

# Peter D. Schwartz

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## The Leadership Journeyman

Peter Schwartz's parents were deeply religious. He grew up Catholic, went to mass, attended Catholic schools, and even believed that he might go on to become a Priest. After visiting a seminary for a weekend and noting that the lifestyle was more stark than his relatively modest upbringing, he decided against the vocation. But he remained an active participant in the church until high school, when he began to have questions and doubts.

"The Franciscan brothers who taught us would give me dogmatic replies," Peter recalls. "I rebelled against it. I intentionally flunked religion in a Catholic high school my junior year. Keep in mind that I was a National Honors Society student at the time. My parents were not happy with me." Although he had rejected organized religion, Peter's impulse toward spirituality never dampened. Instead, taking his curiosity and love of learning, he embarked on a spiritual journey of his own.

Peter began to explore other world religions, past and present. "I took a mythology course in college, and I was so fascinated by that," he describes. "It was a great way to immerse myself in how the Greeks and Romans dealt with the spirit. I ended up minoring in mythology and ancient history. Along the way, I heard about Joseph Campbell, who had a huge influence on my life. I read everything he wrote. Interestingly enough, *The Hero's Journey* is highly correlated to leadership development. It's about the death of a "current self" that is needed to give rise to a more "evolved and complex self"; that's leadership development."

Peter refers to himself as a "leadership journeyman," someone who doesn't prioritize the destination over lessons learned along the way. Recently, he completed the famous Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, walking for 34 days straight across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela.

As he walked, he reflected on the choices that have guided his life, the lessons gleaned from others, and his commitment to his work.

On the pilgrimage, participants receive a "pilgrim passport," a fold-out document on which a pilgrim collects stamps along the route. Peter considers this to be one of his most prized possessions. It reminds him of both the physical and emotional journey he took. "To me the pilgrim passport is a visual representation of the concept of a leadership journeyman," he reflects. "It's nothing

more than a series of stamps on the way to Santiago de Compostela. Santiago was a wonderful place, but those stamps are really what tell the story. It's the milestones along the way that represent the joy and hardship of walking to each one of those places."

Peter relates the three phases of walking the Camino—physical, spiritual and soulful—with the three stages of leadership development—expertise, achievement and impact.

The physical stage represents the learning done in the early parts of a career. The spiritual is the phase of achievement. And the final, soulful phase is similar to the professional phase Peter is in now: making an impact, a contribution to others.

"I found out about the Camino on a poetry retreat with the Irish poet David White," Peter says. "The workshop was in Tuscany and someone there had just walked it. I'd just turned 60 years old and I'm feeling this restlessness. I didn't know what the restlessness was at the time, but I had an impulse to go accomplish something else. I realized later that I'd accomplished everything I wanted to, professionally. Another professional accomplishment just wouldn't cut it. So I walked the Camino, and it was wonderfully informative. For me it confirmed that I didn't need to accomplish anything else. Now it's about impact and contribution. Just simply give back what you



know and continue to learn. But give it back in my role as a Vistage Chair.”

Vistage is a 60-year old organization with over 24,000 members worldwide, hundreds of 16 member executive peer groups in 20 countries learning from one another. Peter has been an unmitigated success there since joining as a Chair 16 years ago. Today, he’s a Master Chair and leader of six groups. Master Chairs have demonstrated continually high levels of performance.

In addition to becoming a Master Chair, Peter has won several major Vistage awards. In 2020 Peter was presented with the “Don Cope Memorial Award.” The Don Cope Memorial Award is the highest honor a Vistage Chair can receive. It acknowledges the Chair who has made the greatest lasting contribution to the Vistage mission and values in word and deed. The recipient is selected from the highest performing nominees worldwide. A four-time “STAR” award winner, Peter was named Vistage Chair of the year in 2016. He’s also won the annual Chair Excellence Award a stunning nine times.

Right now, Peter is running two Chief Executive groups, a key executive group, an emerging leaders group, and is co-leading the Vistage/Stanford Executive Leadership program for select Vistage CEO’s in the Mid-Atlantic. He’s also the Best Practice Chair for the Baltimore-Washington region, helping new chairs build their groups and setting standards. When asked how many companies he’s helped, he doesn’t have to estimate; he notes that he recently added them up. He’s worked with 279 leaders. Among those companies, he ballparks at least a couple hundred thousand employees, and north of a billion in total revenue.

