

## **Our Boards in Action: Chevy Humphrey and Linda Conlon**

**Interviewed by Joelle Seligson**

“Out with the old, in with the new” does not apply to Chevy Humphrey and Linda Conlon, ASTC’s outgoing and incoming board chairs, respectively. The two women have worked together closely since Humphrey, president and CEO of Arizona Science Center in Phoenix, took the helm two years ago. Among their shared objectives is a seamless leadership transition. Humphrey passed the torch to Conlon, chief executive at the International Centre for Life in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, United Kingdom, at the ASTC Annual Conference in Montreal in October. They chatted with *Dimensions* about their similar outlooks—and their few differences in opinion.

**Chevy, what do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment as chair?**

**C.H.:** Let’s see . . . greatest accomplishment as chair. I would say the greatest accomplishment as chair is to support the professional development arm of the Association and also to—I’ll put it this way. Linda and I had three goals, three goals of global fellowship, professional development, and continuity in leadership. And building those three capacities and working alongside Linda to have a continuation of that leadership throughout ASTC so it’s a smooth transition—I think that’s been a real success.

**How has serving as chair affected how you view and understand the field?**

**C.H.:** Oh, wow. It gave me perspective and huge insight as to what’s happening in all parts of the world, and how our Association is so important as a resource to all science centers on a global scale.

**What kind of transformations have you seen over the past two years in the field?**

**C.H.:** Engagement. I’ve seen huge engagement, openness to utilize the Association as a platform for conversation, for networking, as a resource. I think that—you asked the first question, what do I feel is successful as chair, is the openness and people being able to feel that they have a voice and that they are getting—they are being heard, and that they feel that the Association is there to support and help them.

**How do you think your experience leading your own science center has affected you as chair of the board? Do you think it’s made you more effective? Has it ever been an impediment?**

**C.H.:** No, I think it’s made me a more effective leader. It’s helped me because I’ve learned so much. They say a good teacher always learns something from others,

and I've learned so much from others outside and through this global fellowship and I was able to bring back some of those things and provide resources and also guidance to my team. It's really helped build and grow our perspective as an institution. During that period of time as chair, we developed our strategic plan, and that strategic plan was truly affected by my leadership role at ASTC because of all the things that I learned from my colleagues.

**Linda, same question to you. How do you expect leading a science center will influence your role?**

**L.C.:** Well, I think I'm going to be a bit boring actually, in that most of what Chevy is saying is very, very similar to the answers that I would give, but then I don't think that's surprising because the point I made earlier is that we agree on the fundamentals, we agree on the direction, we've shaped the strategic plan together and with others on the board, so I don't think there's going to be a radical change of direction. It's going to be continuing a plan that we have thought through very carefully and are trying to implement to the best of our ability. There might be a difference in slight emphases and a difference in style—we're different people, I'm from the UK, Chevy's from the United States—but I actually think that that's great. I'm well aware that I'm only the second European who will be chair, and I'm well aware that I'm the first European woman, and so I think it will be good for me and I think it will be good for ASTC to have someone that is not North American possibly bringing a slightly different perspective. And I'm sure that what I learn as chair will be invaluable to my colleagues at the Centre for Life because I've always felt that getting out and talking to other people both in the sector and outside can only do good things for your organization. An organization which always looks internally at what it's doing, which never questions what it does, is ultimately an organization that will stagnate. So I'm really looking forward to this exchange because I will grow and benefit, and I hope that I will be able to help ASTC a little along the way.

**I know your plans are to continue Chevy's legacy, but do you have anything in particular that you're hoping to accomplish that we haven't talked about yet?**

**L.C.:** I don't think so. I think I'll just probably elaborate on the earlier point, which is obviously the global dimension is very important to me because I am British, I'm European, I have long had an association with a network which serves Europe, which is Ecsite, but I think that there is a broader stage upon which the science center field can perform. And I'm looking forward to more collaboration, even more collaboration, and I think there are some exciting things coming up which will give that global dimension a bit of a focus. We've got another World Summit coming up in Japan, we're working toward an International Year of the Science Center in 2019. So I would like to think that those are unifying things that the sector can come together and work towards.

