



The Bowhill Engineering team at the new B5 facility, set to open in early 2025.

Blueprint for bold leadership

Jodie Hawkes reflects on her journey from the admin team to the CEO's office, shaped by resilience, strategic growth and the transformative support of Vistage.



Jodie Hawkes, CEO of Bowhill Engineering. (Images: Bowhill Engineering)

For over 65 years, Vistage has empowered business leaders through peer advisory groups and executive coaching. Jodie Hawkes, CEO of Bowhill Engineering, has felt this impact firsthand. A committed Vistage member for six years, Hawkes sees it as both an anchor and a compass in her leadership journey.

From refining Bowhill Engineering's systems to standing firm in a male-dominated industry, Hawkes reflects on how Vistage has sharpened her leadership approach, helping steer the company toward sustainable success.

Hawkes' journey with Bowhill Engineering, a multi-generational, family-owned metal fabrication business in South Australia, began under challenging circumstances.

"My husband, the managing director at the time, lost his brother in a motor vehicle accident," she says.

While on maternity leave from another company with her first child, she stepped into an administrative role at Bowhill Engineering to help support the business. Beginning with a team of just 12, Hawkes has seen the company grow to over 60 team members – a success she attributes in large part to Vistage.

Vistage is one of the world's largest organisations for CEO coaching and peer advisory, supporting small and mid-size business leaders through tailored leadership programs and providing access to a wealth

of experience, research and wisdom from respected business leaders. With over 45,000 members globally, Vistage employs a proven approach to drive better results, accelerate growth and maximise leadership impact.

Already familiar with the organisation through her husband's involvement, Hawkes was encouraged to join six years ago by chair Jerry Kleeman. She considers this one of her best decisions for personal and professional growth, especially during her transition from chief financial officer to CEO 14 months ago. "Overcoming imposter syndrome has been a significant challenge," says Hawkes. "Vistage helped me back myself and embrace authenticity."

"Learning to share my own perspective not only gave me confidence but also resonated with our team."

Through Vistage, Hawkes has strengthened her sense of purpose – a clear 'why' that drives her. While she sees herself as passionate, driven and strong on accountability and execution, her Vistage peers have helped her recognise her unique ability to drive positive change in regional communities and focus on what truly matters. "Recognising the broader impact has strengthened my belief in what we're working to achieve," she says.

Guest speakers and peers alike have influenced her systematic approach and refined her vision.

One such connection, a guest speaker at Vistage, introduced Hawkes to Bowhill Engineering's current board chair, now a mentor and close friend.

"It's not just the speakers. It's the entire Vistage community," she explains. "The value of learning from others who have faced similar challenges is enormous."

With insights from Vistage, Hawkes has cultivated what she calls her "strategic playbook" for Bowhill Engineering. Her approach to accountability and goal-setting evolved, shaped by practical techniques from the organisation. She admits she struggles with details like names and statistics, but thanks to her favourite Vistage speaker, Gary Bertwistle, she found a solution. "He introduced me to the concept of a 'second brain' – harnessing digital tools to organise your life. Now, I keep everything organised in OneNote," she says.

On the business front, Vistage has been instrumental in Bowhill Engineering's evolution from survival to growth. "We've focused on resilience and incremental improvement," says Hawkes. "Small, steady changes add up to significant progress."

Reflecting on a recent Vistage webinar with James Clear, Hawkes recognised that Bowhill Engineering had adopted many of his principles as practices. "Commit to small improvements instead of trying to overhaul everything at once, and you set yourself up for lasting change," she says.

For Bowhill Engineering, Vistage's influence has resulted in 20 years of steady, month-by-month improvements that Hawkes believes have "truly stuck."

Vistage has connected Bowhill Engineering with several industry experts over the years. For instance, Trudy MacDonald, a strategic HR consultant, helped redefine job descriptions, transforming roles from transactional to aspirational. Nick Setchell, founder of RealTime CEO, introduced 12-month rolling cash flow forecasts to the team. Each expert has added a layer to Bowhill Engineering's evolving business system, illustrating how Vistage connections have been woven into the company's fabric. "Almost every aspect of our business – down to our legal team and accountant – has a link back to someone we met through Vistage," says Hawkes.



Bowhill Engineering constructed the girders for the Sydney Gateway Airport project.

These connections have shaped Bowhill Engineering's approach to team empowerment and succession planning, providing a framework for long-term growth.

"For a business of our size, our systems are sophisticated because we've consistently made purposeful improvements," she explains. "Our succession planning, performance appraisals – they all operate within a fully developed framework."

Hawkes often sees new Vistage members who excel in some areas but lack a holistic view of business management. "Vistage helps plant seeds early," she says. "Meetings often introduce new concepts that may not seem immediately relevant but later prove valuable."

Preparedness, she adds, has been key to Bowhill Engineering's resilience. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the company was able to weather the storm thanks to years of strategic planning on "disruption."

"That resilience is rooted in what we've learned through Vistage," says Hawkes.

Vistage has also played a key role in helping Bowhill Engineering excel in community engagement. When the environmental, social and governance (ESG) framework emerged, covering 20 different areas, Hawkes initially thought, "I'm already managing compliance – this just means more work." However, hearing about ESG consistently through Vistage encouraged her to gradually integrate it into the business. Today, the company is in a strong position in this space.

One notable ESG initiative saw Bowhill Engineering underground its power lines to enable future growth. This investment paved the way for a new facility and included a 100-kilowatt solar addition, with the company also installing 30 kilowatts for the local community centre. "This project significantly reduced the centre's power bill, benefiting the entire community," she says. "It's been a true win-win, with long-term impact."

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