEO. “We’re primarily a contracting company, specializing in plumbing, heating and air conditioning for commercial and industrial buildings,” explained Heather. The company has a three-tier go-to-market business model: design, build and maintain. “We’re with the building from concept to construction and after move-in, or throughout its life cycle,” she said.

Its marketing territory is western North Dakota, an area currently undergoing tremendous growth. Between the company’s two operations they employ approximately 130 people, but Heather said she could use at least 15 more in Bismarck. Competition for labor is fierce in this market, which competes with companies looking for oilfield workers.

Heather was introduced to Vistage five years ago when she was invited to experience a meeting by local Vistage chair Jon Jennings. From the beginning, “The Vistage experience was unlike anything I’d ever seen,” she exclaimed. “I decided after the first meeting to join.” Heather said she liked the speaker

that day and the issue processing—where members troubleshoot a member business problem—was the icing on the cake.

Like a number of executives, Heather had previously been a member of another peer group, but decided to make the jump to Vistage because of the high caliber of people in the groups. “I knew I could just be a sponge and learn as much as I could from these people. My chair, Jon, has put together some really phenomenal individuals to be part of this organization and at first glance, I don’t know anybody that has attended a meeting that hasn’t said, ‘Wow.’”

Heather appreciates the high amount of trust that’s shared in the group of 16 CEOs and senior executives. “It’s a safe environment and confidential—you can discuss your most challenging problems,” she said. On numerous occasions Heather has contacted members in her group for advice and counsel on a range of issues. Recently she spoke with several members after she had been asked to join the board of a local bank. Although Heather sits on many nonprofit boards, this would have been the first for-profit board. She needed to know more and talked to group members with similar experience. “I wanted to know all about it: risks, rewards, benefits and time commitments,” she explained.

Another aspect of the Vistage group dynamic is issue processing or problem solving around anything a Vistage member wants to bring before the group. The member makes a presentation to the group sharing all the details and considerations, including the end goal. Following the formal presentation group members fire off questions and provide valuable insights. “Questions from other members dig deep into root causes, which

sometimes result in answers you had not expected,” said Heather.

She likes the presentation format because, “It’s a great way to finalize it [business decision] and come out with something concrete that you can be held accountable for.” Recently, Heather used the group format to help her understand how she could properly manage two disputing senior leaders at her company. They both bring considerable valuable to the firm, so she wanted to make every effort to repair the team rather than dismiss either. Slowly, with Vistage’s help, she is restoring the working relationship between the two.

Being constantly challenged

“Jon is one of those people who is constantly challenging me,” said Heather, referring to her chair, Jon Jennings. “One of the greatest values I get out of Vistage is our monthly one-to-one time together. He’s a great listener and has a way of digging things out of me; we always have what we call brain storming sessions and it’s fun.” She said matter of factly, “Jon energizes the group!”

“We have a bunch of CEOs sitting in the room and they don’t like to be told what to do,” she shared. “Jon keeps us all in line—making sure we’re all accountable to the rules.”

After hearing a Vistage speaker talk about key performance indicators (KPI) a few years ago, Heather decided to change how she looks at business performance. She’s now looking at leading indicators instead of lagging indicators like sales and margins. “You can’t do anything with lagging indicators; those are in the past,” she said. Today, her leading KPIs

examine projects and how projects are staffed. “It’s just helping us make better decisions in the moment, rather than looking back and saying, “Oh, god, what did we do wrong,” she exclaimed.

As her company has grown Heather said she’s learned from her group how to standardize their procedures in training, continuous improvement and safety. “We were growing pre-Vistage but it was always painful; trying to get a grasp on that growth was a challenge,” she shared.

If you ask her about her top business challenges Heather talks extensively about a sea change in the industry where contracting companies are becoming more like manufacturers. Subsystems and assemblies are being fabricated and assembled within the company’s own facilities instead of delivering raw piping and materials to a building site where they are built on location. Prefab saves time and money, but it also means City Air Mechanical needs to hire a manufacturing engineer and expand facilities to design and build prefab subsystems. “We’re taking out pre-manufactured assemblies and basically setting them in place ready to be connected,” explained Heather.

One more challenge: Every business takes people to run it and City Air Mechanical is competing for talent in a hot market being overtaken by oil companies willing to pay top dollar for talent. This is perhaps the company’s biggest challenge. “If you talk to every one of my Vistage colleagues, they tell you the exact same thing. It’s people,” said Heather. **V**