VISTAGE

MemberStories

Micah Thor, COO
Tech Guru
Minneapolis

At a glance

Role: Small business owner
Industry: IT services
Employees: 1-25
Vistage chair: Brian Davis

Company background

Tech Guru is known in Minneapolis as The Caring IT Company. Serving over 70 small businesses and nonprofits, the eight-person firm offers a responsive service desk, technology strategy consulting and cloud services.

Is it an accident that Tech Guru, the best source for IT support for small businesses and nonprofits in Minneapolis, has had its most successful quarter yet? Micah Thor, Tech Guru's chief operating officer and Vistage member, has nothing but praise for the peer group he joined seven months ago. "I'm very happy with Vistage," Micah says. "It continues to get better and better the longer I'm in it and the closer I get to the other members."

Operating from the Grain Belt Brewery building in up-and-coming Northeast Minneapolis, Tech Guru's reach extends through the greater Twin Cities area and other parts of the Midwest. "The Caring IT Company," as it is known, has built its

reputation on caring as much about your business as you do.

Learning to lead with Vistage

In a company that promises to free its clients to do their best work by taking care of all aspects of a business's technology, being a part of Vistage has created great value. "It's undeniable that Vistage has had an impact," says Micah. "It's given us ideas and different, better ways of doing things. It's helped us mature faster."

Micah learned about Vistage from one of Tech Guru's clients. He had been looking for a peer group that would allow Micah to learn and meet with people of different backgrounds, such as HR and marketing. Along with founder and CEO Dan Moshe, Micah is part owner, and Micah wanted to connect with entrepreneurs who had profit and loss responsibility.

Vistage chair Brian Davis leads Micah's key group of senior business leaders and small business CEOs. "The keynote-quality speakers are exceptional. They're engaging, entertaining, and completely relevant. You walk away with more

ideas than you can actually implement," Micah says. Of his Vistage chair, Micah says, "Brian always has a different perspective that's really valuable. His personality sets you at ease, and he truly cares about the people in the group."

How to hire a valued staff

Micah cites a recent presentation entitled "You're Not the Person I Hired: The CEO's Guide to Hiring Top Talent," by HR expert Barry Deutsch. Mr. Deutsch's message caused Micah to rethink Tech Guru's hiring approach, ditching their former questions and processes for the ones recommended by Mr. Deutsch. By using more structured and behavior-based questioning, Micah could better see whether candidates had the "chops" they needed to fulfill the proposed job requirements.

Tech Guru has always hired staff based on the company's values, which include integrity and ethics. "Every new hire is worthy of the high level of trust that people have in their IT provider. I make a comparison to the locksmith industry. In a lot of ways, we have a key to every door," Micah explains. He notes that an employee motivated by money is not a good fit for Tech Guru. "We hire employees who are motivated by helping people and have exhibited that in previous jobs," Micah shares.

In yet another example of inculcating wisdom from a Vistage speaker, Micah cites Edgar Papke for his message of achieving extraordinary results by linking company culture with customer needs. Implementing an idea also found in Mr. Papke's latest book, True Alignment, Micah says, "We're creating a culture where we take great care of the employees, and in turn, the employees take great care of our clients."

In the interest of maintaining happy and motivated employees, Tech Guru uses sales forecasts to hire one more service desk staff member than is needed. "Our goal is for everybody to have 15 percent excess capacity to work on training, education, and special projects," Micah says.

Keeping clients happy

"If Tech Guru's staff members are in a great mood, they'll take great care of our customers," says Micah. By the time Tech Guru's customers get to the company's support tech, they are frazzled and frustrated. They usually have a computer problem that stands between them and completing an important task. Micah believes a happy and motivated staff can have a positive effect on the customer's mood through voice inflection and energy alone—even before they solve the customer's problem.

Evidence of Tech Guru's culture is all around—their values and vision statements can be found on the walls and doors of the loft-space offices. Taking a cue from Google, Tech Guru started bringing in groceries for breakfast and lunch, and for the end of the day, snacks and beer. He meets with his staff regularly—eight full-time and two part-time staffers— to review their goals, commitments, and to-dos.

The value of technology

Most of Tech Guru's clients are B2B companies with anywhere between 10 to 200 users. "They require their technology to be up and running 100 percent all day long. When their computers go down it's painful. People might as well not be at work that day," explains Micah when describing his typical client. For these companies, computers and related systems are mission-critical. Tech Guru makes sure a client's servers are replaced

before they fail and even use sophisticated monitoring to predict when a customer's computer hard drive may be close to failing.

Prospects who aren't a good fit for Tech Guru's business model? Companies whose employees take the day off to play golf when the computers are down. These companies, explains Micah, "Don't see the benefit in being proactive or replacing servers before they fail, for example." He refers to these companies as running "fire-department style IT." That is, operating their computer systems until they die.

Tech Guru's customers pay a flat monthly fee for full and unlimited support. The monthly fee is unique in this industry, where businesses often pay for what they need, when they need it. The fee depends on how many users are employed at client companies. Micah arrived at their service delivery and pricing model through much trial and error. "We started with a complicated, granular service offering that had 20 or 30 different options. Customers got paralysis from analysis," he shares. The Caring IT Company has since simplified its pricing options, and Micah finds his clients look at value and the benefits of a visionary technology plan, not just the lowest price.

Besides learning a lot from Vistage speakers, Micah likes the fact that he can find solutions to business issues from other members of the group. "People are not afraid to tell you you're wrong or something that's hard to hear," says Micah. "You have people from all different industries at different levels with one common interest—to grow your business." *V*