

# VISTAGE

## MemberStories

*Chris Carlson, CEO  
Sportech Inc.*

*Vistage Chair: Wayne Serie*

### Company background

Headquartered in Elk River, Minn., [Sportech](#) is an innovation-driven plastics thermoformer specializing in the design, development, and production of quality products and accessories for the recreational and utility vehicle product industry.

As a supplier to original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), the company designs and manufactures custom molded plastic components for motorcycles, snowmobiles, scooters, ATVs (all-terrain vehicles) and UTVs (utility-terrain vehicles). Sportech is perhaps best known for the molded plastic enclosures, or cabs, they design and build for side-by-side UTVs..

### Quick facts

#### *How has Vistage helped you become a better leader?*

One of the ways I've become a better leader is through my one-on-ones with Wayne [[Wayne Serie](#); Vistage coach]. My strength is not numbers—I'm a sales and marketing guy. I've appreciated input that I've received from Wayne and the members of my CEO group on the financial side of the business. Today I'm focused on a critical set of key performance indicators (KPIs); and, I'm accountable to both Wayne and the group, which I welcome!

#### *How has Vistage helped you make better decisions?*

I view Vistage as an informal board of advisors. We are all business owners who are earnestly seeking wisdom as we take on the daily challenges of running a business. The CEOs in my group and Wayne have been invaluable by sharing wisdom they've gained through the years running their own businesses. I can honestly



say I'm a better businessman today because I've been able to benefit from the shared experiences of the other members in my group.

#### *How has Vistage helped you achieve better results?*

I know without a doubt that the company is benefiting from my involvement in Vistage. We have had to make changes to our company, such as jettisoning some product lines, to stay true to our model. We spend a lot of time discussing business cases that have led to me trying new ideas, which have ultimately improved the company.

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Chris Carlson, Sportech CEO has always been involved in a business peer group of some kind. "There is no way I would want to face the day-to-day challenges of running a business without being involved in a group like Vistage." But before finding Vistage Chris always felt something was missing from his involvement in other CEO/leadership groups.

"Vistage is a bit more expensive than the other groups but it has consistently delivered more value for me," he said. When asked what he liked best about Vistage Chris couldn't point to just one thing: "It's the website, the resources, the speakers, one-on-ones and team meetings!"

“I’ve been in other groups,” said Chris, “But the key differentiator for me has been the quality of the speakers. The speakers are phenomenal!”

Chris mentions Ken Tucker, a recent speaker who talks on the topic of intentional difference and how to differentiate your company in a competitive industry. “I’m in a wildly competitive industry,” said Chris. “Customers say we’re creative and innovative, but the reason they continue to use us is because of our responsiveness,” he said.

Sportech’s customers repeatedly share with Chris that they value the company as a supplier largely because of the trust that has been developed through the years by repeatedly hitting their marks and delivering on their promises. “We’ve been able to develop a deep level of trust with our customers, and it’s truly one of our key intentional differences,” he explained.

### **Explosive Growth and help from Vistage**

Looking around this bustling, modern facility, it’s hard to believe Sportech started as a home-based business by Chris’s dad 20 years ago. Today the company has 190 employees. Sportech has grown steadily over those years, and experienced explosive growth in late 2012. Chris explained it as a transition going from a small to a bigger company. “We needed to grow the infrastructure to support the growth by adding, people, space and equipment.”

The other CEOs in Chris’s group and his Vistage chair, Wayne, helped him navigate the rough waters. “We were lagging in our financial group,” he said. “We didn’t have an accurate view of our costs; but several of the group members had experienced similar challenges and they were very helpful by offering suggestions and resources. We battled through the problems and came out a stronger company.”

Chris credits Wayne with putting together a group of “cool people” that has benefitted from the diverse backgrounds of its members. Chris said they are all there to learn from each other and they all have a passion for continuous improvement. Plus, he said, “I can

count on them for a kick in the pants when I need it, as well as some occasional affirmation when things are going well—something you typically don’t get from your own people if you’re the CEO,” adding, “I love the level of trust from these people.”

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*“I know without a doubt that the company is benefiting from my involvement with Vistage.”*

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### **Building a culture of trust and integrity**

Trust and integrity are so important to Chris that they’re inextricable to his company’s culture. So much so that he takes an active role in the hiring process. Chris explains he would much rather have employees with high integrity and moderate skills than someone with Mensa-like skills and questionable integrity. “You can teach people skill sets, but it’s difficult to teach people to become men and women of integrity,” he observed.

“It’s integrity that’s driving our growth. Not fancy equipment, not brick and mortar and not technology.”

In fact, integrity is so important to the company that employees are evaluated on how well they emulate the company’s values in every day actions. To be sure, the busiest department at Sportech is the company’s HR group. The company is on a hiring spree to meet continued growth, and Chris wants to make sure that new employees unequivocally reflect the company’s values before any job offer is slid across the desk.

“We look for tendencies, character traits and patterns of behavior. We ask everyone what integrity means to him or her,” he explained. If the candidate doesn’t place importance on personal character and integrity, the interview ends right there.

Chris says his company has competitors who work diligently to replicate their designs and their processes,

and in some cases they manage to steal a piece of business here and there. “But they’ll never replicate the true secret sauce at Sportech—our culture.”

He’s learned a lot from Vistage in the past few years, and being the consummate promoter—after all, he’s a marketing guy—Chris is always recommending Vistage to his friends. Some have joined. He truly feels bad for the business owners out there who feel they can do it on their own. “I don’t care who you are, how smart you are and how many degrees you have,” he concluded. **V**