

Our Boards in Action with Linda Conlon and Guy Labine

Interviewed by Todd Happer

At the 2017 ASTC Annual Conference, **Guy Labine**, CEO of Science North in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, will take the reins as ASTC's Board chair from **Linda Conlon**, CEO of the International Centre for Life in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, United Kingdom. Conlon and Labine spoke to *Dimensions* about the Board's recent accomplishments and where they see ASTC and the science center and museum field heading in the future.

Linda, what accomplishments from your tenure as ASTC's board chair are you proudest of?

L.C.: First of all, I think that anything and everything which has been achieved during my tenure has not been down to me. Obviously, I'm chair of the board but I am supported by a very impressive and engaged number of board members from around the world, so maybe these are my achievements but they're as much the achievements of the entire board, so it's a great team of people. I'm particularly proud of the fact that we have set a new leadership direction. I think that's probably the best way to describe the movement and what has happened in the new executive leadership. So being able to set that leadership direction has been quite a critical achievement.

Secondly, I've been really very pleased to increase the diversity of the board. ASTC is unique amongst the [science center] networks of the world in that it has a global perspective. It accepts members from every part of the world and therefore it's incredibly important that we ensure that the board is diverse, and diverse not only in terms of geographical representation but in terms of gender, of color, and the widest interpretation of diversity. So I'm pleased that our board is an increasingly diverse board.

The third thing that I'm really very proud of is the fact that ASTC has played a pivotal role in bringing together the networks of the world to start an International Science Center [and Science Museum] Day [ISCSMD]. And that has taken a lot of hard work from ASTC and as you know we had the first day last year, and it's the start I think of something very significant moving forward. Having such a prestigious global partner as UNESCO is doing the science center community a power of good. I think that we've all been able to focus on at least two or three of the Sustainable [Development] Goals and I think that we've made an exceptionally

good start. I hope we can build on it. I know that the Global Committee and the other networks are working very hard indeed to try and make the 2017 [ISCSMD] even more successful than the 2016 one. So those are my three—setting a new leadership direction, increasing diversity, and [ISCSMD].

How has your experience as chair influenced your perspective on the science center and museum field?

L.C.: It's made me realize that science centers, we're more alike than we are different. Science centers exist in every—well, maybe not every part of the world—but certainly, there are over 650 science centers [that] are part of the ASTC family. They range from the very small to the truly huge. Science centers are in towns, they're in villages, they're in mountain areas, we've even got one in the middle of the sea, we've got them in deserts. So science centers are everywhere. Science centers do the same thing. It's just a question of scale for me. When you actually distill what science centers do, they all have a critical mass of hands-on interactive exhibits, they all have a program of education for schools, they all have suitably qualified people who interact with visitors, and we call them Explainers, hosts, whatever. We address contemporary issues, and we all do some form of outreach. The only difference, really, is the scale upon which we do these things. So for me it's really reinforced that science centers are very similar. And there are so many things that we can learn from each other, from our networking, from our professional development. There's a massive repository of knowledge. And it's really brought it home to me that fundamentally we do the same things, and we grapple with the same challenges.

How have ASTC and the field changed over the past two years?

L.C.: I think that saying "changed" as if it's something which had begun, had a middle, and ended is probably inaccurate. I think that science centers are always changing. There have been some events which have taken place over the last couple of years which have maybe made us sit up and think more. I think the current regime in the [United] States has in many ways been an attack on science, and science centers have really begun to think about this both in their own states and throughout the wider United States, and indeed throughout the world, because although the Trump regime does not appear on the face of it to be positively disposed toward science, we're also living in an age of post-truth. And when we couple that with the power, the potency of social media and the ability for everyone to be able to comment swiftly and for people to be deluged with information without any sort of filter or any attempt to verify information, I think it's a quite

frightening phenomenon. So I think we are starting to respond to that but I think we're still in a process of responding. I don't think that I can say in the last couple of years all this has happened and we've changed because of it. I think it's an ongoing evolution of science centers to really articulate what their relevance is today.

Thank you very much for those. Now we have some questions for Guy. Guy, you've been at Science North in Sudbury since 2001, including six years now as the CEO. What would you say have been your greatest accomplishments at Science North?

G.L.: Well, I'm glad you're not asking me the same questions as Linda because I'd have very little to add. I think there are two things. The first is, I'm the only other CEO our science center has ever known in its 34-year history. So I followed in the footsteps of the founding CEO and lead director of the science center and I think I've done that successfully in continuing the trajectory that he and the board and the organization had created but at the same time allowed our organization to move in a slightly different direction. And I think that's been a success in terms of being able to celebrate and continue the elements that have made us a strong organization in our community in our part of Ontario but at the same time we've been able to shift and move the organization in a slightly different direction to be able to answer a growing need in outreach, in working with Indigenous communities, and in broadening the appeal of our science center.

I have two—the second one is the development of an internal but now community-wide leadership development program that I began four years ago that is now in its fifth cohort that will see 100 individuals from nine different organizations in the community participate in a year-long leadership development program. And the legacy that that will create not only for our organization but for the members and the partners who are part of this in making not only their institutions but in making the other organizations in the community stronger from a leadership perspective, that indirectly helps their audiences, their customers, their clients, and groups that they serve.

Is that related to your having been a Noyce Fellow? What lessons from your Noyce Fellow experience will you bring to your role as ASTC board chair?

