

# 4 ways hobbies can help you become a better CEO

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For a CEO, hobbies can often be seen as a distraction from managing a business. But hobbies — a club, a card game, a pickleball match — can provide CEOs with much more.

A great hobby gives space for mastery and passion that's outside of work. CEOs with hobbies feel happier, more fulfilled and less burned out. Steven R. Covey, who authored the bestseller "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," cites the need to "sharpen the saw" as a means of renewal.

The skills earned from hobbies also pay off at work. We spoke with four Vistage members who credit their hobbies with helping them become better leaders, listeners, and more creative thinkers.

## Dancing out discomfort

When **Jessica McKnight** takes her weekly dance classes, she doesn't think. She can't — the steps and movements are too challenging.

McKnight, President and ReVisioneer of advertising agency CarneyCo, started dancing three years ago. Her two daughters had recently started and, inspired by them, she decided to take adult classes.

At first, dancing felt awkward, especially when getting up on stage for recitals. But those are the exact feelings that paid off for McKnight at work.

“I feel more comfortable doing things that I wouldn’t have been comfortable doing a couple of years ago,” she said.

Learning to embrace the discomfort of dance has led to a mindset shift. McKnight now seeks out challenges and opportunities at work, no matter how uncomfortable. “Dance retrains your brain,” McKnight said.

Dance — or any hobby that makes you do rather than think — can be a great tool for executives, McKnight said. While it can be a humbling experience, McKnight said dancing has helped her become more comfortable with being uncomfortable.

“We have to get out of our own heads,” she said. “You can use those uncomfortable experiences in your life, connect them to work, and improve how you do business.”

## **Creative Mistakes Lead to Ingenious Solutions**

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As a 4-year-old, **Dan Schneck** watched as his grandmother, an amputee, played the organ. She’d work the pedals with one leg as he sat behind her. He fell in love with the sound and vision of her playing, and she taught him.

Schneck, CEO and founder of technology management services company WJI Networks, still plays blues and improvisational jazz on his Hammond B-3 organ. He plays at home, at gigs, and even at work, improvising amid a workday as a break.

“Playing the organ gives me creative juice to come back and solve a technical problem,” he said. “It’s like a flow state. I feel like I can get to the same place when I’m sitting in my business as I do in front of the organ.”

When you practice creativity, Schneck said that you learn how to make mistakes. These mistakes sometimes turn out to be better than what you intended. He’s learned that not everything has to be perfect in music, and not everything has to be perfect in business.

Even if CEOs can’t play a note, Schneck believes that finding a creative outlet is essential.

“You come back with a different mindset, you’re open to different things,” he said. “I think you’ve got to find some outlet, whether it’s music, art, or painting.”

## **Say “Yes, And” Learn to Listen**

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**Tom Neff** is an accountant, and thus an over-preparer. He used to obsessively research every topic that may come up in a meeting.

Perhaps that's why, five years ago, Neff was drawn to taking a free improvisational comedy class.

In improv, there's no preparing: students must listen and react to their scene partners, who could say anything, as there is no script. Neff loved the experience. One free class turned into five full classes, which turned into three years of performing with Butter Beans, his improv troupe in Oakland, California.

Neff, managing partner of accounting firm RINA Accountancy Corporation, said that improv changed him. He went from pushing his own agenda in meetings to being comfortable leading a group by listening, all without over-preparing. After all, employees have no script.

"Improv changed my mentality in meetings," Neff said. "Now, I see myself more as a facilitator than being in charge of a meeting. I will put an idea out there or take an idea from somebody else and try to build on it."

Neff has even brought improv into RINA's leadership retreats, using improv exercises to relieve people's anxiety. "It relaxed everybody," he said.

Leaders should consider sitting in on an improv class, Neff said. "One of the basic principles of improv is to play off each other and create something as a group," he said. "That's foundational to being a strong leader."

## **See Through a Different Lens**

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**Eric Mulvin** has been taking photos since he was a child. As he grew and became an entrepreneur, he kept his hobby and grew as a photographer, snapping photos of the starry skies and deserts of his home city, Phoenix, Arizona.

For Mulvin, owner of customer support company Pac Biz, photography is a stress reliever. Mulvin wants to bring the stress relief and personal growth of hobbies to his employees.

"One of our core values is personal growth," Mulvin said. "If you give everyone the opportunities to develop their professional and personal passions, they're not going to want to leave."

Mulvin uses photography to show employees that it's good to have a hobby. Once, he led call center employees on a photo walk through Dumaguete City in the Philippines, a lush city on the waterfront.

But Mulvin wants employees to find their own passions, photography or otherwise, and bring them to work. He'll put employees on accounts that match their interests, for example, or allow them to bring their hobby to work in a different way. Last year, he commissioned Pac

Biz's videographer, who loved painting, to paint a mural of the company's core values.

Developing hobbies is great for the mental health of executives and employees alike, Mulvin said. Finding a hobby can be a great way to avoid burnout, relieve stress, and feel fulfilled in life. "Your hobbies remind you that there are bigger, more important things out there," Mulvin said. "And I think it really helps to give yourself like a break."

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