

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Luke Carlson, CEO
Discover Strength
Minneapolis

At a glance

Role: CEO/Owner

Industry: Exercise and Fitness

Employees: 25–75

Vistage chair: Brian Davis

Company background

Discover Strength is a health and fitness organization built on the principle that through strength training people can achieve tremendous health benefits. Its trainers hold degrees in exercise science with focused study in exercise physiology, biomechanics, motor learning, and nutrition. CEO Luke Carlson started the firm in 2006; today they boast three locations with plans to add seven more by 2020.

When you walk into Discover Strength in Chanhassen, Minn. for your first session, you realize you're not in the lobby of just another health club when you find a recent issue of the Harvard Business Review in a stack of fitness magazines displayed on a table.

That impression is further reinforced when a serious-looking trainer in formal business attire greets you with a clipboard and a checklist; no tight-fitting sweats and bulging biceps here.

These touches, and many others, have been care-



fully crafted by Discover Strength's founder and CEO, 35-year-old Luke Carlson. He's building a brand that's unmistakably different in this fiercely competitive industry.

Luke comes to the fitness industry with some serious cred; a masters in exercise physiology from the University of Minnesota and experience working as an assistant strength and conditioning coach for the Minnesota Vikings.

Ten years ago, Luke thought his career would be on a different trajectory. "I either wanted to be an NFL strength and conditioning coach forever, or I wanted to be a tenure-track faculty member in a research institution," he shared. But, a mentor and fitness industry legend offered a different path: "My mentor suggested I do something business related."

He plunged into researching the idea after a health industry entrepreneur told Luke he needs to read

the seminal business books *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*. That was all it took for Luke. “I started a journey where I became incredibly passionate about business, leadership, and management, not just exercise,” he exclaimed.

Luke researched and formed his company to address a need that wasn’t being adequately filled in the Twin Cities. Discover Strength opened in Chanhassen with its first location in 2006. Today, the company boasts three locations, one in highly desirable downtown Minneapolis.

As the name suggests, Discover Strength is all about strength training for its growing legion of appreciative clients. Discover Strength doesn’t sell memberships. Its currency is in “sessions.” Clients buy sessions in packages or one at-a-time. They have the choice of sessions with a personal trainer or in small groups with a handful of others.

Luke hires only trainers with degrees in exercise science or related fields. Trainers keep up with the evolving field by attending conferences and consuming the latest scientific literature. Many of his trainers are also on the staffs of area high schools where they coach football and other teams when not working with Discover Strength clients. the 70s’.

Discover Strength clients like the efficiency and professionalism of Luke’s company. The company designs workouts for busy professionals—most are 30 to 45 minutes. They claim their approach “yields far better results in far less time.”

With its focus on efficiency, Discover Strength’s client archetypes are female and male professionals 45–52. They don’t have much spare time, may or may not have children, and enjoy the simplicity and lack of rush-hour crowds at the company’s locations. Luke said their clients “Pride them-

selves in finding ways to do things a little bit more intelligently than the average person.” But, many clients still have memberships at larger, mainstream health clubs, he said.

Continuous Improvement Leads to Vistage

Luke’s passion for exercise and fitness is only equaled by his obsession for all things business related. The self-drive of continuous improvement is what eventually led him to Vistage, and Minnesota chair **Brian Davis**. He said he joined Vistage “to be around business people in other industries that were smart. I wanted to see how they approached problems, how they solved problems, and how they dealt with the classic business struggles and issues growing firms have.”

What he didn’t expect was the transparency within the 18-member group. “Everyone was so incredibly open and honest with numbers and issues. What I realized is that everyone’s dealing with many of the same issues!”

After all, Luke stressed, “The fundamentals of leadership are universal. So many management tenets are universal, and therefore, cross-industry. I think you can learn from anybody, and I’ve really enjoyed that.”

Indeed, he is learning. Luke needed advice on where and how to fill a crucial financial management role. He brought the dilemma to his Vistage group: Luke needed someone with the chops of a CFO, except he didn’t have a CFO-sized budget. The answer came from another group member: Outsource the need.

Luke has also found value from hearing everyone’s entrepreneurship journeys. There are lessons

to be learned from every leader's path—the challenges, the successes, and even the failures that have shaped who they are today.

Luke said he's also been learning poignant leadership lessons from his Vistage group chair, Brian. "I just love to talk to Brian and pick his brain. It's nonstop," he said. With Brian's experience and credentials, Luke raves "Brian is an incredible asset to our group."

"Whenever Brian gives advice on something, I write it down and generally implement it," shared Luke. It's that kind of openness to new thinking that has helped Discover Strength continue to grow and prosper. Luke attributes part of the company's growth in the past several months to Vistage. "We've had tremendous business improvement since we've joined Vistage."

To be sure, just recently, the company surpassed one of its key performance indicators: the number of sessions booked in a quarter—804.

"Our whole company rallies around sessions more than revenue numbers because revenue is hard to understand for our personal trainers. Everyone understands sessions. A customer came in, bought a workout and we had a chance to affect their lives."

It's that intersection between the personal trainer and the customer that also sets Discover Strength apart from nearly every other health and exercise organization. You could say Discover Strength is not fad-based. Remember Jazzercise and Sweatin to the Oldies?

Exercise routines at Discover Strength are guided by science, and science only. Luke calls it an "evidence-based approach." If exercises and routines have not been vetted in peer review research,

the company won't adopt them. Call it data-driven exercise. Observed Luke, "Instead of starting with a trend or fad, we start with the science of human physiology and peer review research."

The company's passion for research is one of the reasons "learning" is the company's first of four core values. Luke believes in learning so much he hosts a conference every year that brings exercise professionals, authors, researchers and academics from all over the world to Minneapolis to speak about developments in exercise and fitness.

Between planning conferences, leading a growing company and working with his loyal clientele, it's amazing he has time to attend monthly Vistage meetings. But he never misses. Luke said he "Gets so frustrated with entrepreneurs that say 'they don't have the time or the money for it [Vistage].'"

"If you're not involved, what leader in your company is working on the business, not just in the business?" **V**