



“Business coaching will help to determine the path where CEOs can see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Hong Khay Chai

Senior Chair
Chair since 2002
VEE-37

CHALLENGE, HAMMER, ACCEPT, INSPIRE, REINFORCE

Hong Khay Chai is one of Vistage Malaysia's pioneer Chairs, having started in 2002. He reflects on his long coaching journey with wit, humour and candidness. Through the years, Khay Chai has developed unique coaching methods and has coined catchy acronyms to keep his Vistage group active and vibrant.

Hong Khay Chai reveals that he was an “accidental” Chair. He has no Ivy League qualifications but lots of business and management experience in the public and private sectors. At the time when he was about to downsize his own business, he was introduced to Richard Wong by a former employee. To his surprise, Richard asked him to become a TEC (at that time) Chair. “I almost dropped from the chair I was sitting on,” he recalls. Despite reservations, it was a good offer and his reply was “Why not?”

It was a very tough beginning. In the early 2000s, not many had heard of business coaching. It was even harder for Khay Chai because he started in Penang. He had the nightmare of overcoming the ‘kiasu’ and ‘kiamsiap’ (translated from Hokkien dialect as ‘cannot lose’ and ‘stingy’) mentality prevalent in the business community.

“There was fear of parting with money for something when they cannot see its usefulness,” he explains. Using his wits, Khay Chai’s selling story was “If your car is sick, you go to a mechanic. If your business is sick with cashflow and HR problems, etc. who do you see?” Eventually, he managed to break the phobias. Members joined and soon became “salesmen”, extolling the benefits of joining Vistage, by word of mouth.

Being a pioneer in business coaching was also tough. Through the ups and downs, Khay Chai has honed his skills in innovative ways. In a nutshell, he uses the CHAIR acronym to define his coaching tools. C is to challenge members to come out of their comfort zone; H to hammer them to instil discipline if they stray; A to accept them as family; I to inspire them when members need encouragement, and R to reinforce, so that members stay and work together. Khay Chai discloses that he really uses a hammer (a toy one) on his group members if they are late for meetings.

Looking back, Khay Chai is grateful to Richard Wong for his generosity. He describes him as one “with a lion heart” because he looks after the welfare of his team including Chairs. In the early years, for instance, he says that Chairs were invited to join him on retreats.

“By helping people with business problems, I am also helping myself to be better and wiser.”

He acknowledges that there was uneasiness in the beginning, as Chairs themselves were all former bosses and needed chemistry to work together. “The Chairs did not follow Richard 100 per cent, but Richard knew how to adjust,” he reveals. As a person, he says Richard “sticks to his guns and gets the job done”. He admires him for his strong belief and conviction. “He can make the invisible visible, when no one believes so”, in reference to Richard building up Vistage in Malaysia from scratch.

Business coaching is seen as a two-way street. Both Chairs and the CEOs benefit. “Vistage gives me a good platform to learn, unlearn and relearn” is how Khay Chai defines the personal benefits he has derived from being a Chair. In the past, he says he learnt from his own profession. Now there is broad spectrum to learn how to survive and sustain in a broad business environment. He sees this as a real deal. “By helping people with business problems, I am also helping myself to be better and wiser.”

How has he changed? Khay Chai says he has learnt ‘how to cool down’ (anger management) and ‘how to tell people off in a good way’ (by choosing the correct words). Indeed, he has been creative in coaching and keeping members engaged over the last 16 years. How does a Chair make an 8-hour meeting feel like 4 hours? How does a Chair ensure good meeting attendance and punctuality? One of his tools is the “3 Cs box”. This is another acronym coined by Khay Chai – First, Car keys are kept to ensure members do not leave early; Second, Cell phones are kept and can only be used during breaks and Third, Cheque books to ensure members pay their fees on time.

Despite his resourcefulness, Khay Chai has had unpleasant memories. He recalls the first five years as a Chair was a ‘roller coaster’ experience where his Vistage group membership was very unstable. The worst experience was some 10 years ago when he almost closed down his group. This was due to a misunderstanding among members that soured relationships. His energy level was at its lowest ebb, but he managed to “raise the Titanic” by resolving communication issues and emphasising leadership values.

Not long after, Khay Chai enjoyed one of his most memorable moments as a Chair. This was during the 15th anniversary of the group where all members celebrated at a retreat themed “Older and Wiser”. It was especially poignant for Khay Chai because members’ spouses expressed appreciation that fellowship in the group had helped foster harmony and good relations within their own families.

How does he see the future of business coaching? “Businesses can come and go but coaching will stay. More businesses will get sick and the remedy is to have more Chairs come on board,” he replies. He cautions that the business landscape will change dramatically with the advent of Industry 4.0 and Chairs must also adapt accordingly. “Business coaching will help to determine the path where CEOs can see the light at the end of the tunnel,” he concludes.



Fellowship with members at Vistage CEO Summit 2014

“Businesses can come and go but coaching will stay. More businesses will get sick and the remedy is to have more Chairs come on board.”

Hong Khay Chai has 20 years of experience in managing businesses, ranging from building materials, logistics, automotive rust-proofing to environmental technologies. He was a Board Member of the Penang Water Authority for 10 years.

Khay Chai is also active in community work and is a certified Train-the-Trainer of the Lions Clubs International since 1983.