

# Michael Harden

## Good to Great

Voltaire warned that the good is the enemy of the great. But Mike Harden, a seasoned executive and leadership coach serving the DC metropolitan area, knows that “good” is a stepping stone to reaching one’s full potential—and he knows how to guide clients in taking that leap to get to greatness. It’s a leap he had to learn how to take the hard way, but through the coaching platforms and advisory roles he’s assumed today, he’s determined to streamline and simplify the process for others.

“To be a great CEO, you need four experiences under your belt,” Mike says now. “You have to have been fired once in your career, allowing you to be empathetic when you have to fire others. At some point, you have to struggle to make payroll, teaching you humility and how to manage your cash. You have to get sued by a disgruntled employee or former employee—a badge of honor that shows you’re taking risks and doing your job as a CEO. And finally, you have to go to Pamplona and run with the bulls. Then everything else doesn’t seem so bad.”

His is a life and leadership philosophy that could only be garnered through the personal experience of a man born to test limits. In Pamplona, his leg was run over by a bull trying to gore him. When he was seventeen, he lied about his age so he could start skydiving. “In those days, there were no tandems,” he recalls. “During one jump, I pulled the ripcord, but nothing happened. I was freefalling, and all I can remember is my entire life flashing before my eyes. It really happens—within a matter of seconds, every memory in your brain replays. Thankfully I pulled again with all my might, and the parachute came out at the last minute.”

Brushes with death never discouraged Mike’s adventurous spirit—something he now jokes about with his equally adventurous children

when they say that the Harden family has a defective fear gene. He ran out of air once while scuba diving, barely making it the seventy feet back up to the surface. On another occasion he photographed an exploding volcano while hanging out of a helicopter as lava spewed up around him. He’s climbed mountains, explored caves, flown airplanes, and hitchhiked from Ohio to Virginia Beach and back in his youth. “I’ve always believed that testing yourself is a crucial part of getting from good to great,” he says.

“Otherwise, you’ll never know what you’re capable of. Everyone needs to test themselves from time to time.”

Now the founder and CEO of the Clarity Group, an organization that provides transformational coaching for exceptional leaders, Mike tests his limits these days not through the accomplishment of daring physical feats, but through the triumph over complex challenges alongside world-class CEOs and executives. “The people I work with are incredible, and they all have

completely different sets of circumstances and problems,” he says. “I have to be at my best, day after day, from one meeting to the next. Each client’s path from good to great is a unique one, and I love the challenge of figuring out how to take them there.”

The concept of leadership coaching first crossed Mike’s radar in 2005, when a friend sent him a *Wall Street Journal* advertisement for a CEO coaching program called Vistage International. “This sounds like you,” the friend had said, reflecting back on the long talks they had about growing businesses. At the time, Mike was teaching graduate school, writing books, and keeping an eye out for his next great adventure. He knew this was it. “As I learned more about Vistage, I saw that it’s really the coolest thing out there,” he recalls. “Had I known about it when I was a CEO, I could have saved myself a lot of hard



knocks and mistakes that cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars. After making those mistakes and learning from them, I saw Vistage as a great opportunity to employ my experience in the service of others.”

Mike applied and ultimately became a Vistage Chair, eventually assuming the leadership of four Vistage groups in the DC metropolitan area. In this capacity, Mike works with almost sixty CEOs, key executives, and management team members, advancing their success by bringing in speakers, conducting one-on-one sessions, and facilitating group meetings. Now around 60 years old, Vistage has almost doubled since Mike came onboard, growing to 20,000 members worldwide in 16 countries.

Alongside this responsibility, and in addition to serving on almost a dozen advisory boards, Mike launched the Clarity Group as a platform to provide coaching to people who needed something outside the Vistage framework. With 42 years of experience and 25 at the CEO/COO level, he’s seen it all, and is uniquely positioned to advise CEOs, COOs, Presidents, and business owners along their path to greatness. “When I’m considering taking on a client, I don’t care how big or small their company is,” Mike says. “What matters to me is, are they exceptional? Are they coachable? Do they want to get better at what they do, and are they going to challenge me by being engaged and asking tough questions? Those are the people you need to bring your A game to, and that’s what I’m all about.”

Mike also uses his own experience to help others through Executive Security Escape and Evasion (ESEE), a program he launched to teach executives and high net worth individuals how to stay safe. He began studying safety and self defense in high school, and in college he learned rare techniques from several Israeli friends who had survived the Six-Day War of 1967. Later, as an Army Ranger, he learned hand-to-hand combat and became an instructor, but it wasn’t until several decades later that he decided to formalize his training by taking up Ju-Jitsu.

