

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Steve Vreeman, VP of Operations
Rhino Marking and Protection
Services
Bloomington, Minn.

At a glance

Role: VP of Operations

Industry: Manufacturing

Employees: 26-75

Vistage chair: Brian Davis

Company background

[Rhino Marking & Protection Systems](#) provides innovative marking systems to protect buried utilities, helping to ensure worker safety and protect the environment.

Rhino has been the leader in the damage prevention industry for more than 20 years. With the introduction of the TriView™ marking system in 1997, Rhino revolutionized the damage prevention industry by providing a 360° visibility marker post that could be used in a variety of applications.

Steve Vreeman's first career was flying S-3 Viking anti-submarine warfare planes from the U.S.S. Ranger on missions all over the world. He "worked" for the U.S. Navy for nine years—including a tour as an action officer for the Joint Chiefs of Staff—before he traded his aviator wings for a desk.

Today, Steve is the VP of operations for Twin



Cities-based Rhino Marking and Protection Systems, where he leads manufacturing, human resources and finance. He's been working with [CEO Scott Landes](#) for nearly four years, about the same length of time Steve's been a Vistage member.

"Scott brought me in to help as the company grows to put some structure around our business operations. It's not just the manufacturing; it's also HR and finance," shares Steve. Rhino has annual revenue of approximately \$8 million.

"When I talk structure, I take the people out of it and decide what the structure looks like," he says. Steve built the organization from the perspective of what the company's customers need from Rhino. He followed the same formula for Rhino employees, creating a structure that served employee needs. Steve described this exercise as step one.

In step two he developed the processes needed for the separate groups to work together more efficiently and effectively. For instance, he says, "How does my meetings action group have to

relate to my customer service group, and how does that need to relate to finance? What do the processes and communications look like between groups to help them function properly."

Step three, and what Steve described as the most critical step of all, is "What people do you need?" Borrowing from the Entrepreneurial Operating System, he described the step as putting the "right people in the right seats." Steve has five direct reports and overall responsibility for about 35–40 employees.

Signing up for Vistage

Not that long after starting at Rhino, Steve's boss, Scott, asked him if he would like to join Vistage. Scott, who has been with Vistage for many years, wanted Steve to experience the same benefits that kept Scott involved in the executive coaching and learning organization. "I've always been one who wants to learn and grow through professional development, so I jumped into Vistage. I ended up choosing chair [Brian Davis's](#) group. I like how Brian structured and ran his meetings," shares Steve.

Steve's Vistage group has members from multiple industries, a reality he considers a benefit. "Each group member looks at issues and processes problems a little differently. That's given me a broad perspective and keeps me thinking outside the box," he explains.

His group has VPs of IT, HR, sales, marketing, operations, finance and more. Each brings their perspective and ideas for solving age-old business problems. Steve recalls when he was looking at a significant expansion of manufacturing capacity to handle new product lines. His group members helped him sift through the web of details necessary to plan any business expansion. Vistage

members helped him think through issues like bank financing, capital equipment, personnel and manufacturing space.

Steve says he also gains a better perspective through Vistage guest speakers. "They're [speakers] talking about best practices and new ways of looking at things. They're also talking about different ways of looking at key performance indicators (KPIs). That broad perspective helps me make better decisions," he says.

The Execution Roadmap™

Rhino, in fact, adopted a strategic planning process taught by long-time Vistage speaker Jim Alampi. Alampi shows companies a unique vintage of a strategic plan he calls the "execution roadmap."

According to Alampi, "[The Execution Roadmap™](#) gets a company's entire vision on two pages—core values, purpose, mission, and BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal) to SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats)—to three-year focus areas to one-year initiatives to 90-day tactical priorities."

Steve says, "I like Jim's method and tweaked it a little bit. We put together a strategic roadmap each year that we give to every individual at the company." The roadmap defines the company culture, its vision, and core values.

Steve says Rhino likes to have its employees engaged, and for the most part, they are. "We want people to have fun, and that's part of our culture," he shares, adding, "We're a pretty laid-back company, but we want to get things done, and we want to do well by our customers. And, of course, we want great results."

Steve helps the company drive results by setting a broad range of KPIs. He likes to think beyond the typical KPI's, such as gross margins. "If I track margins, that's a nice number, but I can't do anything with it." He would rather look beyond a KPI like gross margin to see where the costs come from, such as labor.

Through Vistage and speakers like Alampi, Steve has been inspired to create KPIs to measure manufacturing productivity. A few of these include the number of assemblers per product or dollar and scrap rates. "Each of these KPIs tells us a separate piece of the puzzle," he says.

Steve also credits Vistage and chair Brian Davis with helping him process vexing business issues. Sometimes those issues are discussed in a small group where everyone gets a chance to weigh in with advice on how to solve the problem. This "issue processing" has helped Steve and other group members achieve breakthroughs on matters that seemed too overwhelming.

According to Steve, issue processing is just another tool in the Vistage toolbox that keeps him moving toward self-improvement. He says the Vistage experience has, indeed, broadened his perspective, and given him the tools to excel over the long haul. **V**