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FEATURES

Groups for the lonely CEO Local CEOs meet up and swap tips

[Mary Worrell](#)

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For Tom Knox, being a CEO of a business with more than 200 employees and plenty of other moving parts can be lonely at times.

Knox runs Seniorcorp Inc., a home health care company based in Norfolk. Prior to starting his business four years ago, Knox worked for the Dish Network and later as a senior vice president at the Christian Broadcasting Network, based in Virginia Beach.

His grandmother was neglected at a nursing home and he decided to start a business to assist the elderly in the comfort of their own homes. He liquidated his savings and put everything on the line to get it off the ground.

With a wife and four children under the age of seven, taking such a risk was stressful.

“The pressure can be unbearable,” Knox said.

He joined a local chapter of The C12 Group seeking fellow CEOs and business owners with whom to trade ideas and commiserate over the challenges.

The C12 Group is one of many businesses facilitating peer advisory groups across the country, but with a Christian, biblical base.

Knox learned about the group on a golf outing with David Nygaard, owner of multiple David Nygaard Fine Jewelers locations in Hampton Roads.

“He said it created an ad hoc board of advisers that he could trust,” Knox said.

CEOs don’t often have peers around to bounce ideas off, as employees may just be giving lip service to the boss and friends and family may not understand the business enough to offer truly helpful advice.

“It helped me make really good decisions,” Knox said. “It’s invaluable to be out of your world for a day and you can bring issues up in the group.”

Knox said having the counsel of other CEOs carrying the weight of their businesses on their shoulders is comforting.

Randy Case, a graduate professor at Regent University, runs two local C12 groups on the Southside. A third group operates on the Peninsula. In total, 27 CEOs in Hampton Roads are on C12 Group boards, Case said.

“CEOs tend to get quite isolated from real input and have few peers,” Case said. “They don’t talk shop with many people.”

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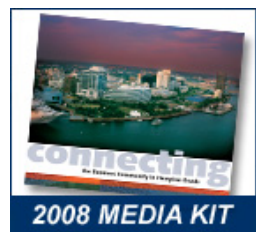
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Each C12 group meets once a month for an all-day meeting. The meetings include exercises and curriculum work as well as discussion about business problems, pending decisions and even family. Each member also receives one-on-one coaching from Case once a month.

Most peer advisory groups are modeled in this way, with a monthly group meeting and monthly coaching sessions for each member.

“You get the accountability to each other and insight on your business,” Case said.

Accountability is the main goal of a peer advisory board, as most small businesses are run by a sole executive and lack a board.

“The CEOs don’t pull any punches,” Case said. “CEOs have weaknesses, but still have to deal with a variety of issues.”

Bill Boyer, a small business coach and consultant, purchased a license through CEO Focus, another company offering materials and models for peer advisory boards, for the Hampton Roads and Richmond areas.

Boyer facilitates a board of six CEOs whose industries vary from contracting to glass to mortgage banking.

“I have worked with small companies for many years and most need some type of mentor,” Boyer said.

As for the kind of companies that join groups like CEO Focus and C12, Boyer said many times it is the successful companies that are looking for even more improvement.

“I find you get better-run companies, because they recognize that while things are going well, they can still learn,” Boyer said.

CEO Focus boards meet once a month for a four-hour meeting, then members meet for one-on-one coaching with Boyer once a month.

While CEO Focus follows a curriculum, Boyer said he also lets the group guide his lesson plans. Recently, members had questions about contract law, so Boyer invited two corporate attorneys to a board meeting to answer questions.

Tim Whited is CEO of Westar Roofing Corp. and Mid-Atlantic Glass Corp. and a member of Boyer’s local CEO Focus board.

“Basically everyone is aware there are things you should be working on,” Whited said. “Many small businesses are content with the status quo, but this is ideal for the business that is not content.”

Whited has a partner in both the businesses that runs day-to-day operations while he works to improve and grow the companies.

And a third group, The Alternative Board, now has a Hampton Roads franchise.

Bill Payne purchased a franchise from The Alternative Board, also known as TAB, in March. After his training with the company, he has 14 CEOs he works with centered

around two advisory boards.

Payne, who recently retired from a 42-year career with IBM, is aiming to have three local advisory boards with seven businesses each.

TAB's mantra is to "work on your business, not in it," which translates to the curriculum. The tools provided by TAB, Payne said, show CEOs how to assess the effectiveness of their businesses and to develop strategies and plans.

"We never have competitors on the same board or in a vendor relationship," Payne said. "The whole premise is confidentiality."

Membership on these boards is not cheap.

For C12, the monthly rates are staggered based on each company's annual revenue. It can cost each business between \$500 and \$900 a month for a spot on the board. C12 offers a less expensive version, but without the one-on-one coaching, for \$275 per month.

CEO Focus is a flat \$595 per month. TAB is also \$595 per month, but with a \$500 start-up fee. TAB also offers a less expensive option for smaller companies, or those with smaller annual revenues, for \$395 per month.

While the programs may not be for everyone, Knox of Seniorcorp says his involvement with The C12 Group has given him a return on his investment.

"Every time I leave a meeting," Knox said, "I implement an idea that has translated to financial gains."

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