

A portrait of Carli Kinneer, a woman with shoulder-length, wavy, reddish-brown hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a maroon-colored top and a silver chain necklace with large white beads. She is holding a black and white striped knit hat. The background is softly blurred, showing green foliage and a white textured surface.

Leader Profile

Carli Kinneer

Partner and Practice Leader
at Signium International

with **GLAIN ROBERTS-McCABE**

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Carli Kinnear, Partner and Practice Leader at Signium International, has lived her life dedicated to guiding organizations in transition through periods of significant change. During a trip to South Africa, her own life was changed in a profound way by a catastrophic car accident. At a critical time in her career, she sustained an injury that impacted the portion of her brain related to memory, reasoning, problem-solving and task flexibility.

*Carli sat down with Executive Roundtable President **Glain Roberts-McCabe** to share the deeply inspiring lessons she has extracted from her journey of recovery and how she summoned the resilience to continue on her path undaunted.*

GRM Carli... you're currently Partner and Practice Leader at Signium International but at the height of your career as a fast-tracker at IBM, you had a significantly life changing experience. Tell us what happened.

CK At that point in my life, I had a single-minded, laser-sharp focus. My career ambition was to reach the level of Partner in a global business consulting organization and deliver meaningful work managing the people, culture and organizational risk in transformational change programs. I had studied and excelled in this field of work. I felt I had something to offer.

At PwC and ultimately IBM, I got the opportunity to achieve that dream. I was running a \$12MM business, delivering Change Strategy work. It was the same year that I was finalizing my business case for promotion and I had been burning the candle on both ends for way too long. I needed a break.

I decided a trip to my native South Africa was what I needed to recharge. Two days after my arrival, a close friend and I were driving through a familiar neighborhood, when a minibus driver ignored a stop street, plowing into my side of the vehicle. I didn't see it coming. I was knocked unconscious instantly and woke up in intensive care, attached to various supporting devices, unable to move. I looked around and recognized my friend. We were both alive!

My injuries included a pelvis fractured in three places, a broken collar bone, multiple soft tissue injuries to my right side, from my ear to my foot. The invisible and more profound damage was a right frontal lobe brain injury. The right frontal lobe contains our executive skills such as working memory, reasoning, problem-solving and task flexibility. The skills I used and needed every day!

The weeks in the hospital in South Africa were challenging. Dazed, I underwent multiple surgeries, while slowly piecing together what had happened. I later learned that four people were involved in this

accident and there was one fatality. After three weeks, I was cleared to travel back to Canada, albeit mostly horizontal and in a wheelchair.

There were a couple of months of tremendous discomfort, confusion and emotional uncertainty. My vision and cognition were affected. I couldn't read, I struggled to find words. I could not tolerate loud noises or quick movements. It was absolutely impossible to attempt any type of multi-tasking and I struggled with my decision making. There were days that I felt overwhelmed.

The first six months of my rehabilitation involved weekly sessions with a speech pathologist, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist and a trauma counsellor.

GRM What an unbelievable experience. People often joke 'what would you do if I got hit by a bus?' but you literally did! I would have thought that going through something this traumatic would really slow you down, but that's not exactly what happened.

CK Oh no, it did slow me down initially. In fact, *everything* slowed down significantly. Getting anything done, even just getting dressed, took so much longer. I was slow in responding to questions. It was hard to remember things.

Within about seven weeks of arriving back in Toronto, the Managing Partner for IBM Canada's consulting business called me, asking if I was still interested in staying in the partnership race. I appreciated that call. I didn't think twice before responding "Yes!"

After the first few months of adjusting to being mostly horizontal and being in rehabilitation, I asked my therapists to help me with my goal of finalizing and presenting my Partnership business case. I started working a little every day, to build a presentation that formed part of a rigorous global selection process that IBM's Consulting Business had in place.

Three months after my accident, I delivered that presentation to the Canadian leadership team. I was still on a crutch and my right arm was in a brace. I was able to make my presentation with conviction and passion. I received a standing ovation. For a few brief minutes, I felt like a rock star!!

That sensation didn't last long. The process of preparing for and delivering it took everything out of me and I could only focus and concentrate for short periods of time. I collapsed from exhaustion that night and it lasted a few days. A month later, I received the news that I did not get the promotion for reasons beyond my control. It was not for a lack of trying, and I felt I had gained a practice run for the next round.

I was blown away by the level of support and encouragement I got from everyone close to me during this time.

I pushed myself to re-enter my business role after six months of intensive rehabilitation. I had learned to apply specific coping techniques to manage my cognitive issues in a constructive way. I still could not stay fully engaged in any specific task for more than thirty minutes. I spent a lot of time in private meeting rooms doing brain adjustment exercises between working sessions and conference calls. One day at a time was my motto.