**These next few questions are to both of you. We can take the same order, Chevy and then Linda. How does serving as a board chair or how do you expect serving as a board chair will affect your ability to serve on a**

## **committee?**

**C.H.:** I feel the importance of listening and—I think listening is the biggest piece that I've learned as chair because there are a lot of people that have great ideas that want a platform to have a voice. I think that being on a committee, being chair, has provided me that opportunity to understand that there are many voices that need to be heard, and you need to allow that platform for them to have that voice. It's as simple as that. I think that it's helped me. I serve on a number of boards here in the valley here in Phoenix, and the chair is there to provide that platform and that leverage for others to be heard and also to bring consensus and leadership to help form and make decisions as a team.

## **Linda?**

**L.C.:** Yeah, I agree with all of that, and I would say that Chevy is very good at listening. I think when she talks about giving people a voice—I have noticed that over the last two years, watching her at work, I think she is very, very good at not only listening but following up on what she hears because you can actually hear what people are saying without listening to them . . . You can hear and not do anything about what you hear. But Chevy is very, very good at not only listening but carrying through whatever actions need to be carried through and bringing together people who perhaps do have different viewpoints but they can be accommodated, and a good chair recognizes that as far as possible. You really want a situation where most people can buy in and take something from the decision, because people like win-win. No one likes to feel that their voice hasn't been heard. I think it's interesting, the committee structure; the amount of work that gets done at the committee level is considerable. And I think it is quite a job for the chair to keep abreast of all of the things that happening. The committee does the detailed work, which then comes back to the board, but it's important that the chair is abreast of what's happening with the nature of that work. I sit on the global committee currently, and Chevy is going to jointly chair that committee, and it really is a global voice, and it's very, very interesting to hear the different perspectives from different parts of the world. We really have to as a global body recognize that the developed Western world isn't the only voice and there are strong voices coming from all over the world. There are some real challenges that some parts of the world are facing, and we can learn from how they rise to address those challenges.

## **How do you think the board chair should relate to and work with chairs of ASTC committees?**

**C.H.:** I think in partnership. It's in partnership, and it's that we work together to accomplish our shared goals. I think what ASTC provides is that the business plan sets the goal, and we are all trying to work toward reaching the goals of that five-year business plan that was developed, and it was developed jointly by all the committees, all the committee chairs, and the board members, so everyone has a vested interest in reaching those goals. But I do think the team at ASTC is amazing, and they also provide leadership by making sure that we're prepared for better

decision making.

**L.C.:** I would echo that. The committees are answerable to the board, and what they are looking at is set by the board, but obviously the implementation is something which can only be achieved through partnership. Chevy and I spent a couple of days in Washington recently with the ASTC executive team, and it was great fun because we got a chance to meet individual groups and get to understand what they do and how they do it in much more detail than we can ever get on conference calls or in board meetings. And what struck me was yes, the professionalism of the team, which I think I would have expected, but also their enthusiasm for what they do. They genuinely do seem to believe in what it is that they're trying to do and you can't put a price on passion.

**This is my last question for both of you. How do you think ASTC is doing in terms of communicating its programs and its successes to members?**

**C.H.:** I think it's doing an excellent job, through emails, through social media—the social media is amazing, as well as at conference. What I love about the ASTC team and the spirit of ASTC is that they're always looking for new ways to ensure that its membership is informed. That's a constant level of excellence and they're always trying to improve that level of excellence.

**L.C.:** This is, I think, the one response where I'm going to differ and perhaps not quite agree with Chevy. ASTC does an incredible amount of work. Each time we have a meeting or each time I look at the website, I find something else there that I didn't know about. So I think there is no question that ASTC's range of activities and services that it provides for its members is second to none. It is a hugely well organized and successful trade association, I suppose. But I think because it does so much and it works on so many levels, it's very difficult to communicate this effectively to everyone, and I think we need to do more. Certainly when I'm talking to people about ASTC outside of North America they're always very surprised when I explain what ASTC does because they have no idea of the extent. So in a way, ASTC is paying a price for its own success. I would like to think that during my chairmanship I will try to do everything I can to tell potential members and particularly outside of North America that the value they get for their subscription is incredible. I think we still have a big job to do to tell more people about the great things that ASTC does and get more members to actually sign up and join.

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