

**VISTAGE**

# The CEO's Blueprint For World-Class Leadership

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Leadership lessons  
to build trust,  
drive purpose,  
improve culture  
and foster success

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# Introduction

During my 35-year career as a business leader, I have led large and midsize organizations and advised CEOs and key executives from companies all over the world. Over that time, I've come across all types of leaders. I've had mentors who have inspired me and countless others. And candidly, I've also encountered leaders who suck the energy out of a room and squash innovation. From years of first-hand interactions with CEOs I've noticed distinct characteristics that set high performing leaders apart. These leaders are the ones I reflect on as I share the insights in this blueprint. Their wisdom and integrity serves as a guidepost for me when I need a reminder of my True North as a leader.



Sam Reese, CEO,  
Vistage Worldwide, Inc.

Leadership is a lifelong journey, and I'll be the first to admit that I don't have everything figured out. Many of these lessons also come from mistakes I've made along the way, the setbacks and hard won triumphs that have helped me in the ongoing pursuit of becoming a better leader. I've also derived endless inspiration from the leaders who've come before us who I admire and respect – everyone from John Wooden to Abraham Lincoln. The following are some fundamental truths about great leadership – distilled from those insights – that ensure solid decision-making through unpredictable times and beyond.

## Focus on what can be controlled.

We cannot control what happens. However, we can work to control our reactions. Successful leaders set the example for their businesses by focusing on what they can control — effort, energy and attitude. In turn, leaders also trust their employees to focus on what they can control — their responsibilities. This means managing their work, practicing efficiency and finding effective ways to communicate.

## Don't make excuses.

Effective leaders keep their businesses energized, not just operationalized. This push cannot happen when leaders focus on negative outcomes or use certain events as excuses not to drive the company forward. Roadblocks do not mean a company and employees can't work to prevail.

## Set clear goals focused on results.

Consistently reminding the team how the company's mission, vision, purpose and values connect to long-term goals is critical to success.

## Always strive for improvement.

I am most inspired by the leaders who work to continuously improve themselves, their leadership skills and their companies.

## Believe in breakthroughs — and celebrate incremental successes.

Implementing changes or reaching goals can be a difficult journey from start to finish. Celebrating the small successes can make the big ones feel more attainable, and doing so is critical for individuals to feel recognized and valued. Small wins still count as wins.

***CEOs are in the business of making decisions. And the outcomes of those decisions will define success. So, how do leaders rise to the challenge day after day, year after year? This Blueprint for World-Class Leadership shares best practices from great leaders for generating stronger trust, purpose and culture – and fostering more success.***

# Chapter 1: Trust

*Simply put, trustworthy leaders do what they say they're going to do and expect the same of others.*

**Summary:** People need to be able to trust that their leader can guide them through the unknown — be a leader they can turn to and a light in the darkness. Effective leaders build an environment where employees can trust each other, their supervisors and leadership. These leaders also fully trust their employees. To create that culture of trust, great CEOs start with the examples they set. The following are pillars fundamental to building trust throughout an organization.



## Trust starts with integrity

Customers want it, employees demand it, and investors require it — integrity. It means always doing the right thing, and in full view. The increasing pressure to take shortcuts to success means business leaders, more than ever, must model integrity and trust and instill these principles in their people and organizations.

Equally important for building integrity is establishing expectations of transparency and the belief that everyone has a voice and ideas to help the company succeed. When integrity manifests itself in an organization, everyone understands the goals, operates in line with expectations, and holds each other accountable to those standards.

## Delegate to build trust and accountability

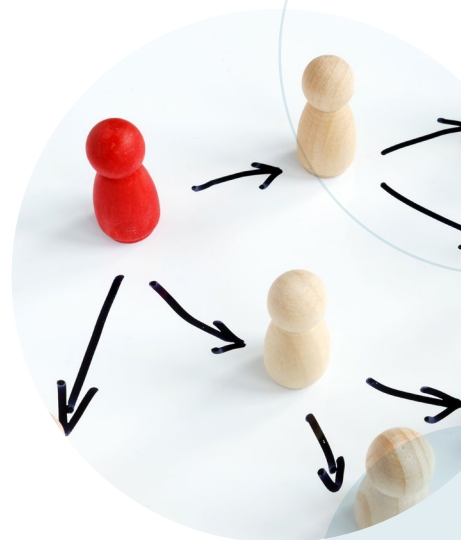
One of the toughest tasks executives face on a daily basis is time management — knowing how to best use their time and prioritize pressing issues and when to delegate. Proper delegation can free up leaders to focus on big-picture items, such as strategy, culture, organization and results.

