## Clyde Northrop

## A Can Do Attitude

Sitting in their small apartment across from his mother and stepfather, thirteen-year-old Clyde Northrop knew his life was about to change—though he couldn't have guessed how much. After living in Japan for six years, his parents had parted ways subtly, as divorce often occurred back in the 1950s. Clyde and his younger brother had returned to America with their mother, who went to work and had neither the time nor the energy to keep her sons disciplined and in line. Stuck in low-caliber classes where he

had already learned the material, Clyde was bored and often skipped school. Then, after a year of being a wild child, Charles Roberts entered the picture.

Charles had a daughter and son of his own, around Clyde's age. Only a week after he married Clyde's mother, the newly-blended family gathered so the parents could announce the news that they had decided they would never work for anyone again. Instead, they were pooling their money to start a family

business, in which the kids were expected to play integral roles. "By then, I had already learned that questioning the old man was not a good idea," Clyde laughs today. "So we readied ourselves for a wild ride."

Charles Roberts hailed from Appalachia with an eighth grade education, while Clyde's mother had finished high school and was trained as a secretary. They had no real expertise to speak of, but that didn't stop them from trying their hands at business after business. "In rapid succession, they started a delivery business, a food service business, and a furnace cleaning business," Clyde recounts. "My stepfather had this unbelievable confidence that he could muscle through anything, figure it out, and make it work. It was a mindset that was passed on to us kids."

Clyde still remembers vividly the day one of their delivery trucks blew a transmission. He

and his brother called up to their stepfather, who told them to go to the parts store on the corner and take care of it. When the boys told him they didn't know how to fix it, Charles disappeared back in the apartment and returned with a transmission manual. "Well, read about it and figure it out!" he shouted, hurling it at the two boys. "That was our whole thing," Clyde says today. "If we didn't know how to do it, learn. My stepfather taught me everything I know about work, drive, and initiative, and I became sure over time that there

was literally nothing I couldn't do." Now a Master Chair of Vistage International, Clyde brings that same "can do" attitude to the CEOs and executives he works with, opening doors to new successes and new heights.

As the world's largest executive coaching organization, Vistage provides leadership training and guidance to the visionaries and innovators who shape the businesses that put the world to work. The program acts as a success accelerator,

helping business leaders across seventeen countries take their companies further, faster. CEOs and C Suite executives are divided into groups of around fifteen people, which are led by Chairs that facilitate the sharing of perspectives, wisdom, and best practices. "Vistage helps people succeed by de-leveraging an individual's risk, spreading it around so it's not all on the shoulders of one person," Clyde explains. "Rather, you get a range of perspectives, which illuminate your blind spots and help lead to better decisions. I believe in the wisdom of crowds—that none of us is as smart as all of us. By that logic, you benefit not only from the people in your group, but from over 20,000 Vistage members in our network worldwide. To me, it's that multitude of perspectives that makes Vistage truly invaluable."

As a Master Chair, Clyde has done over 10,000 hours of one-on-one coaching for Vistage,

and has a proven track record of strong retention across the four groups he leads. In the twenty years he's been with the organization, he's worked with around 1,200 leaders, each a top influencer in companies that average around 50 employees. By that math, his work has touched around 60,000 employees—a legacy that magnifies exponentially when accounting for the families and communities that depend on those people. "I'm a big believer that Vistage Chairs attract people like themselves," Clyde says. "My groups tend to have people with high confidence and high drive."

Vistage brings value to its members through various avenues, including one-on-one sessions, group sessions, and speakers. Clyde sees the greatest value, however, in connecting the information that comes from those various dots. "When you take what you learned in one training and share it with someone else, they add their piece to it by giving their perspective, which means you've just learned something else," he says. "New value is generated through exponential connection, which I find very powerful."

In part, Vistage is about understanding and leveraging the power of your own storysomething Clyde first learned through watching his father. A native Washingtonian, Clyde grew up thinking his father was a globetrotting laundry expert who taught clothes cleaning best practices across Asia. In reality, the story was a cover for his father's work as a spy for the Defense Intelligence Agency. He spent eleven months out of the year overseas, returning to the U.S. to "learn new techniques" once a year before heading out to his new duty station. When Clyde was six, he moved with his mother and younger brother to Japan to finally live with his father, and still remembers vividly the eight-day trip on a troop transport vessel that took them from Seattle to Yokohama.

The family lived on base in Sendai for a year, and then moved into a village. His mother worked as a Red Cross volunteer, and he remembers the nanny, Yoko, who continued to expand his mind and experience with the foods, cultural practices, and tone of post-World War II Japan. When he was nine, the family moved to an air base several hundred miles north. Clyde played in Little League and rode his bike, but couldn't develop long-term friendships due to the transitory nature of the military schools. He remembers his relationship with his father, however, as especially good. "He'd take me out to

the rice paddies in his '49 Studebaker, set me in his lap, and teach me how to drive," Clyde recalls. "I couldn't quite reach the pedals, but he'd clutch it while I'd change the gears and steer. I loved that."

