

VISTAGE

MemberStories

*Tom Weaver, CEO
Achieve Services*

Vistage Chair: Wayne Serie

Company background

Achieve Services is a day training and habilitation program serving adults with developmental disabilities. The organization focuses on abilities rather than disabilities and provides work and training in a range of life areas. Employment services include community-based jobs as well as work completed for pay in Achieve's in-house workshop.

Tom Weaver started his career as an attorney practicing law, was an energy industry lobbyist, and worked for two former governors (Governor Pawlenty was a law school classmate) serving state agencies before landing as the CEO of Achieve Services. His experience in government agencies turned out to be fortuitous for his role at Achieve, in which he must work with scores of state and federal agencies while navigating a matrix of regulations that dictate how the organization, and others like it, must operate.

"We are what's known in the industry as a day training and habilitation service, or DT&H, Tom explained. Achieve serves 185 adults with developmental disabilities; and, a primary focus is to find jobs for them in the community. By focusing on abilities, not disabilities, Achieve increases the independence and quality of life for all individuals in its program.

The organization provides work and training in other life areas to help people achieve their employment goals. Employment services include community-based jobs as well as work completed for pay in Achieve's in-house production area. Based on individual needs, par-



ticipants may receive help and training in other areas such as communication, social skills, behavioral skills and motor skills. "We work hard to provide meaningful employment and habilitation services for our folks, and to provide opportunities to blend with the community," Tom said.

Competition for Achieve Services is different from a typical company. Tom said there are about 150 programs like his throughout the state of Minnesota. "To the extent that we compete, it's primarily competing for employers to hire our people," he said. There is a very high demand for programs like Achieve Services, and typically there are waiting lists.

Achieve Services got its start 50 years ago when a group of parents banded together because they didn't want their kids institutionalized. Achieve Services transitioned from a program for kids to a program for adults in the '80s.

Can Vistage help nonprofit organizations grow and thrive?

Tom was first introduced to Vistage by an Achieve board member. However, Tom was skeptical whether Vistage would be the right thing for him, as a nonprofit entity. “I wondered whether sitting in a roomful of entrepreneurs would be worthwhile and relevant. I just didn't know if our issues would have enough commonality,” he shared. Tom decided to follow his board member's advice and give it a try. He hasn't looked back. “She was absolutely right. It's been a wonderful thing for me and, more importantly, for Achieve,” he shared. Tom's group leader is longtime Vistage chair Wayne Serie.

Immediately, Tom began reaping value from his Vistage membership. “There aren't many issues raised at our meetings that don't apply to me as a nonprofit organization,” he said. One of Tom's business challenges was to wean the organization's reliance away from government-funded projects. When he took over as CEO, 90 percent of Achieve's revenue was derived from government-funded work. He turned to his Vistage group of a dozen-plus members for ideas on how to diversify Achieve's revenue stream.

“Within my Vistage group we have very creative and smart, experienced entrepreneurs,” Tom said. The key idea to expand the organization's revenue stream came from his group. The idea was to create and manufacture a unique product that could be sold directly to consumers or through wholesalers – ideally a product that everyone needed, and that had to be replenished.

The product is an environmentally-safe laundry detergent they source from Lubrication Technologies. The company developed the formula, mixes the detergent, helped design labels, found a pump, and used its suppliers to get bottles and caps. Lube Tech is also providing Achieve with space for the initial production.

“We'll be launching this product within the next couple of months,” said Tom, adding “It's just a really exciting opportunity, and it never would have happened without Vistage.”

Tom's also getting critical marketing help from a fellow Vistage member and Achieve board member Tom Wilson, account services president for Risdall Marketing Group. “He's full of energy and ideas! And he's connected us with a professor at the University of Minnesota whose marketing classes will be taking this project on as a class project,” said Tom. For now, the name of the detergent is Achieve Clean, but that may change after the organization has time to think through its strategy. “Wash With a Cause” is the detergent's tagline.

Achieve Services employs a full-time staff of 65 people in addition to a number of temporary subcontractors. A large part of the workforce is made up of bus and van drivers, who drive the organization's 25 vehicles. “We pick our people up at their residences in the morning and bring them here or out to the community to work,” Tom explained.

Other Achieve staff people include training specialists and assistants, as well as job coaches. Tom's executive team is lean and mean; a program director and HR director. He also has four program supervisors responsible for hands-on supervision of the organization's work teams.

A constant stream of ideas

Tom credits Vistage for a constant source of ideas that keeps him motivated and open-minded to adopting suggestions from group members, and the many guest speakers addressing him and his colleagues. “The speaker presentations at the monthly meetings are really helpful. I've learned a lot from the speakers and ensuing discussions on a variety of topics—everything from accountability to life balance,” he shared.

Recently the focus has been on creating a healthy work culture, and how to make sure you have the right culture. Tom said Achieve has historically had very little turnover, in an industry that's known for a high burnout rate and high turnover. Achieve has avoided excessive turnover up to now, but lately the organization has experienced retention issues.

He brought the retention dilemma to his Vistage colleagues and was greeted with a plethora of ideas he could take back to Achieve and implement. Some of them were profoundly simple. For instance, leaders put out a basket of M&Ms with a notepad and invited employees to give a fellow employee a thank-you note and M&Ms for doing something “Meaningful” & “Memorable.” The idea behind this act of kindness was to help employees see that they were appreciated. This change, along with other staff appreciation measures, has helped stem the flow of departing employees. And Tom credits Vistage for helping him discover these “aha” moments.

“We have such a great group of Vistage members. It's just been an amazing experience,” he shared. **V**