

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Steve Pulley, President
Alliance Benefit Group North
Central States
Albert Lea, Minn.

At a glance

Role: Owner/President

Industry: Benefits Management

Employees: < 100

Vistage chair: Don Kielley

Company background

Alliance Benefit Group North Central States is one of the largest independent employee benefits administrators in the country, serving organizations in 48 states. The company was founded in 1993 and has approximately 100 employees.

Steve Pulley's Vistage experience began two and a half years ago when he was brainstorming with a colleague about how he could take his fast-growing benefit management company—Alliance Benefit Group—from a \$10 million enterprise to \$20 million. Though Steve's company had just come through the recession largely unscathed, he was nonetheless looking for answers on how to structure Alliance Benefit Group to take the company, and its 100 employees, to the next level.

That colleague and friend had been pleading with Steve for years to take a look at Vistage as a source of ongoing business ideas and coaching, but he just kept saying “no thanks” ... until he



finally agreed to try it. As the president of Alliance Benefit Group, Steve was eager to begin implementing new strategies and tactics that began to flow in as a result of his Vistage membership.

One of the first changes to the business came when Steve incorporated principles of the wildly popular Entrepreneurial Operating System, or EOS, into his company. EOS was first introduced to the business world with the seminal book, *Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business*, by Gino Wickman. Steve's Vistage chair, Don Kielley, invited an EOS expert to give a presentation to his group of 15 CEOs and senior leaders. Several group members immediately adopted EOS as the principle strategy to drive their businesses. “EOS changed everything for us,” said Steve, adding, “If it wasn't for Vistage, we would have never known about it.”

As a result of implementing EOS Steve said everyone in the company knows their core values, and strives to live by them. Values are critically important to a company like Alliance Benefit Group, which administers employee benefit plans

for midsize organizations. The company manages 401k, 403b and 457 plans, as well as healthcare accounts, which include health reimbursement accounts and Cobra. In addition, Alliance Benefit Group offers payroll services.

Every one of the company's lines of business—retirement, health and payroll—has its own organizational chart. Most employees focus on only one business because of government and industry certifications that are required to work in an area. “About a third of our employees have at least one credential, such as a professional designation, through an organization that's specific to what they do,” said Steve. A few of these organizations include the American Society of Pension Professionals and Actuaries (ASPPA) and the American Payroll Association. “All of our account managers overseeing 401k plans have to pass a test and have a minimum number of years of service in the industry to be qualified pension administrators,” said Steve.

Steve shares ownership in the company—which was founded in 1993—with two other executives of the closely held firm. Alliance Benefit Group North Central States has operations in Kansas City and Minnesota and is one of the largest independent employee benefits administrators in the country, serving clients in 48 states. Its advisors don't just limit their markets to the north central states, as the name implies. The company has advisors in Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Birmingham, Ala., St. Louis, and Atlanta.

Alliance Benefit Group employs attorneys and CPAs to help the company navigate the complexities of the industries they work in. “We spend a lot of time and money educating our employees. We're very proud of that. If you look at our core values, our number one value is

customer service, so we take that very seriously,” Steve said.

Vistage and the adoption of EOS fueled the desire to create company values that weren't just window dressing. “Before, we had core values but we didn't really live by them. We didn't recite them before meetings. And we didn't hire and fire based on our core values,” explained Steve.

As you would expect, the benefit management business is a high-touch trade requiring constant customer interaction and support. Indeed, the company is passionate about maintaining high levels of customer engagement to separate it from its competition. Steve said Alliance Benefit Group's typical customer is a privately held company with 50–250 employees in one of four industries: banks, manufacturing, nonprofit hospitals and churches. Trust and honesty are cornerstones of the company.

Vistage speakers leave enduring lessons

Besides the EOS speaker that forever altered how Steve ran his company, other Vistage speakers have left enduring lessons on leadership. Steve recalls insights from futurist David Houle and his poignant predictions on the global economy as it shifts from the information age to what he calls “The Shift Age.” Steve also cited presentations on marketing and social media—insights he shared with his sales and marketing team—for content that delivered actionable value.

Like all Vistage members, Steve meets with his fellow CEOs once a month with Vistage chair Don Kielley. Before he became a Vistage member Steve shared he didn't have people in his business who could challenge him on decision making. But now he looks forward to the discussions that

unfold during each meeting. “Vistage has taught me to be more open with my leadership team,” Steve shared. He said his group has challenged him to be more open with budget information, asking him, “What are you afraid of?” Steve quipped that now he refers to Vistage as his “monthly therapy group.” But this therapy group dispenses valuable advice on how to fix business problems. Vistage has taught Steve to be open to ideas from people who have gone through similar experiences and in the process have learned something valuable to share. “I now have a less narrow point of view,” he said.

Steve cautions that if you’re a taker and not a giver, however, Vistage won’t be right for you. Some CEOs simply cannot deal with being questioned and challenged by others, even if the environment is a CEO peer group. “If you don’t like being challenged, you’re not going to make it in Vistage,” he said. “You have to be open and willing to accept advice from anyone in your group,” he asserted. **V**