Around the one year mark after the accident, I realized that I was not 100% "back." It scared me. I found myself in the deepest, darkest depression I had ever experienced. It was during this time that I learned about the chemical imbalance that happens as a result of brain injuries.

At the same time, the next promotion cycle in IBM started. I had another opportunity. I built a new case, presented again, and got the promotion. Eighteen months after my injury, when the veil of depression started lifting, I had a huge celebration, called my "Gratitude Soiree," where I invited and thanked everyone who helped me during that chapter.

GRM As you look back on that period of your life, how did it change or shift you as an individual and as a leader?

CK Looking back, it took me about five years for the real revelations to truly take effect.

To this day, I believe the accident was a divine intervention. My lifestyle before the accident was not sustainable and there were major lessons that I needed to learn about what is really important in this life. My priorities started shifting and I became more mindful of the need for balance, authenticity, compassion and kindness in my everyday life.

I learned about the importance of a strong and resilient team. I learned how to fully trust in the ability of one's team and let go. My leadership style shifted as a result of this and I stepped back. I started leading from behind. I shone the light on high potential individuals and worked harder to make them stand out.

I realized that I had been given a new opportunity to be a "new and upgraded" version of myself, someone who was more authentic and real. Over the past few years of my life, I have had the opportunity to explore parts of my personality that had not been available before. I call this phase my "experiment in authenticity" and my friends comment on living vicariously through me.

Leadership Tip

Trust in the ability of your team and lead from behind.

GRM Change is a theme in your life. You spent a significant part of your career as a change

management consultant helping organizations navigate key transitions. In your own life and career you have experienced many

Leadership Tip

Accept each new opportunity with gratitude.

truly significant transitions: from a child growing up in South Africa during Apartheid, to working on projects to build a more integrated South Africa, to a continental move to Canada, to your rehabilitation from a devastating car crash, to making significant changes in your personal life. What is the one key thing that you have learned about navigating change as a result?

CK I regularly reflect on my experience in South Africa and the unique vantage point I had of Nelson Mandela's process that ultimately resulted in transforming the country. I learned from that.

Change requires tremendous courage and will—and most certainly, a well-orchestrated plan. And it certainly helps to have people around you who can help, because it is not easy.

We have the wonder of *choice* in this life. When I immigrated I chose to vote with my feet and change my future. I managed the entire transition like a change project. With the accident, I chose to experience it as a growth opportunity. When I made changes in my personal relationships, it was hard but, in most cases, I have been able to manage that process in a thoughtful and respectful manner.

Leadership Tip

Change helps us grow.

As people, when we choose to change, we choose to grow and that is truly the only thing that matters in this life. To do that, one needs courage and will.

GRM When I first heard your story, I felt like it was the quintessential story of many fast-tracking leaders. You seemed to have hit all the ways we tend to measure success in our society—great job, great firm, the right title, financially secure. How are you defining success for yourself today?

CK Today, I see myself as successful because I live purposefully, mindfully, and with a greater awareness of my own actions and their effect on others. My intention is to create a life of balance and meaning, every day.

To me, meaning comes when one can collaborate, guide, inspire, and support others or ultimately contribute to making the world a better place.

When I consider all the elements that affect my wellbeing, (career, money, health, friends and family, romance, personal growth, fun and recreation), I am doing as much as I can to develop each of those areas in a purposeful and mindful manner. Balancing all those areas is my definition of success.

GRM What have you taken from this experience and how is it shaping the next chapter of your life?

CK Well, on a more humorous note, one take away from this experience is that the ability to multi-task is completely over-rated! Focus on one thing at a time and do it well. We are so much more efficient with our time when we do that .

Looking back, I am proud of my resilience, courage and passion to forge ahead with the new opportunities that have opened up for me. We all have the ability to bounce back. It's about how we choose to respond to our adversities.

I now realize that I was granted the chance to build a new dream, and I am actively creating my next dream.

In the future, I want to continue to focus on change and growth. I enjoy working with business leaders to find and grow the change leaders of the future. I find meaning in coaching young leaders through times of personal, professional and business change. It is deeply rewarding to share my experiences in a way that inspires others.

I want to make a difference in the lives of others and leverage my own lessons. This feels good. I lead with my heart, not my head or my ego.

Leadership Tip

Lead with heart.

GRM Thanks so much for sharing such a personal and inspiring story with us. Listening to you has definitely prompted me to take a step back and evaluate my priorities and definition of success, and take a moment to reflect on and appreciate the people and opportunities in my own life. I'm sure many of readers will feel the same.



Glain Roberts-McCabe believes great leaders make the difference and that every leader can be their own kind of great. As Founder and President of The Executive Roundtable Inc., she and her

team inspire great leadership through innovative group, team and individual coaching and mentoring programs.

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