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Chairmen's RoundTable: Retired CEOs help 'Strengthen San Diego, one company at a time' through nonprofit volunteer organization

By Diane Welch



A recent CRT meeting at Fish and Richardson offices.

Once a month members of the Chairmen's RoundTable, a nonprofit volunteer organization, meet at the Fish & Richardson offices in Carmel Valley. The group of retired CEOs with diverse industry backgrounds is unique in that it provides mentoring and business advice to private businesses in San Diego County- absolutely free. No catches! Except maybe that those fortunate to qualify for this service have to step up to the plate and do their part. The entrepreneur charged with turning his company around has to commit to investing his time and energy in studying his business, and agree to implement the suggested strategic changes.

Robert McRann, former chairman, a current evaluator with CRT, and a long-standing volunteer, talked about his role in the organization whose guiding principle is "Strengthening San Diego, one company at a time."
"I was approached by a member of the Chairmen's RoundTable in 1998 and asked if I'd consider joining the group," McRann recalled. "I really appreciated what they stood for - giving back to the community that had supported their careers - so I joined at that time and have been a member ever since."

A California native, McRann, 74, was born and raised in Los Angeles, and for 13 years was the senior vice president and manager of Cox Cable in San Diego. In 1995 he spent two years working in Australia, then after being transferred to Amsterdam for two months, returned to the U.S. in 1998, and was semi-retired from his professional work when he joined CRT.

The organization was started 11 years ago by five retired executives who had done fairlywell in their businesses here in San Diego, McRann said. These five founders, David Flowers, Tom Delahanty, Ken Olson, Jack Hayes and

Mort Rible (now deceased), shared a common philosophy that they each wanted to give back to the business community.

“Now if we fast forward to today, there are 40 volunteer members, who in the past have been in executive positions, and who now mentor local companies who may have strategic or operational issues,” McRann noted. Between them these 40 provide over a millennium of time tested, practical business experience and knowledge. Advice that could cost upward of \$400 an hour if one were to hire them as private consultants.

Aligned with the mentors are 20 sponsors who provide the financial support to make all of this happen. “They are made up of either banks, or executive search firms, and accounting companies, etc.” McRann said. “And as our sponsors they have two obligations to us: first they give us a couple of thousand dollars a year to keep us solvent, and second, they are required to send us at least two clients a year. So this gives us a minimum of 40 opportunities to gain new clients.”

When a client is recommended to the program, the first step in is to evaluate whether that client may be helped. “We determine what their strategic issues are, if we the have the skill sets to help them, and if they have a coachable CEO.” If the company meets CRT’s basic criteria, the CRT board typically assigns two mentors to lead the project. These mentors are selected by consideration of the mentoring client’s industry, its critical issues, and the talents that will be needed to most effectively address its issues.

In the first meeting, the client and mentors get to know each other, work to clearly identify the most critical issues and outline a mentoring plan. This plan may include a future presentation to the entire CRT organization or consultation with select members and/or sponsors of the CRT organization.

From there a series of meetings held between the client and the mentors crystallize the true issues faced by the client. These issues are then encapsulated in a presentation made by the client in a meeting attended by CRT’s mentors who offer advice to the client based upon the broad spectrum of experience that they bring. After the group meeting, the mentors follow up with the client and present a summary of the findings of the CRT members regarding the issues and the suggested strategy. Implementation of any of the recommendations is the responsibility of the client.

In the past, CRT has turned down clients because their CEO has not been able to objectively participate and was not willing to be coached. Some companies are in so much trouble that they refuse to see that this is the case, said McRann. But most are appreciative of the sage advice given and the results are evident in the success of their businesses.

To date, CRT has mentored around 230 companies during its 11- year run. The criteria for a business to qualify for mentorship includes that they have a minimum revenue of \$5 million a year and between 15 and 20 employees. “We mentor companies of all sizes above that, and have had several in the \$50 million range and a couple over \$100 million,” McRann explained. “After we complete the mentoring process we produce a report that summarizes their business, their issues, and contains our recommendations, similar to the type of report that would be issued by a consultant. The difference is that we return in six months to see how the client did in reference to the recommendations.”

And for those who understand the wisdom in this process, it works. “The statistics that we have, show that between 85 and 90 percent of these businesses have gone on to do fairly well based on the work that we have done with them. The other 10 percent were either in terrible trouble or were just unable to follow through with the advice and fix their problems.”

To find out more about CRT’s services call (619) 823-8658 or email: Info@ChairmensRoundTable.com Or visit www.chairmensroundtable.com.