



“We really live up our mantra that a CEO needs no longer be lonely at the top.”

Heah Kok Soon

Master Chair
Chair since 2002
VCE-1

OPENING THE DOORS TO BUSINESS COACHING

Master Chair Heah Kok Soon enjoyed his 30-plus year career being involved with and helming companies in the corporate world. After retirement, he became one of Vistage's early Chairs to continue touching base with business leaders. He credits Vistage for being the pioneer in business coaching in Malaysia.

Instead of playing golf every day after retirement, the former CEO at several large corporations decided to dedicate time to nurture other CEOs. He is glad that he took up Vistage chairing some 17 years ago and contributed to Malaysia's business coaching industry.

"I had done all I wanted to do in the corporate world. But I wanted to keep in touch with industry, business and people in industry," Heah reflects on the early years. As he knew Richard Wong from his own CEO tenure at Nylex (Malaysia) Bhd, it was not long before he caught up with Richard to explore the idea of being a TEC Chair. "I was drawn to TEC as it was a CEO organisation," he adds. The other attraction was his good rapport with Richard. "I do feel we share an uncannily strong chemistry. Our thinking processes are alike, usually congruent whether for business or personal matters.

He is very easy to work with," Heah discloses. He credits Richard for being extremely courageous to give up an excellent corporate career to take up the challenge of an untested business proposition in Asia, and for being extraordinarily prescient on the notion of business coaching.

It was fairly smooth sailing for Heah as a pioneer Chair. Heah recalls how his corporate network helped to recruit members into TEC, although executive coaching was relatively new then. "People wanted to know what are the results, processes and achievements. It was a challenge but also an opportunity. People were also quite happy to learn," he recollects. His good reputation as an erstwhile strong and effective CEO was an advantage, enabling him to recruit business associates, suppliers and bankers quite easily when he started as a Vistage Chair in 2002.

Heah reviews TEC's growth through the years and believes that the company is indeed a pioneer in the business coaching industry. "In the first five years, we were quite anonymous. We took off from the sixth year onwards." He attributes this to the carefully selected cadre of Chairs, who were competent and committed. "The ex-CEOs turned Chairs gave good value to the business community." In the early days, this word-of-mouth approach helped to spread Vistage's message. It testified to the power of the Vistage Model, the one-to-one sessions and group dynamics," Heah emphasises.

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In later years, stronger office support and marketing efforts generated further membership growth. Cold calls and Awareness Events captured more prospects. Summit conferences and Tea Talks organised by Vistage gave Vistage more visibility. “It was more publicity but there was never any hard sell,” Heah points out. After TEC/Vistage introduced business coaching, several local business organisations and foreign consultancy companies offered programmes related to coaching and mentoring executives. Until today, Heah believes there is no other coaching organisation in Malaysia that offers Vistage’s business coaching model.

“One can discern the difference between Vistage and the others. We really live up to our mantra that a CEO needs no longer be lonely at the top,” he explains. He amplifies that group meetings and peer sharing in Vistage stand out. There is a coach to hold your hand and peers to engage with and elicit advice from. If one was part of a 16-member strong Vistage group, one would have the tremendous benefit of 15 other pairs of eyes and ears to help process and resolve issues and problems and offer solutions. As the saying goes, “no one is as smart as all of us.

Heah himself reveals that his coaching journey has been most satisfying and self-actualising over the years at the professional and personal levels. As a Chair, he has been a star performer, having won the Vistage Chair Excellence Award several times over. “I am a better listener, no longer the hotshot who knows it all,” he admits. “I like to think I have learnt to be more patient and more humble, and less judgemental in stereotyping people I meet.” He adds that his sense of caring, sharing and altruism has also heightened.

He notes that a Chair is not a ready-made solution provider but should continually proffer guidance to enable CEOs to find solutions themselves. The essence is to “Teach them how to fish, not just to give them fish”. Many CEOs have benefited from such guidance. Heah recalls one success story which strikes such a chord. This relates to Alan Lim, former CEO and founder of MediaBanc, a media monitoring business. He grew his company from infancy to prime and managed to sell it at a very high PE multiple to a foreign buyer. So grateful was Alan that he took the entire VCE-1 group on a three-day luxury Eastern & Orient Express train trip, all expenses paid. Amid the celebrations, Heah conducted his first Vistage meeting, with an Inclusion Exercise involving spouses in an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery exercise, on the train!



Heah Kok Soon & his VCE-1 Champion Team in Vistage Golf Challenge 2018

The only unpleasant memories Heah could remember was having to ask three members to leave his VCE-1 group as they were persistently not showing up for group meetings.

Looking ahead, Heah believes that business coaching is here to stay and is upbeat over such a development as there has been a high influx of candidates applying to be Vistage Chairs in the last two years. (As a member of the Vistage Chair Selection Committee he helps suss out and recruit new Chair prospects.)

“More and more retiring CEOs and business owners want to become Chairs,” he discloses. If the trend continues, new Chairs will be forming their own groups and this in turn will augur well for even further growth for Vistage Malaysia.

**“Teach them how to fish,
not just to give them fish.”**

Heah Kok Soon joined UMW in 1973 as Financial Operations Manager and was appointed Executive Director in 1988. He led the financial restructuring of the UMW Group during the 1985-87 economic crisis. All in all, he spent a total of 21 years at UMW.

Recruited in 1994 by BTR Plc, UK, Heah spent seven and a half years helming the public-listed Nylex (Malaysia) Berhad, culminating in a Management Buy-Out of the company, initiated by him in 1999. Heah is a certified Adizes trainer for Organisational Transformation. He was Chairman of the Malaysian Mensa Society for several terms between 1991 and 1995.