When Clyde was twelve, he and his younger brother returned with their mother to the U.S., allegedly so she could undergo surgery. In reality, his parents had drifted apart and decided to divorce. Fortunately, his father was a spectacular letter writer and storyteller, and would Clyde and his brother eight-page masterpieces covered front-and-back in his compelling scrawl. When they arrived in the mail, Clyde would read them aloud to his younger brother and cousins. "The stories were so crazy and exciting that the kids would all stop playing to come in and listen," he says. "Years later, when we finally found out he was a spy, we were shocked to realize that his stories were actually true."

Clyde had attended parochial school through sixth grade, but made the switch to public school for seventh. The coursework was far less advanced, and Clyde was bored senseless. He began skipping school and was ultimately expelled for absenteeism. By that point, his mother was remarried to Charles, and when Clyde broke the news at the dinner table that evening, he braced himself for a firestorm. His stepfather, however, remained completely calm. "That's actually great news because I need help with the new business," Charles said. "You can work with me now. We'll start tomorrow morning at 3:30 AM."

When Clyde was allowed back at school, he was the most dedicated student imaginable. He and his siblings adopted a highly regimented lifestyle, working paper routes first thing in the morning and working at the business in the evenings. "We were the only kids on the block that couldn't wait to go back to school and do extracurricular activities," Clyde laughs It was a grueling upbringing, but Clyde took to it well. "As kids, we all lamented the work and dreamed of growing up to get normal jobs where you clock your eight hours and enjoy weekends and vacations," Clyde says. "But now, all of us have our own companies and still work crazy hours. We owe that to my stepfather's influence."

When Clyde turned 18 and neared graduation, he knew the drill. The second he received his diploma, his parents would expect him to head out on his own, as they had with his older step siblings. "The drinking age was eighteen

back then, and on the day of my graduation, he took me and a friend out for our 'first beers,'" Clyde says. "My stepdad asked me what I was doing tomorrow, and I said I didn't know. But then he clarified and said, 'No, where are you living tomorrow?' Fortunately, I was ready for the question and had joined the Air Force."

Clyde had made the decision hoping to avoid being drafted directly into the Marines and sent to Vietnam. With a friend, he joined the Delayed Enlistment Program, which opened the door to his first real forays out of town. He spent the summer in Florida and then reported for basic training in Texas, where his squad was completely torn down and reconstituted, both physically and mentally. "It was an extraordinary experience that my stepfather prepared me well for," Clyde says. From there, he was sent to his first duty station in Illinois, where he spent a year in tech school. There, he was offered the opportunity to take over a makeshift fatigue tailoring business, and though he had never sewn anything before, he eagerly accepted. "For the next ten months, I made about \$3,000 as the station's tailor," he says.

Clyde was then transferred to Arizona, and then overseas to Vietnam, where he served two tours. "The last movie I saw stateside was The Green Berets, which is a lot of shooting and killing as these guys are trying to protect this base in the middle of some godforsaken jungle," Clyde remembers. "I saw that movie and thought, I'm toast! Reflecting on it during the flight over, I fully expected to be killed."

After landing at the air terminal in Vietnam, waiting to be transferred to his duty station, Clyde bought a soft serve ice cream and remembers seeing a group of dusty, battle-hardened servicemen lugging their weapons. Suddenly, rockets started raining on the terminal, and Clyde ducked for cover as the building shook. He came up when the coast was clear, to find the group of soldiers in the same place, unflinching. He knew he was in the big leagues.

When he arrived on base, Clyde was relieved to find a sizeable, solid compound, much more secure and comfortable than what he had seen in the movies. After enough guerrilla attacks, he too learned the calm and composure displayed by the men in the trembling air terminal. After serving his twelve-month deployment, he volunteered to serve an additional six months—a period cut abruptly short when President Nixon

initiated a troop drawdown.

Back stateside, Clyde arrived in Seattle and took about a year to make his way back to the East Coast, hitchhiking across the country. Charles agreed to rent him the basement floor to sleep on for a hundred dollars a week, and he enrolled fulltime at Prince George's Community College on the GI Bill while working odd jobs on the side. He started a modest home improvement business, moved in with friends, and remembers driving to New York City in 1972 in a van to see a concert protesting the atrocities in Bangladesh. Unable to get tickets, he didn't make it into the concert, but he did meet Mary Christina, the lovely young woman he married the following year. "We were poor as church mice," he laughs. "Our wedding bands cost maybe \$50 apiece, which was a king's ransom to us back then."