Though experts say people over the age of 35 should not subject themselves to high amplitude throws, Mike held his own against students half his age and received his first black belt when he was 58. At 60, he earned his second-degree black belt, and he even spent time in Thailand studying knife fighting. “My wife called

it the ‘Bone of the Month Club’ because I was always breaking something,” he laughs. “But it was important for me to master that. There was a time I was almost kidnapped while on business travel, and several times my hotels caught on fire. Now, through ESEE, I teach people how to protect themselves, their families, and their employees. From preventing home invasions, to anti-kidnapping, to stopping a car-jacking, to surviving a plane crash, to escaping from a locked room or responding to an active shooter, these are skills people want to learn.”

Mike’s passion for continual self betterment perhaps stems from watching his father, a man who never finished high school but taught himself new skills on a daily basis. He would come home at midnight after working second shift at the factory and stay up late reading at the kitchen table. “He was incredibly driven and calm, and my mother adored him,” Mike remembers. “They almost never fought, which was a beautiful thing.”

Mike was born in a poor coal-mining town in southwestern Pennsylvania. Both his grandfathers were miners, as was his father, until the mining layoffs of the 1950s compelled him to accept a factory job in Cleveland. The family moved to Ohio when Mike was two years old, though he would return to the mining town frequently throughout his childhood to visit family. His sister was born two years after the move, and his mother took a job at a factory as well to try to make ends meet. “We were poor, though I never knew that as a kid,” Mike reflects. “We lived on hand-me-downs, and my mother’s meals were often what was left over on my plate after I’d finished eating. Every Christmas present was something that had belonged to somebody else, but it made no difference to us as children, blissfully unaware.”

This modest upbringing taught Mike how to be frugal—a character trait that persisted later in life, long after he could easily afford not to be. As a kid, he was always on the lookout for ways to make money, whether it was mowing lawns, delivering newspapers, running errands, or raking leaves. When he was fifteen, he got a job collecting golf balls at a driving range, and through high school and college, he worked third shift at the factory as an air hammer operator.

In his earliest school years, Mike had trouble reading, and the nuns at his Catholic

school thought he simply didn't have the capacity to do it. His mother, however, knew what was in him. Through second and third grade, she would sit down with him after school and force him to read, helping him through the trouble areas. Thanks to her effort and care, he developed a love of reading and the capacity to speed-read early in life. And thanks to his photographic memory, academics came easy to him from then on out. He developed a strong interest in chemistry, and the teacher who taught him in fifth and sixth grade brought in a special home study organic and inorganic chemistry course as a gift for Mike. "He really helped nurture my love of science and history, supporting the spark in me that has made me a lifelong learner," Mike recalls. He was a straight-A student through high school, mastering information instantly without the need to study.

His most defining coming-of-age triumph, however, sprung from the constant bullying he experienced as a scrawny kid small for his age. After one particularly intense beating, Mike vowed that he would never let someone lay a hand on him again without suffering consequences. He resolved to become the best he could be physically and mentally, which translated into a lifelong pursuit of success. "It was a defining moment when I made up my mind that I was never going to be second to anyone," he says. "I wasn't going to let someone dominate me in any way, shape, or form ever again in my life. It just wasn't going to happen. I still remember the time I finally stood my ground against a bully and had a real fight right there in the hallway of my high school. They left me alone after that."

Although Mike was too small to play football in high school, he picked up wrestling, which helped to build his confidence and his physical capabilities. His father was a World War II veteran, and he had grown up wanting to join the military, so he decided to pursue that route after high school. He was nominated for the Naval Academy but was turned away because he was colorblind, so he instead accepted an Army ROTC scholarship. "Once I got that scholarship, I started receiving letters from colleges all over the country wanting me to enroll," he says. "Harvard was among them, but so was Virginia Tech. Virginia Tech had a Corps of Cadets, and I really wanted to be in a military environment. And this was in the 70's when being in the military wasn't a popular career choice."

Beyond that, Mike had always been drawn to Virginia for reasons he couldn't explain. Virginia was his mother's middle name, but otherwise the family had no known ties to the state. It wasn't until much later, when Mike took up genealogy, that he realized his mother's roots in Virginia stretched back generations before her family had relocated to Pennsylvania. "It really felt like the state was in my DNA," Mike says. "When I was accepted to Virginia Tech, I enrolled without having ever set foot on the campus. I was just drawn there."

Mike's college years fell amidst the Vietnam War, and at one point he considered dropping out of school to go fight, but his father was adamantly opposed. Though neither of Mike's parents had gone to college themselves, they knew Mike had been given a tremendous opportunity when he won a full scholarship, and they refused to let him throw it away.

So, instead of fighting on the frontlines, Mike studied architecture, urban and regional planning, and physical education, searching for the right major. When he finally stumbled upon his first sociology class, he knew it was the field for him and quickly switched his course of study. His greatest education came, however, when the Army launched a special program to allow a select group of exceptionally strong candidates to attend Ranger School during the summer.

Mike was the only student from Virginia Tech to make the cut, but he was again almost turned away when they discovered he was colorblind. Thankfully, a Sergeant Major had a word with the medic at the last minute, convincing him to let Mike through. "I don't know why the medic changed his mind that day, but he stamped 'Qualified for Army Ranger Special Forces' on my application, and I got in," says Mike. "Ranger School was one of the most significant things that has ever happened to me, and I returned to school my senior year as an Airborne Ranger."

