

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Jamie Lowe, EVP
Atmosphere Commercial Interiors
Minneapolis

At a glance

Role: EVP Minnesota Region
Industry: Professional Grade Furniture & Related Services
Employees: 150+
Vistage chair: Brian Davis

Company background

Atmosphere Commercial Interiors, previously a business unit of Target Corp., is the premier provider of professional grade furniture and move/installation services in the Twin Cities. The company's mission is to furnish engaging and inspiring spaces that reflect a company's brand and supports people.

When Jamie Lowe showed up for work the first day seven years ago at Target Commercial Interiors, he quipped he couldn't even spell "furniture," let alone sell it. Previously, Jamie spent several years running a program team inside Target marketing, and before his Target experience, he had a stint with the Minnesota Twins (off the field).

"I've had a varied, entrepreneurial career, which I love. I thrive on newness and innovation it," he says, adding, "Every stop along the journey has been thrilling, energizing, and a real learning experience."



In June of 2015, Target Commercial Interiors got a lot more entrepreneurial when the BIG Target agreed to sell the business to a small group of investors led by CEO [Mike Litwin](#) and his senior leadership team. The new spin-off company is named Atmosphere Commercial Interiors and its team members affectionately refer to the newly-branded firm as a 61-year-old startup.

Delivering exceptional experiences

Jamie was named executive vice president of the Minnesota region, the company's largest by multiple measures: scope, scale, breadth, and team size, he shares. Other regions include Arizona, Wisconsin/Illinois. Jamie's responsibility includes leading the sales, project management, client coordinator and design teams. That's about 70 team members and \$150 million in annual sales.

As one of the country's largest distributors of Steelcase office furniture, Atmosphere Commercial Interiors collaborates with clients, architectural & design firms, construction companies, and corporate real estate firms to

create compelling, high performing workspaces, as well as powerful environments for education, healthcare, hospitality, and sports spaces. The company's customers include national, well-known brands as well as sports facilities: Accenture, Bosch Security Systems, Carlson Companies, Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota, Phoenix Children's Hospital, Wells Fargo, Target Corp, InterContinental Hotel Group, Target Field, Target Center, TCF Stadium and Daytona International Speedway.

Jamie talks a lot about delivering exceptional experiences for the company's many customers—a trait that has helped Atmosphere win projects against entrenched competitors. He also concedes the business is somewhat a commodity business, "A chair is a chair, and a desk is a desk," he says. But, Atmosphere approaches projects from a unique angle. "We think differently. We're always trying to understand how we can innovate and leap ahead by offering solutions that may be unanticipated and in turn delivers meaningful value, and therefore, creates stickiness with the client. We are results oriented because that's what our clients expect," Jamie shares, adding, "We invest substantially in talent who have a genuine passion for space and performance."

"If you think about your workplace as an ecosystem or a habitat, how we work matters," he says. Gone are the days of sitting all day in big "cube farms," Jamie says. "Today it's about innovation, collaboration, well-being, and ultimately engagement in the workplace." To reinforce his well-being point, Jamie cites a recent *Wall Street Journal* Article that suggested workers who could stand at their desks were 46 percent more productive than those with traditional seated desks.

Thinking differently

Jamie doesn't think of Atmosphere as a furniture company. "I think of ourselves as in the workplace culture, performance, and engagement business," he shares. And customers soon realize Atmosphere is a different kind of company.

"We think differently. With an entrepreneurial spirit and flair, we intensely focus on delivering what our clients need and want. We act differently by helping CEOs understand the direct correlation between space + engagement = higher performance and increased profits. The workplace and its corresponding furniture are not an expense, rather an investment in performance and better results," Jamie asserts.

Apparently, thinking differently is paying off. The company is experiencing phenomenal sales performance. Sales are up 25 percent compared to the same period last year, and the sales backlog is up 16 percent.

There's a definite entrepreneurial vibe at this "startup." With the ever-present safety net of Target no longer there to break a fall, Atmosphere's team members realize that they alone are responsible for their destiny. Jamie's grateful for a silent partner in the business—his Vistage Key group.

Vistage as silent partner

Jamie's been a member of Vistage chair [Brian Davis's](#) group for nearly three years. His membership in the group has been essential as Atmosphere has grown into a thriving force in the industry. "Vistage has taught me to be open to seeking help from others outside of our organization. I'm building a network of trusted advisors I can continuously reach out to."

Because most Vistage members work at entrepreneurial businesses, Jamie says that Vistage is having a much higher impact on him since Atmosphere became an independent company.

Recently he asked his group to help him process a high-performing sales organization. “I’m trying to make sure we’re positioned to be the best that we can be. To gather input from a group of experts helped me leap ahead as a leader.” He listened to the opinions of all and chose the right mix of ideas for Atmosphere. “That has been invaluable for me,” he says

Insight from Vistage members helped Jamie design an accountability system that incentivized his sales team for the right behaviors and activities.

Jamie discovered a side benefit to Vistage is he spends a day away from the business every month with like-minded people in similar circumstances. “I always keep a notebook to write down nuggets and ideas that could help me in the future.”

And, sometimes those moments of inspiration come from the Vistage speakers. The most impressive presentation he says came from former CIA official Herb Meyer. The talk—What in the World is Going on? A Global Intelligence Briefing—is a 90-minute tour discussing global issues that all business leaders should know. “It was truly the best,” says Jamie.

Vistage chair Brian Davis finds nationally recognized speakers like Herb Meyer to present at the key group meetings Jamie regularly attends. Brian also has been instrumental in guiding the direction of productive group discussions that mark every meeting, shares Jamie.

“Brian is so effective that some days, I don't know just what happened,” says Jamie. Most of all, Jamie says that Brian taught him to be vulnerable in a healthy and growth-oriented way. “That's given me a lot more confidence as a professional.”

This leap has helped Jamie develop as a leader. “I’ve found that people want to be led by somebody who is passionate and committed, plus a little bit of vulnerability is healthy,” he says.

Vistage is doing that for Jamie he says. The Vistage experience reminds him that to grow means sometimes being a little bit uncomfortable. But that’s a good thing he insists. One of his Vistage peers captures the idea nicely by musing, “It's about being comfortable with being uncomfortable.”**V**