G.L.: It is. I really appreciated the investment by the partners including ASTC in developing the Noyce Leadership Institute program and the experiences that I

gained from that program. And in fact [I] was able to translate that participation into a very hands-on, practical effort to create a similar platform that is based on action learning that has access to great resources, that uses coaching, uses mentors and sponsors to really drive leadership development and leadership development qualities in individuals who may not have had access to this type of program. In the end, the success of ASTC and its members is based on the ability for people to be able to not only lead the institutions that we represent but to work in the institutions that we represent, whether they are engaging with visitors, whether they are planning new programs and new initiatives to engage visitors. The core strength of what we bring is the ability to make individuals stronger and more skilled and competent in the respective areas that they operate in that make our collective field stronger. And I think that connection is people. Again, I take away from my experience with the Noyce program the need to recognize and invest in the leadership and the development of leadership in individuals throughout the cross-section of the organizations that we work for.

What do you hope to accomplish in the next two years as chair of the board of ASTC?

G.L.: Well, I actually had the same saying when I became CEO of Science North: I don't have shoes to fill, I have snow shoes. And for those that don't live in a cold climate, snow shoes are large apparatuses that you strap onto your feet to walk on snow and they allow you to have a bigger footprint. I'm following a current chair and a past chair who have invested a significant amount of time in making the association and our field better—specifically Linda Conlon and Chevy Humphrey. I have an interest in continuing the efforts that they brought to make our association and our field stronger. Linda talked about some key successes that she led as chair of the board, and I subscribe to the same agenda. I think ASTC's role in being a key partner and motivator for a day that celebrates the role of science centers and science museums is an important effort that increases the profile but actually increases our capacity to interact with, engage with, and be seen as a strong entity in our collective, individual communities. The broadening of the diversity of the board is something that I subscribe to. Our field is relatively small. As Linda said, we have close to 670 or so members. There are about 4,000 science centers and science museums in the world of various sizes. When you think about this planet, that's not a huge number. Yet the impact that we have is significant. Being able to bring together the majority of that population or that industry under one collective voice I think is really important. Supporting our members to me is the most important thing this association can do. Having a strong board that supports a strong professional staff in being able to achieve that, to me, is really important. The next two years are going to be important, especially the next year as we bring

on a new CEO. I expect the role of the chair of the board is going to be important in conveying the board's interest in wanting to have a strong CEO that can play a lead role in moving the association forward.

For both of you, a question: ASTC is currently, as you mention, undergoing a leadership transition. Where do you hope a new CEO will take ASTC in the future?

L.C.: I would like to see the chief executive of ASTC helping to make science centers as good as they can possibly be. I think we do a decent job, I think we run tight, efficient businesses. I think we do some incredibly innovative work. But ASTC is really the glue that binds us together. And so together we have to be better than we are when we're on our own. So I'd like the CEO to help us be as good as we can possibly be and to help us define our relevance. I think the relevance issue is a very important one. It never goes away because things change all the time. Change is the constant. You always know there's going to be change. So science centers have to respond to change in the past, now, in the future. And we have to constantly reexamine and redefine what being relevant means. And if ASTC can help us to do that, it will be doing a good job.

G.L.: Just to add to that—I completely agree with that and I also think that our field is populated with great institutions, with great individuals that have daily successes in engaging audiences. And I think the association and the leadership of a CEO is both an opportunity to help celebrate that [and] help tell those stories, but at the same time to share those successes and share the expertise that exists in our field to make our field stronger collectively by helping provide resources and provide best practices and provide storytelling that allows our field to be strong.

Our last question for both of you: What do you see as the main priorities and challenges for the science center and museum field today?

G.L.: Again, back to the point of relevancy. It's important to understand that, not everywhere, but in many parts of the world our audience demographics and our audience's understanding of science has changed significantly in the last number of years. Many visitors are coming to our science centers armed with pre-existing knowledge and information that they may have accessed through different means that may be accurate or not, and I think there's an opportunity for science centers to create a platform or to use a platform that already exists to be able to convey the importance of science and the importance of science in evidence-based decision

making, in making individuals more trusting of science, more interested in science, more passionate about science, and in general, more aware of the importance of science in their everyday lives. The pace of change has grown exponentially and obviously will continue on that trajectory and it's important for science centers to both recognize but also put in place the tools and the themes and the platforms to be able to engage audiences with that. At the same time, our greatest strength—I'll go back to the first question—is our people. And the opportunity for a visitor to engage with and speak with a real person as opposed to looking up content online or in the digital platform.

L.C.: I do think that the world is moving, the demographics are changing, sometimes people are moving because they want to and sometimes they're moving because they have to because circumstances dictate that. The mix, the people who live close to our science centers now, I don't necessarily think that we know who they are and we need to make sure that we do know who they are and we need to try to engage with them in ways which are appropriate and relevant to them. So I think looking at movement of people throughout the world and what this means for us and our respective environments and how we respond. Technology is moving fast—it's always moved fast but the pace seems to accelerate even more. So I think understanding better the role that technology plays in our lives and trying to use technology intuitively and elegantly to help us to do what we want to do without technology being the master. Technology is great, and it should be our slave, it shouldn't be our master. I did mention the assault on science and a general disregard for what constitutes facts now. We have the expression "alternative facts," which is very worrying. I think the alterative facts and assault on science Why are people coming to our science centers? People don't come to science centers in my opinion for information. You can get that pretty much everywhere. I think people do come to science centers because we try to encourage people in how to think, not what to think. We try to equip people with opportunities for experimentation, curiosity, problem-solving—the sorts of skills that people need in the 21st century to be active, engaged citizens, and science is a very good pathway to that. I think I've probably said a lot of what Guy said, but I think we pretty much agree with each other on that one.

G.L.: We do.

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