Clyde finished his degree at the University of Maryland and picked up a large territory distributing the *Washington Post* to paperboys on weekends. He planned to complete graduate school to become a criminal psychologist, but then realized he could make just as much growing the delivery business he was running out of his kitchen. "We had a baby on the way, and it dawned on me that I could either save the criminals in the state of Maryland, or I could save my family," he says. "Criminal psychology was interesting, but not that interesting, so I left that behind and looked forward."

With that, Clyde and Chris decided to take her accrued government retirement of \$5,000, plus whatever money they could scrape together, and turn their kitchen business into an actual company. They incorporated Southwest Distribution in 1974 and set to work expanding their customer base by disrupting the market, which was already comfortably divided amongst their two competitors. Chris handled the books and finances, while Clyde went out to grow the business. "I put on a suit and a smile and went everywhere I could-NYC, LA, Chicago, Dallas, Miami-to tell publications we could distribute them in DC," Clyde says. "People wanted to take a chance on us. By 1980, we had captured the market and brought in this flood of out-of-town newspapers to the DC area that was very well received."

In this way, Southwest Distribution evolved into a logistics company that moved and transported product across the country. At that time, papers were printed in their cities of origin, so Clyde would negotiate how to get them to DC. "We went after every newspaper in the country that was published in a market of over 300,000 people," Clyde explains. "We became the official newspaper distribution contractor for the White House and most of the federal government." It was the perfect challenge for Clyde's can-do attitude, and the company grew to \$10 million in revenue.

Business was good and continued to grow, but as the world evolved, electronic transmission and "Print on Demand" papers disrupted Clyde's model. Yet he managed to adapt over time, drawing on traits and skills he had picked up from important figures in his life. He employed the extreme focus on craft and mission that he had learned from his paternal father, who was able to compartmentalize and perform perfectly in the moment without getting caught up on what he would have, could have, or should have done. He demonstrated the unflagging work ethic, selfconfidence, and drive he had learned from his stepfather, believing always that anything was possible. And he maintained the absolute loyalty he had learned from his mother, who supported and defended her children no matter what. "When the market asks, 'Can you do this?', my answer is always, absolutely!" Clyde says. "I overpromise but never under deliver, pulling all-nighters and giving it my all to figure it out."

When Clyde joined Vistage as a member in 1989, he only wished he had found the organization sooner. Nine years later, he turned fifty and hit his 25-year mark at the helm of his company. He felt ready for a shift, and a friend suggested he become a Vistage Chair. "Vistage had done so much for me and my company," he recalls. "I'd met some of the smartest people on the planet and learned more than I'd ever learned before. I've always been compelled toward personal optimization, continually learning and trying to better myself, so I knew it would be perfect for me. And my life's mission is to build community through listening, caring, and sharing, which is what being a Vistage Chair is all about."

Clyde and Chris sold their company to their two sons in 2005 — men who, like Clyde, grew up in the family business and swore they'd never return to such grueling work after heading off to college. But they both found their way back to the company, rose through the ranks, and initiated a ten-year buyout of what is now a much more technologically-oriented company. Their

involvement, as well as Chris's support, allowed Clyde to fully step away and focus on his work at Vistage. Thanks to this focus, Clyde won the distinguished Hyndman Award in 2015. One of the organization's most prestigious awards, it honors individuals with strong chairing capacity who have exemplary ability to lift others through help in the community and support for younger chairs. Clyde and Chris mirror this giving focus in their personal lives, supporting a host of philanthropic goals that include support for abused children in Montgomery County and The Hunger Project (thp.org), an organization focused on transforming conditions that give rise to hunger and poverty.

Beyond any doubt, Chris's support has been absolutely integral to Clyde's success in life. "Without her, there's no way I could have lasted in business," he says. "My 'can do' attitude is great, but unless it's balanced with fiscal discipline, it can easily spin out of control. When anything is possible, money is no object—until you need to make payroll. Chris's ability to be fiscally prudent is unquestionably why that company is 42 years old and still successful today. Beyond that, she is extraordinarily caring and compassionate and always smooths the edges out for everyone. I'm so lucky to have her."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Clyde underscores the importance of confidence. "Whether in the military, in school, in family life, or in business, it's important for leaders to convey absolute confidence in themselves," he says. "Not arrogance or authoritarianism, but feeling good about themselves and the direction they're headed." Confidence must be balanced, however, with open eyes and an open mind. "Technological shifts are changing the game all the time, so stay alert and agile so you can respond swiftly," he says. "You can't know what's going to happen, so you have to be open. When things are evolving faster and faster, the goal is to adapt and keep up. But never forget how attainable that goal is. You can learn to do literally anything if you believe you can. Failure is unacceptable, so your mindset must be resolute: you can, and you will, so you do."

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