

## CEO ROUNDTABLE

## Executive Session

How Nashville's Growing CEO Forums Are Helping Company Leaders Better their Businesses

/// By Linda Bryant

Ten years ago, Tom Turner was too busy leading a fledgling startup to network other C-suite executives and entrepreneurs. These days, he says he can't afford not to.

Turner, president and co-founder of Document Solutions Inc., joined the Nashville branch of The Entrepreneur's Organization four years ago. "I'd finally reached the point in my business where I had a little more time," Turner said.

He joined the group thinking he'd stay for a year, just to give it a try. He's stuck around these past four years — and counting — because the membership has produced measurable results for his business.

"It's been instrumental in helping DSi get to a new level," Turner said. "Since I've joined, we've averaged a yearly growth rate of 136 percent. I don't think it's a coincidence that it's [happened] since I've been in EO."

And Turner's experience isn't unique. There are several other forums for top executives in Middle Tennessee, each with a different character, structure and level of commitment. (Here's a brief rundown of each.) Common among them all, however, is one basic premise: coaching and support from executive brethren can dramatically improve performance and profits.



Outgoing EO Nashville President Clint Smith



EO members at the 2008 Global Leadership Conference in Dubai. Top (l. to R.): Clint Smith, Clay Stevens, Arnie Matham, Don Cook. Middle: Dave Galbenok. Bottom (l. to R.): Tim McMullen, Jim Harris, Joe Freedman, Chris Glaser, Cullen Douglass.



Incoming EO President Debbie Gordon and EO member Matt Davis at the 2010 EO Moveable Feast.



2011 EO Nashville sponsored "Evening with John Rich" event.

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Realizing those benefits comes at a price. Membership in these groups can cost anywhere from the \$200-a-year CEO Roundtable, which is sponsored by the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, to over \$13,000 a year for the highest level of membership at the Nashville chapter of Vistage. That group, formerly called TEC, is an international support organization for CEOs with over 14,000 members in 15 countries.

Despite the dues, and the economic squeeze of the recession, memberships are on the rise at local CEO forums — backing, with numbers, the groups' claims that they provide a business boost.

In fact, the Nashville chapter of EO, which has about 100 members, is the fastest growing division in the world. C12, Nashville's newest CEO forum, is the fastest growing in the nation, having gained 40 members in two years.

C12, a faith-based group, reaches out to CEOs who view themselves as stewards of their companies, with responsibilities toward everyone connected a business: employees, customers, vendors — even competitors. The group organizes around best business practices and comprehensive business education, but it also blends in “God-honoring priorities,” said Troy Blackmon, managing chair of C12 Group Music City.

“Running a business is more than generating a profit,” Blackmon said. “If the problem is at home, then we can address that, too. It's not OK to lead a successful business, but have a train wreck at home.”

Mike Yarbrough, president and CEO of Laser One Inc., a provider of printer and copier supplies, said his group is effective because members are “open with each other and encouraged to get to reality and deal with it.”

“I've gotten a lot of things done because of this accountability,” he said.

Dick Wallace, president of The Alternative Board of Nashville, agrees that accountability is something executive leaders need — even crave. TAB is an international organization that creates executive peer advisory boards, special leadership and education events, and executive coaching sessions for member companies.

“Leadership at the top is lonely,” Wallace said. “There are very few places where people at the very level of a company can go and get confidential advice and counsel.”

Wallace and his business partner, David Jones, derive income from TAB's \$600-a-month dues, but also provide services for members, including one-on-one executive coaching.

“Executives need a safe place to speak openly and frankly and hear not just what they want to hear, but what they need to hear,” Wallace said.

Wallace gave the example of a member who came to a forum ready to discuss his choice for a new chief operating officer. “It was a key hire, and he couldn't afford to get it wrong” Wallace said. “He came in ready to make the hire, but everyone on the board concurred that it was the wrong choice. He ended up being very glad he didn't go with his first decision.”

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Tim Shaver, facilitator for the Nashville branch of Vistage, said CEO forums are critical for executives who want to drive change instead of just react to it.

“Members talk about everything — balance sheets, hiring, and compensation issues,” Shaver said. “There's a high level of accountability. There's financial reporting for all members. You see them making better and better decisions. There's also tremendous personal growth.”

Vistage members join advisory board peer groups, receive one-to-one coaching, learn from expert speakers, and interact among a global network of CEOs from a broad range of industries. Shaver said the average three-year growth rate for Vistage members' companies is about 250 percent.

Rhonda Marko, president and CEO of Destination Nashville, has been a member of the Chamber's CEO Roundtable for 17 years. She's gone from one employee to 19 full-time and 100 part-time workers.

“The roundtable helped me write my first business plan and hire my first employee,” Marko said. “The group has helped me succeed, but I had to make a commitment to participate. You get back what you put in.”

Members also helped Marko in 2008 when she made recession-related layoffs, the first and only move since the company's inception. “Getting expert counsel from my peers made it much easier,” Marko said.