



**Leader Profile**

# **Glain Roberts-McCabe**

Founder and President of the Executive Roundtable

*with* **PENNY CLARK**

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*Most people don't  
land their 'dream job'  
right out of school.*



*This week, we're turning the microscope  
back on ourselves. Executive Roundtable PR  
Manager & Events Coordinator, **Penny Clark**,  
asks the company's Founder & President,  
**Glain Roberts-McCabe**, to talk about her  
unconventional path into the world of corporate  
training and share what she's learned about  
career transitions, sponsorship, and playing  
to your strengths along the way.*

**PC** Hi, Glain, welcome to the other side of the interview! Let's start off with some background—tell us about your current job.

**GRM** Sure. I'm the founder and president of The Executive Roundtable. We're a leadership learning organization where leaders learn from each other, not from a textbook. We use a blend of peer coaching and mentoring as the core to our approach, plus we bring in more traditional components like assessment, on-the-job learning, and personal goal setting. Our aim is to inspire leaders to be great... in whatever way 'great' means for them. Most of our programs are delivered within corporate organizations but we do offer a few programs for individuals.

**PC** Peer-to-peer learning is a concept that's really at the core of your technique. Where did your interest in the peer-to-peer style come from?

**GRM** About seventeen years ago, I was working for a firm that needed to reinvent their training business. A friend invited me to join a MasterMind group with five other individuals. It was a great experience. I used the monthly sessions to really think through how I was going to design a new approach to development. In fact, the program I launched was a very early version of the peer Roundtable process that we use today. After that group wrapped up, I started to look for another group that I could get involved in where I could talk about leadership challenges and opportunities. Unfortunately, the only programming available at the time was for CEO level leaders. It's what gave me the idea to create The Executive Roundtable for leaders who aspire to senior levels but aren't there yet. I wanted a place where leaders could cultivate their leadership together.

**PC** You're a big advocate of people taking responsibility for their career path. Your own career path has been pretty unconventional. How did you get to where you are today?

**GRM** That's true. I graduated from college with a diploma in Creative Advertising and always thought I was going to be a Creative Director for an ad agency. But, instead, I came out of school into a full blown recession and the biggest priority was, frankly, to get a job. Luckily, my college program offered a work placement. I could have gone to an agency but when I heard about the long hours and low dollars, I quickly rethought that plan! It was imperative that I find something that would allow me to live independently. You see, I had run away from home at seventeen and was living with a former boyfriend (which wasn't going over so well with my parents), so I was really at the basic level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I needed food and shelter. I found an employer who had a track record of hiring graduates from my program and was also known to pay well. I did a six week work placement in the advertising department of the *Ottawa Citizen*. When it ended, I called my boss every day for two weeks until he hired me for a summer position. Thanks, Jim Orban!

**PC** That's persistence! So from advertising to corporate training... how did you make that leap?

**GRM** Well, it wasn't really a leap, necessarily. It was more like a number of steps. Like many people who graduated in my GenX cohort, my main focus after graduation was simply to get a job. Twelve months in to my position at the *Citizen*, I was bored out of my mind and in need of something else but I had no idea what or where I was going to go. I remember feeling like I was quite stuck. I decided I'd like to get into PR as I enjoy writing. I tried to get into the promotions department at the *Citizen* but the opportunities weren't there. So, I started to volunteer for the Big Sisters Association on their marketing committee. This allowed me to get exposure to event planning and fundraising activities. Plus, I got to meet some really interesting and dynamic women. About a year after

I'd got involved as a volunteer, a one-year contract opened up and I decided to apply for it. Even though I hadn't had as much experience as some of the other applicants, I had some great allies in the other volunteers and a proven track record from being involved to that point.

From my time with Big Sisters, I decided I wanted to join a larger organization and do more community development work. I moved

### **Leadership Tip**

Experience isn't everything. Persistence, a good track record, and making connections in the organization you want to work for can put you ahead of the competition.

to Ottawa Tourism to run their membership division. While there, I started orientation sessions for our members and found that I really enjoyed being in a teaching type role. I started investigating corporate training and when I was asked to get certified as a facilitator for a customer service program we were rolling out, I jumped at the opportunity. I told the organizer of the training company that I was interested in joining their organization and that's how I really made the leap to the training

field. She had an opening to hire a program manager and I went for it (even though I had no idea what a program manager did!).

**PC** I've heard you say that you've never felt qualified for any of the positions you've held. Why do you think people hired you and what's your advice for others who may want to transition into new areas but don't have the experience?

**GRM** [Laughs] Yes it's true. I felt underqualified for every role I've held, except for the last one I held before I went out on my own. In every case, I was given the opportunity to take on the job because people had seen me in action. At Big Sisters, I had been a volunteer. At Ottawa Tourism, the President knew of me through his wife who

worked for the agency we used. When I moved to the consulting firm where I ultimately became Managing Partner, a client who used to work at the firm recommended me.