“It’s been the privilege of my lifetime to work side-by-side as a participatory companion with the small business owner,” Peter nods. “The wonderful thing is I have people who’ve been with me the entire 16 years. I’ve seen marriages, divorces, cancers, kids growing up, multiple successful exits, and even a couple of bankruptcies. I’ve experienced it all.”

Peter got his first leadership certification from Georgetown University in the years before he joined Vistage. He continues to invest in his own development for the purpose of being a thought leader in the leadership development space. Recently, he completed a year-long deep dive with

a Harvard professor on immunity to change and adult development theory. He notes that he pursues such deep dives every other year. In 2018, he went through the Vistage Executive Leadership Program through Stanford University, which is three modules on strategy, innovation and leading through change. “It’s important to me, if I’m going to have maximum impact on my members, to be a thought leader in this space,” Peter asserts. “I consider it my obligation to them to be the ‘tip of the spear’ with respect to all things related to leadership.”

“The reason I do what I do is I want others to live an inspired life,” he summarizes. “Ultimately, it’s an expression of my spiritual impulse. The word ‘inspire’ and ‘inspiration’ mean ‘in touch with your spirit.’ That is your essential life force, your chi, whatever spiritual tradition you have for understanding spirit. It’s that center of you that is the energy that propels your life. I want to live an inspired life, and I want to help others live an inspired life.”

Growing up, Peter had no idea he’d end up in such rewarding work. He was born and raised in Levittown, Pennsylvania, a place where he jokes that people “kept down with the Joneses.” His family was not wealthy; as he grew up, he remembers his parents struggling financially. Seeing that reality, his first priority when he reached college was not spiritual fulfillment, but money. His mother stayed home with Peter and his three younger siblings. His father worked for a wood preserving company, and over the years, the family’s financial status began to improve. Peter’s father never finished college and started as a clerk with the business. But he eventually worked his way up to become President. “It was wonderful to watch my father do that,” Peter reflects.

Both of Peter’s parents were tough and had high expectations of their children. Even though at times they could be unreasonable and angry, Peter loved and admired them. The family always joined together for dinner each evening. He recalls his father’s integrity and the respect the workers had for him as he developed into a great leader. His mother, he recalls, had an artistic nature and an eye for beauty. Each Christmas, she made it her business to give the children a holiday wonderland. She didn’t have much interest in blinking lights around the garage; instead she gravitated toward more unique décor, like beautiful bells in the windows.

Peter always did well in school. Although neither of his parents had finished college, they made it clear that all four of their children would attend. Additionally, he developed a love for athletics at an early age. He excelled in baseball and believes that his early success in sports contributed to his successes later in life. "I'm very kinesthetic, and I played every sport I could play," he smiles. "I won a lot; I remember being in swimming and winning over and over. In baseball, I was a great hitter and pitcher. I had this experience in my childhood of winning, and I really believe that that's how I came to expect winning of myself. I wanted to win and I wanted to excel, so I set that standard for myself." In middle school, Peter's eyesight suddenly worsened, and he struggled to deal with the loss of baseball. However, he leaned into his training on the swim team, quickly becoming a star there as well.

Also from an early age, Peter had the instincts of an entrepreneur. As an altar boy, he cannily got himself into a leadership role where he could determine assignments. Knowing the big events like weddings, Christenings and funerals usually brought in tips, he began assigning himself all the good shifts. "Finally one of the nuns intervened to tell me, 'Hey, spread the wealth,'" laughs Peter. "So I began to learn management while I was learning how to make money."

His first job was shoveling snow in the neighborhood. Then he got a paper route. Finally, in high school, he began working at the wood preservation company alongside his dad. "It was fun to work at the plant even if it was physical labor," Peter recalls. "That experience instilled in me a sense of respect for the working man. They had dignity; this was the best way they had to make a buck."

After high school, Peter went off to college as planned. He began at Temple University, but when his parents moved to Norfolk, Virginia, he transferred to Old Dominion University. His parents still didn't have much money, and Peter was paying his own way through school by working. Transferring meant he qualified for in-state tuition.

Throughout school he maintained a hectic schedule of studies and jobs. He worked in construction building tennis courts. He loaded trucks for Nabisco and brought home free broken cookies to eat for dinner. He was a lifeguard at the

beach and a bartender in local establishments. Through it all he earned decent grades, hitting his self-imposed goal of maintaining a 3.0 GPA through graduation.

