

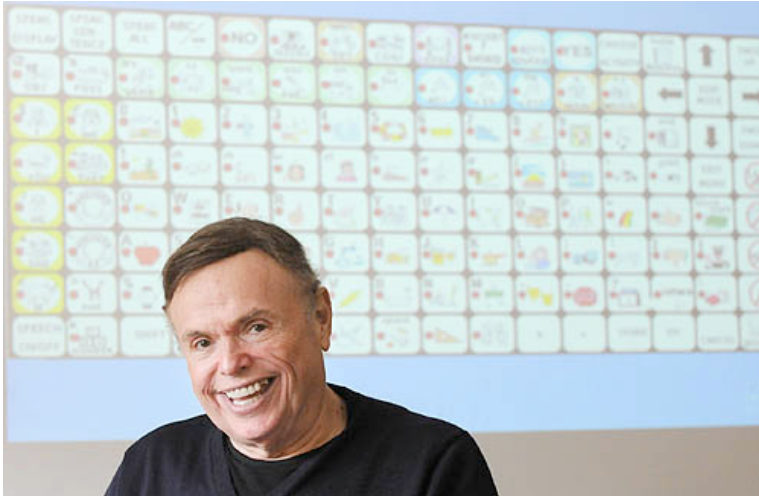


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## Gatherings help top executives learn how to be better leaders

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By Len Boselovic, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Robin Rombach/Post-Gazette

Bruce R. Baker, president of Semanic Compaction Systems in Castle Shannon, with the Unity language software for augmentive communication behind him.

As the recession rages outside, about 20 CEOs of Western Pennsylvania companies are comfortably ensconced in a meeting room at St. Clair Country Club, sipping bottled water or coffee and watching clips from "The Killer Angels."

When the carnage in the movie about the battle of Gettysburg comes to an end, speaker Steven B. Wiley comes to life, telling the attentive executives that learning from Gettysburg's heroes -- including a willingness to listen -- can make them better leaders.

"If you think about listening until it hurts, it could change your life," Mr. Wiley exhorts them.

Mr. Wiley's May 27 presentation kicked off the all-day, monthly meeting of a local chapter of Vistage International. The San Diego-based company trains more than 14,000 senior executives in 16 countries to be better leaders, including nearly 100 in Western Pennsylvania.

A CEO's \$12,480 annual dues -- Vistage is waiving the \$2,000 enrollment fee this month and cutting it in half for CEOs who join in July -- entitles members to attend monthly meetings where they hash out problems with other chapter members, monthly two-hour coaching sessions with the group's chair, up to eight workshops a year featuring speakers like Mr. Wiley, and the opportunity to pick the brains of Vistage

members around the globe.

Each group contains up to 16 chief executives, mostly from small and medium-size companies.

They are expected to bare their souls in the confidential sessions and give no-holds-barred advice to fellow members about business and personal issues, whether it's budgeting, dealing with problem employees, evaluating acquisitions, a troubled marriage or managing growth. CEOs in competing businesses are placed in different groups.

"When I get feedback from my group on a topic I raised, it's frank. None of these people have any financial interest in my business, so they're going to give it to me straight," said Pittsburgh bankruptcy attorney Robert S. Bernstein, who has been a member for 15 years. "There is an absolute pledge of confidentiality within the group, so members get to be close."

Bruce R. Baker, president of Semantic Compaction Systems, has "seen a lot of dicey stuff put on the table" in nearly 10 years as a member.

His Castle Shannon firm licenses software for helping the impaired communicate through keyboards. A former classical language professor, Mr. Baker lacked the business background many members have. He says Vistage provides financial discipline and a forum for working out complex issues.

"You feel like you're in the presence of a psychiatrist or priest. That's it, a priest. I tell him things that are difficult to talk about," Mr. Baker said of his meetings with group chair Andrew Aloe.

Mr. Aloe was a Vistage member for 10 years when he was chairman and CEO of Shenango Inc. The Neville Island coke plant operator was sold to DTE Energy last year.

Members say the group is not for every CEO. Vistage agrees, screening members before allowing them to join. Vistage Chairman and CEO Rafael Pastor says prospective members have to be able to demonstrate they are willing to listen, take as well as offer advice, and commit to attending the monthly group and one-on-one meetings.

"People know coming in this is not like a golf club where you show up when you feel like it," Mr. Pastor said. "You have to be the right kind of person to do this."

Even the right kind of person squirms when it's his turn to air his problems. Daniel J. Dupee joined Vistage when he was helping run his family's Cincinnati-based temporary staffing business and remained a member when he became president of the Coalition for Christian Outreach, an East Liberty organization which provides Christian nondenominational resources to college campuses.

"The feeling is very much like being on the hot seat," said Mr. Dupee, adding the group members sometimes tell him he has misidentified what his real problem is.

"If you only talk to people inside your organization, you end up recycling the same kind of stuff, some of which is not really accurate to what is going on," he said.

At a time when CEOs of many small and medium-sized companies are struggling to survive, paying Vistage's annual dues and devoting one day a month to what Mr. Baker calls "communal think" may seem like a luxury.

But Vistage's CEOs say it can be lonely at the top. There's frequently no one inside their companies who can offer them candid, objective advice. Moreover, they believe that if they don't grow as leaders, their companies are not going to grow either.

"It's a significant commitment of time and energy, [but] I benefit from the recharge of getting out of the office for a day," Mr. Bernstein said.

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