Executives who don't delegate feel overwhelmed and unbalanced. Worse, they tend to lose the support of their teams. By not delegating, they're basically telling team members they don't trust them. What employees really want is ownership — they want to be able to take on more challenges and responsibility. Trust grows when leaders distribute tasks to their teams and give them room to use their expertise and creativity to accomplish them.

Some parameters I have noticed great leaders use when delegating include the following:

🔧 **Establish clear goals.** Goals should focus on results and the role each person will play in reaching them.

🔧 **Empower employees.** Once team members understand the expected outcome, great leaders empower them to get the job done. Having adequate resources and structure to support their success, and an environment that fosters learning from mistakes, leads to more successful outcomes.





✎ **Communicate.** For people to succeed, they need to know what the successful completion of a project looks like. Effective executives give team members the opportunity to ask questions and gain a full understanding before starting their projects. They also have a communication plan in place to debrief so they are regularly updated on progress or obstacles.

✎ **Be patient.** Successful leaders don't get upset or micromanage if things go wrong. If leaders become reactive, teams will become hesitant and unable to make a decision unless they run it by their CEO.

✎ **Foster collaboration and mutual accountability.** When leaders ensure their team communicates openly and has the structure in place to hold one another accountable, it's amazing how effective a business can be.

Effective leaders demonstrate accountability to employees by being reliable and consistent. Simply put, trustworthy leaders do what they say they're going to do and expect the same of others.

### Problem-solving is a team sport



Although CEOs are the ultimate leaders, decision-makers and stakeholders for an organization, they are not the only ones who will solve problems. Employees are on the front lines and know firsthand the ins and outs of the business, the clients and the challenges. CEOs who leave their egos at the door and rely on those around them to find solutions automatically build trust among their teams, give others a chance to share their voices and push their boundaries, and combine experiences to improve the company.

Leaders develop trust successfully by leaning on their teams and valuing transparency and vulnerability. A CEO who thinks they must have all the answers — or else appear weak to their team — is not setting themselves up for success. Great leaders create an open environment where their team can celebrate the successes and learn together from the failures.

#### Principle in Action: ILLUME Advising



When COVID hit and schools closed down, Vistage member Anne Dougherty knew the company she had founded, ILLUME Advising, had to take a proactive approach to supporting its staff while maintaining productivity. About 80% of the staff is women and parents with young children. ILLUME brought in a mental health expert to discuss well-being and gave its team the tools to self-assess and support their colleagues when somebody was having a very difficult time. It also offered flex hours and schedules and provided resources to parents and to all staff. Most importantly, ILLUME's leaders learned really quickly that they had to be very clear on expectations of performance and key results while trusting their company to get the work done on a flexible schedule, because the company still had to run.

## Chapter 2: Purpose

*When companies have a compelling purpose that employees can rally around and believe in, teams can quickly get aligned and overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges.*

**Summary:** Communicating a clear mission and purpose is one of the most important things a CEO can do to ensure lasting success. A defined purpose creates an understanding of what the organization aims to achieve and governs decisions made at every level. Employees want to contribute to a greater purpose and see how their work affects the broader organization. A purpose-driven culture inspires employees to work in unison with their colleagues to achieve the greater vision.

### Purpose is your North Star

A company's purpose is its fuel. Nobody wants to work for a company that says its number one goal is "shareholder value." Running a business today is also about customers, employees and a bigger objective. When leaders unite colleagues and stakeholders around a clear purpose, it energizes staff. Employees want to understand how their actions contribute. They are free agents, and finding and retaining talent is a critical challenge. It's more important than ever for CEOs to craft a culture that appeals to the type of employee who will drive the business forward.

Authenticity is one of the key principles for leaders who want to build a purpose-driven culture. An authentic purpose feels collective and aspirational. It tells the world what an organization intends to accomplish and gives people a chance to decide if they want to be part of it. Employees can leave an organization at any time. But if they are engaged behind a purpose, it drives excitement and makes them want to stay.



### Establish purpose consistently

CEOs can't simply have one meeting with their executive team, put the purpose up on a wall and expect overnight change. Employees at every level have to see the organization consistently making decisions in support of its purpose. CEOs build purpose-driven cultures in years, not weeks.

I've noticed that great leaders repeat their company purpose often. Broadcast your purpose through every channel at every opportunity. Whether it's a supplier, partner, member or coworker, everyone should know what an organization's purpose is. It's not a marketing gimmick. It's not something that only applies to certain situations. The purpose should align with the company's core values.



Once every team member understands why an organization is in business, this enables the organization to take better approaches to growth. Being a leader takes ongoing commitment to a clear mission, vision and purpose. When companies have a compelling purpose that employees can rally around and believe in, teams can quickly get aligned and overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges.

