



Photography
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Mike Hill

SAILING TOWARD SOMETHING BETTER

By Dan Cook

Michael Hill grew up with a passion for sailing. So strong was his love of the water that he attempted to become a professional, competitive sailor.

Fortunately for his current clients, he wasn't quite good enough to go pro. But one of his sailing connections did draw him into the insurance business, which turned out to be exactly where he belonged.

Hill is a corporate insurance consultant for business owners with Coldbrook Insurance Group LLC, where he operates his own business. It's a bit of an unusual arrangement, but it's worked well for the consultant from Holland, Michigan.

"Each person builds their own practice under the Coldbrook umbrella," he says. "We have the strength of Coldbrook and the flexibility of an entrepreneur."

Hill followed a circuitous route before coming to Coldbrook. The journey started when he acknowledged that competitive sailing would not be his profession. He was at loose ends, when a sailing colleague offered him a position with his insurance agency. He took the job, and spent more than fifteen years doing "the traditional insurance thing."

In 2017, having tried a few different

versions of the same old, same old, he experienced an awakening. "I was turning 40, and I asked myself, did I want to do it this way for the next half of my career?"

He loved working with entrepreneurs, with clients who wanted something more. What he didn't love was not being able to offer them that something more.

"Business leaders would hire me as a trusted advisor, but the options I had for them weren't different from anyone else's. And the trend of higher cost for less coverage never ended."

But Hill knew that by leveraging self-funding and the flexibility it provides, there was a better way.

"So I started talking to everyone I could. I joined the Next Generation Mastermind Network. I read every article about innovative insurance plans I could find. And anyone who was referenced in an article, I would track them down and find out what they knew."

In 2017, he was ready to chart a new course. He was so fired up, he wrote a book, "Not Rocket Surgery." He met Jim Watson of Coldbrook, joined the firm and began looking for clients who shared his vision.

One of those clients is Jim Eickhoff, CEO of Creative Dining Services, a multi-state hospitality management company with more than 2,000 employees. At the same time Hill was discovering a strategy he was passionate about, Eickhoff was looking for a better plan for his employees. Every year, two weeks before the "new" plan was to kick in, his broker would appear with the proposal. It was always 15% to 20% higher than the previous year and always described to him as "a great plan!"

Eickhoff didn't understand most of the plan's elements; why it was always so much more expensive, or why there were no true alternative proposals.

But he knew if he did his research, he'd get some answers. His research ultimately led him to Mike Hill.

Together, the two mapped out a



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customized plan for Creative Dining. They created a model that offered plan members two choices: a health savings account option or a traditional PPO; however, unlike traditional two-tier plans, both had three tiers. They added a "guided choice" benefit level on both plans that offered plan members lower or no cost if they chose to receive medical care from a list of top-rated practitioners and hospitals.

Eickhoff also agreed with Hill that a C-level executive had to be intimately involved with setting the strategy for plan management. Their CFO never had been involved in the discussions before; it was strictly an HR domain. But going forward, the plan spend would be treated just like any other line item in the budget.

It was that kind of guidance—asking questions, providing answers—that led to the plan revolution at Creative Dining. The relationship immediately resulted in considerable savings, which have grown year over year. Now, the parties have an agreement in which Hill is remunerated if certain metrics are delivered.

"I told Mike, 'We want to reward your team as well, because you have saved us so much money. If you're willing to share some risk, we'll make sure you are rewarded if we continue to have great service, happy employees and keep our preventive costs down,'" Eickhoff says.

What about those annual plan increases? Last year, it was 6%. This year: zero. Creative Dining has reinvested some of those cost savings into a targeted one-on-one diabetes management program that has delivered highly impactful results for the plan participants.

"Working with Mike has put intimacy back into this health care relationship. Mike is not a vendor; he is a family member at Creative Dining," Eickhoff says.

It's not all insurance, all the time for Mike Hill. He serves on four boards of directors, including the board of his local hospital, and that of LifeCircles PACE, a health plan for Medicare and Medicaid eligibles that is taking a holistic approach to managing the members' health.

Oh, and Hill still sails competitively. This summer, he took part in his 26th Chicago-to-Mackinac race, where he was pitted against some of the top sailors in the Great Lakes region.