Mike was the top military graduate in his class at Virginia Tech and went straight after graduation to Fort Benning for officer basic training. He wanted to be in the infantry, where the fighting was, and his first assignment was the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Hawaii. He then had the opportunity to spend time as part of the First Royal Australian Regiment in Townsville, Australia, as part of an exchange program, and though he would have preferred to be sent to

Vietnam, he made the most of it. "If I'm going to do something, it's going to be one hundred percent," he says. "I'm a very patriotic person, and I wanted to be serving my country on the front lines where I was needed most. But the war was winding down around that time, and they made the decision not to send any more lieutenants to Vietnam."

Mike likely would have stayed in the military for the entirety of his career, but the age of the modern volunteer army left him disillusioned. At times he felt more like a warden than an officer, so after four years of active duty and time spent in the reserves, he decided to end his military service. He was living in Texas at the time, and with three kids, he knew he needed to make money. He had gotten his MBA on the GI bill and was able to go straight into banking upon entering the civilian workforce in 1978.

Mike launched his career in Atlanta working in operations at C&S Bank, which was later acquired by Bank of America. He later went to work for vendors that sold computer systems to banks, which gave him the opportunity to master sales and travel the world. He continued working his way up through the ranks, taking a job as a sales representative with CitiCorp in 1990. There, he met his second wife, Jeri, and continued to advance when the business unit was acquired by Fiserv, Inc., a financial services company. In 1992, the company asked Mike to create a government services division operating out of Dallas. "I taught myself how to be a President and CFO, mastering financial ratio analysis even though I had never taken a course on the subject," he says. "I lived and died by the numbers, and within fourteen months, I built a division of a thousand people doing \$60 million per year. I mastered every job at every rung in the ladder, and I experienced every growing pain you can imagine, including getting sued more times than I can count. But that experience taught me how to be successful and gave me the confidence to be the kind of coach that will grab you by the collar and tell you straight if you're making a mistake. I will do everything I can to stop CEOs from creating train wrecks." Fiserv eventually became a Fortune 500 company, and Mike was one of its most successful division presidents.

Despite Mike's record of success, the division was forced to shut down due to a regulatory violation made by a small subcontractor

doing business for Fiserv, so Mike decided to strike out on his own in 1996. At that time, the world was bracing itself for Y2K, so he followed his heart back to Virginia and launched Century Technology Services, a company ensuring government entities and private companies were Y2K-compliant. The company had a great run, with Jeri handling business operations while Mike and their engineers traveled all over the U.S., Europe, Asia, and South America. By the time 2000 came and went, the business was doing around \$12 million, and Mike closed up shop to launch a cybersecurity company specializing in penetration testing and security audits.

Unfortunately, that was around the time the dotcom bubble burst, and the Hardens went from being millionaires to having negative net worth virtually overnight. Mike kept fourteen employees on payroll in an attempt to get the new company off the ground, paying them out of his own pocket while he and Jeri went without salaries. After burning through \$350,000 of his own money, Mike finally accepted the fact that he needed to cut his losses and walk away from the venture. "I ended up broke with nothing to show for it," he recalls. "But we both found jobs again, started working, and made some investments that turned out to be very good. Before long, we recouped all the wealth we had lost. That was a great lesson in how you fall down and then get back up."

During that period of rebuilding, Mike started working as a writer and as an adjunct professor at the University of Maryland, Strayer University, and George Washington University, biding his time until he came across Vistage and launched the Clarity Group. Jeri has stayed by his side through it all, a risk-averse balance that has helped to make it all work. "She's one of the smartest people I've ever met," he says. "She gives me great advice, and we're perfectly aligned, politically and ideologically. I'm really lucky to have her." Together, the Hardens work to support the San Miguel School in DC, a middle school dedicated to helping underprivileged Latino children develop the skills they need to compete in top high schools. Jeri also works to help animals in need, while Mike has dedicated substantial time in the wake of 9/11 as a volunteer for the Virginia Defense Force. In this capacity, he led four armories in Northern Virginia, rising through the ranks to battalion commander.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Mike underscores the importance of reality checks and hard work. "My kids will make their own way in the world, just as I did," he says. "I've always believed that you have to work for what you want, and I've wanted my kids to learn the value of a dollar through their own hard work. They never got anything handed to them." He also remembers his time in the military as one of the most important periods of his life, and believes every young person should find some way to serve the greater good for a period of time. "Serving in the military was an important time for me to give back, and it laid a foundation for leadership," Mike affirms. "It taught me that great leaders never complain or blame others; they find a way to get the job done. They motivate people not through money, but through loyalty and setting the example. And when they face setbacks, they persevere. Indeed, good leaders fall down sometimes. It's the really

great leaders that get back up and come back stronger than they were before."

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*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](#).*