I think often, especially when we talk about advancing women in leadership, we say that people need 'mentors' to get promoted. My view is different. I think to advance—whether that's within your organization or switching careers—you need a sponsor. The difference between a mentor and a sponsor is that a sponsor has skin in the game. A sponsor is willing to go to bat for you and put their reputation on the line to get you the interview/job/promotion etc. You can mentor many people but you probably only sponsor a few. You sponsor people that you have seen deliver results, who you believe will do the job and who will...frankly...make you look good as well. I think sponsorship is a very key factor to transitioning into areas, sectors, or jobs where you don't have hands-on experience.

The other thing I would suggest to people looking to make a transition is to think about volunteering. It's just such a great way to build experience, networks, and exposure in new areas or industries.

**PC** You've had a number of roles: advertising design, fundraising, volunteer manager, membership director, training manager, sales director, general manager. Which role was your favourite and how did it shape where you are today?

### **Leadership Tip**

The best way to advance in your career is to get a network of sponsors who have seen how you work and know you'll make them look good if they recommend you.

### Leadership Tip

You'll never like 100% of your job but, if you pay attention to the parts of your role that give you energy, you can shape your role so you're doing more of what you like, more of the time.

**GRM** I loved aspects of all my roles but my favourite role was probably when I had the opportunity to be the executive director of a networking organization. I love

a general manager type role where you can have the full picture of the business and I am definitely oriented to being in a services-based business because it fills my need to 'help others'. I tell people that, from my very first role, I thought of my job as a pie that had different tasting slices in it. Some slices I really enjoyed eating and others were less tasty. When I would get restless in a job, I would



start to look for roles that would give me more in my 'career pie' of what I enjoyed 'eating' and less of what I didn't like, plus some new things to taste. Over the years, my 'career pie' filled up more with what I enjoy doing. These activities are really my strengths and my aim is that I spend about 80% of my job doing what fits my strengths and delegate/outsource work that doesn't fit that. The first thing I outsourced at The Executive Roundtable was bookkeeping!

**PC** Are you able to maintain an 80/20 split on strengths activities most weeks?

**GRM** I have to say that, most of the time, yes I am. But, there are some weeks (eg: when we're doing budgeting, or detailed work on program components and pricing) that I'm using my strengths about 40% of the time. This is when I come home exhausted. I find on the days that I've managed to use my strengths through most of the day, I'm feeling pretty energized. I think paying attention to what energizes you and what drains you is really key to shaping a career path that makes you, not just your organization, happy.

**PC** Say more about that...

Well, in my experience, my boss was the person who pointed out my strengths and weaknesses through the dreaded annual performance review. Most of the time, we end up being told to work on our 'developmental' areas which is really taking you away from focusing on the things that you're already great at and could get even better at. I think, as individuals, we need to be aware of our strengths. Just because your boss sees you as being good at something, doesn't mean you actually enjoy that work. It just means you're good at it. A strength is something that you're good at and that energizes you. It gives you 'juice.' You love it. You'd do it all day if you could. For me, paying attention to those things allowed me to have more proactive conversations with my former bosses about what I wanted to contribute to the organization.



**PC** But what if the organization doesn't need your strengths?

**GRM** Great point. Then take them somewhere where they do need them. I think it's really important that, as individuals, we remember that companies aren't there to make us happy. But they shouldn't make us unhappy either. We need to look for shared success. How can what you bring to the table and what you're interested in doing benefit the company? And what does the company offer that can benefit you? When these things are in balance, you have shared success. If it's out of balance either way, it's not going to work.

I think many people are afraid of sharing their strengths with their bosses and asking for more of that type of work because they don't know how those strengths 'fit' into the org chart or into their job description. In my experience, your boss is likely to have a broader view of opportunities within the organization than you do, so let them know what you're thinking about. If what you're suggesting is going to benefit both you and the company, it's really not that risky to explore. It's when you come in with a one sided suggestion that

### **Leadership Tip**

Great jobs take work. Proactively shaping your role and being prepared, if necessary, to move to a new company where you can do more of what interests you will help you get to you 'dream' job.

is great for you but not great for the company that you may find your boss less receptive.

I believe that the more you know and understand yourself, the better equipped you're going to be to drive your own career path. Great jobs typically don't just land in our laps. We have to pursue them but  if you're not clear on what you're striving towards, you'll never get there.

**PC** Glain... thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with us today on how to get the most out of your career.

**GRM** My pleasure!

For more information or to join the Roundtable community visit: [TheExecutiveRoundtable.com](http://TheExecutiveRoundtable.com), connect on Twitter @ [ExecRoundtable](https://twitter.com/ExecRoundtable) and on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/ExecRoundtable).

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