The rigorous schedule wasn't the only difficulty Peter encountered in college. When he was a junior, his mother committed suicide. It was a crushing blow. "It numbed me," he reflects. "It took me a while to find joy again. The loss of a parent at a young age shapes a person. My siblings were also hugely devastated by it." And to make matters worse, his father quickly remarried a mere six months later. He wanted the kids to accept a new stepmother but that was difficult to do so shortly after their mother's death. Although his father was doubtless mourning in his own way, the decision was deeply offensive to Peter. For a long time, Peter could not find the power to forgive his father.

Ultimately, Peter and his father were able to work through their differences during the last three days of his father's life. "It was all forgotten during that time," he says soberly. "I was running Vistage meetings that week and at the end of each meeting, I would drive three hours to my father's hospital and spend the night. I did that for three nights in a row, and on the last night he passed. When I drove back home, I had my eyes set on the road in front of me, and I realized that I don't need to look back and regret a thing. I'm really grateful for the time I was able to spend with my father during those three days."

Originally, Peter had considered a pre-med major, but quickly found it wasn't for him. By chance, he discovered the mythology course that became so influential on his journey. Ultimately, he majored in psychology and minored in mythology. But upon graduating, he knew mythology wasn't where he'd be able to make a buck. He was still focused on securing his financial future before looking to feed his spirit. At a party, he ran into a girl who was working for C&P Telephone. He learned that she was making pretty good money at her job. Shortly thereafter, he happened to read an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about emerging industries: one was telecom. Peter reached a decision. He went out and got a job selling telephone systems for a start-up.

At first, it was rough going. But after a manager pulled him aside and assured him that successful people involve others in their sales, Peter learned to value help from others. He

learned that working with others yields tremendous dividends. And soon after, he was named Rookie of the Year at his Fortune 500 start-up. "That was an eye-opening moment for me," he declares. "It taught me the importance of a change mindset."

From there, the sky was the limit. Peter climbed the ladder, eventually moving into VP and Senior VP roles at various telecom companies. After several years, he went out on his own, reselling long-distance with a good number of contractors on staff. Then he took a position as a Principal in a consulting business. Finally, in his last role before joining Vistage, he was VP of Strategic Alliances at another start-up. The business went from four employees to 400 in the space of a few years and raised \$75 million in venture funds. Ultimately though, the new business was a casualty of the dotcom boom. "I liked being in start-ups," Peter reflects. "I was able to sell a brand-new product in a market that's never been sold before. I developed my capacity to take an early stage concept or company to maturity."

By the time the last business went under, Peter had already taken his first few leadership training courses. Although he enjoyed many of his previous roles, he began to realize that his real passion lay in guiding others. "I say I get two paychecks," he smiles. "I get the financial paycheck from Vistage, and I get an emotional paycheck from the work I do. And most months the emotional paycheck is larger than the financial paycheck. That's a fact. The joy in it for me is that I don't have a bad day. There are days that are more difficult than others, but I never have a bad day. I may have five 1-to-1 meetings with members and come home exhausted, but emotionally I feel privileged."

For the past five years, Peter has also had the emotional support of his wife Elaine. Elaine is an artist, with an ambition to excel in her chosen second career. Peter finds a great deal to admire in this. "The passion we have for our work is very additive to our relationship," he affirms. "She's a wonderful person, and the list of reasons I admire her is just too long to list. We're the best of friends, and we make great travelling companions. But I

really admire her so much for her commitment to her craft."

As a "leadership journeyman", Peter has reflected long and hard about the nature of leadership. Some of the lessons he took from the Camino de Santiago were to "learn to travel light", to "find the joy in the walking" and to learn to respect and love the imperfect and impermanence of all things. It's no surprise he has an elegant answer to the question of the meaning of leadership. "It's nothing more than the deployment of self into circumstance to create a desired outcome," he articulates. "That's the most beautiful and simple definition of leadership to me. First of all, it says you know what your desired outcome is. And the self is the version of you that you bring into that context to create that outcome. So to be able to self-assess before you enter a situation: How do I need to be experienced? What impact do I want to have in this context? That's leadership."

To young adults entering the working world today, he advises discipline. "Set a high bar for yourself and be willing to pay the price," he instructs. "That means get out of bed in the morning, put one foot in front of the other, and move toward your goal no matter what. Enjoy it. But set the bar high."

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt*  
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).