### *Principle in Action: Thrive Farmers*



For Vistage member Tom Matthesen, his company's mission is its differentiator. Through an innovative revenue-sharing model that provides a stable, predictable price for coffee, Thrive Farmers ensures higher earnings for farmers — up to three times more than the traditional model. It also provides a “halo effect” for consumers, who are increasingly seeking out brands committed to social justice. The B Corp-certified company gives farmers wider participation in the entire supply chain. Rather than simply selling the beans, farmers are stakeholders in the other steps in the process, reaping more of the profits as coffee drips its way from the farm to our mugs. Farmers’ earnings

are also tied to the actual end-market value of the coffee, meaning they share a fixed percentage of the revenue when a bag of coffee is sold. This gives farmers higher, more predictable and more stable income than traditional models.

The sole coffee provider for Chick-Fil-A, Thrive Farmers has grown more than 8,500 percent in five years and ranked 19 on the Inc. 500 list of the nation's fastest-growing privately held companies for 2016. Those are impressive metrics, but for Matthesen, a more compelling measure of success comes down to treating people with respect and pride. “If one of our customers looks at the work we’re doing, they will then look around at their other 300 vendors and ask, ‘What are you doing?’ Thrive Farmers is leading a sea change,” Matthesen said.

## Chapter 3: Culture

*When leaders take care of their team, and let the team take care of the customers, the rest takes care of itself.*

**Summary:** Throughout the pandemic, I've been amazed to hear the stories of companies that refused to quit. Their business and people were too important to them. If that determination and perseverance aren't a fundamental part of the DNA of a company's culture before a crisis, that's not something that can be suddenly turned on when things get tough. Culture can set you apart, help you retain and attract top talent, and make customers proud to work with you.

### Principles of world-class cultures

Whether organizations work remotely, in person or in a hybrid model, there are some fundamental principles that keep a culture intact:

✎ **Create a rallying cry for what needs to be accomplished and anchor the team to the company's mission, vision, purpose and values.** Patrick Lencioni's concept of creating a rallying cry resonates with leaders around the world who recognize that employees want their work to be relevant and important. Strong leaders give their people a voice and ensure they have autonomy and competence to act.

✎ **Align the team around strategy, culture, organization, results and execution.** It's important to always stretch people to get the goals you're after. But effective leaders ensure employees are equipped with the right tools, resources and plan to get there.

✎ **Uncover the gaps in skill sets and hire for the new reality.**


Without customers and great employees, there's no business to plan for.

And making sure the right team is in place — one that understands how to support customers — sits at the top of the priority list. The best leaders are detailed and purposeful about the people they onboard, hiring new and diverse talent to overcome challenges and correct business vulnerabilities. They actively work to ensure their teams develop the capability to succeed in a constantly shifting environment.

✎ **Communicate.** The most resilient leadership teams are in consistent communication with one another, rather than leaving what and how they communicate to chance. Inspiring leaders share stories about their company's history and customers that showcase their values and operating principles.





 **Connect your team with customers.** Customers appreciate when companies are nimble enough to understand their changing needs and offer new ways to help. The best leaders ensure their teams regularly connect with customers, listen to their feedback and consistently look for more ways to deliver value.


Creating a world-class culture means staying close to customers and employees, and embracing purpose and core values. When leaders trust and take care of their team, and let the team take care of the customers, the rest takes care of itself


## Embrace diversity of thought


Diversity of thought, and of talent, is the spark that ignites a company's growth and purpose. When CEOs make a deliberate effort to bring people together with diverse backgrounds and experiences, they can tap into new ways of thinking — fresh perspectives that challenge the status quo.

In Vistage CEO peer advisory group meetings across the world, executives from noncompeting companies come together to help each other solve their challenges. Not only do they bring a variety of experiences and backgrounds, but they're not constrained by institutional knowledge. They can offer fresh, objective perspectives.

Here are a few ways I've noticed that leaders create an environment that celebrates diversity of thought within their company:

 **Tapping into diverse experiences** — both inside and outside the leadership team — is the key to unlocking this potential for the organization. Leaders can create an environment that celebrates diversity of thought by actively seeking people with different backgrounds, not by assuming the most senior people in the room have the best ideas.

 **While diversity of thought is invaluable in building teams, so is bridging the generational divide.** Nowadays, it's common for a business to have five generations in the workplace, and trying to speak to every constituency can be challenging. But when effective CEOs communicate that their organization values collaboration and respect for one another, every generation nods in agreement.

 **Recruiting for the right blend of specialists and generalists is vital.** Instead of looking for a candidate with 10,000 hours of experience in just one area, organizations might be better off with a colleague who brings a range of experiences to the company.



Attracting a diverse group of people to your company helps bring more perspectives and better solutions. It also makes your company a place where everyone feels that they belong, and feels comfortable bringing their unique point of view to the table.

## Create and nurture resilience

Fostering a resilient workforce is an invaluable investment. Being able to bounce back quickly from hardships, challenges, crises and adversity is essential to creating a productive culture. The following are steps committed leaders take to build resilience into their culture:

✎ **Build a culture of ongoing learning, development and mentoring.** Having mentors on the team who believe that it is still possible to win, even if they're behind, inspires the team to continue to move forward in the face of tremendous challenges. Resilient people inspire others to persevere.

✎ **Create cross-functional teams that bring people together from different areas of the company and build trust among employees.** These teams offer an opportunity to employees of all levels to practice leadership.

✎ **Refine the interviewing and hiring process.** Successful leaders seek out resilience from the outset by asking interview questions that will shed light on whether the prospect is a problem-solver or someone who plays the victim when things turn south.

✎ **Set boundaries when it comes to workload and timelines.** It may seem counterintuitive, but when a leader encourages their team to unplug, it recharges the team so they can stay focused on the goal.

When leaders persevere toward goals, are transparent and allow employees to make room for personal growth, it creates a culture of resilience to face any challenge. Successful leaders set the standards for employees to build trust, purpose and resilience — they never lose sight of the company's mission, vision and purpose.

## Commitment, transparency, flexibility

CEOs nurture strong cultures through commitment, transparency and flexibility. They examine their leadership styles, ask key questions to identify necessary changes, and focus on their North Star (mission, vision, purpose and values) to propel their companies forward. Setbacks give leaders the opportunity, time and again, to improve leadership skills as they move along their daunting journeys. And as CEOs become more agile, more open to new ideas, and authentically connected with their teams, they identify leadership lessons to strengthen themselves and their companies for the future.

### Principle in Action: Atomic Object



partner Mike Marsiglia shares, "Overall, the philosophy is simple: Hire a team of smart people and create a culture in which they feel safe and empowered to do great work."

At software consulting firm Atomic Object, the leadership team works hard to ensure that everyone on the team shares the same values. First, when they hire a new person, there's always a conversation about the company values: Give a s\*\*t, think long-term, own it, share the pain, teach and learn, and act transparently. They have also built an internal recognition program that focuses on those values. They announce these recognitions every morning during a company-wide meeting. They're team oriented, so recognitions are peer-to-peer, not top-down. Vistage member and Atomic Object managing



## Closing Thoughts

Strong leaders reject shortcuts to growth. They know leadership excellence requires hard work and determined attention. They take ownership of their development. They bring rigor and grit, working hard to hone their expertise and continuously improve. They keep an organized rhythm of communications and work progress to keep their businesses aligned.

They are high on curiosity and low on ego. They are inquisitive, welcome new ideas from trusted sources, and are eager to explore. They are the first to admit they don't have all the answers and also the ones who believe most that a breakthrough is on the horizon.

Finally, mindful leaders **challenge their thinking with fresh perspectives**. World-class leaders seek diverse perspectives on important decisions from trusted peers. They actively work to combat insular thinking and confirmation bias — situations where they've made up their minds and seek the easy places to get answers that validate their points of view. They find other CEOs and business leaders who've tackled similar issues in different industries. These peers understand the nuances and challenges of the C-suite and bring fresh perspectives unhampered by institutional knowledge. Leaders who surround themselves with executive peers who offer differing points of view — and push them to achieve their next peak of success — create a fundamental condition for leadership growth.



**Leadership is a perpetual climb that requires a lifelong commitment. For over 60 years, more than 100,000 top-performing business leaders have traveled down this leadership path with Vistage. The journey is arduous, but it is well worth the effort — for it will bring leaders to peaks they never thought possible.**

**Discover the benefits of joining your executive peers who have the grit and commitment to accomplish what only a few can do.**

[Learn more](#)



## About the Author

Sam Reese is CEO of Vistage, the world's largest CEO coaching and peer advisory organization for small and midsize businesses. Over his 35-year career as a business leader, Sam has led large and midsize organizations and has advised CEOs and key executives of companies all over the world.

## About Vistage

Vistage is the world's largest CEO coaching and peer advisory organization for small and midsize businesses. For more than 60 years, we've been helping CEOs, business owners and key executives solve their greatest challenges through confidential peer groups and one-to-one executive coaching sessions. Today, more than 23,000 members in 20+ countries rely on Vistage to help make better decisions for their companies, families and communities. The results prove it: Vistage member companies grow 2.2 times faster than average small and midsize U.S. businesses, according to a 2017 study of Dun & Bradstreet data. To learn how a peer advisory group can help you navigate challenges, make better decisions and achieve growth, visit [vistage.com](https://vistage.com).

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