



# Keystone Partners

**Recorded Message:** The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

**Dave Hennessy:** Welcome to the Hennessy report by Keystone partners. I'm Dave Hennessy and today's guest is Yolanda Butler Stephens, the Chief of People and Culture at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. Yolanda started her career in labor relations, went to law school, thought she'd end up in civil rights, always wanting everyone to have a fair shot and work experience and decided the best way to make an impact was through human resources. My Keystone colleague, Traci Delgado, introduced Yolanda and me, and actually Tracy joins our discussion for a few questions.

Yolanda's realness shines through. She's empathetic and personable. Constantly being the new kid taught her an important life lesson that it's okay to not always fit in and she works to make sure that her organization is diverse and inclusive. Part of the Museum of Science and Industry's mission is inspiring the inventive genius in everyone, in math, science, and technology. They've done some amazing things in engaging IDO for creativity and tapped into Google for some resources in their community. It's an amazing organization and Yolanda's an incredible leader.

Next up on the podcast we have Jennifer Kartono, the Senior Vice President of Global Human Resources for Iron Mountain. And now our conversation with Yolanda Butler Stephens.

Yolanda, welcome to the podcast.

**Yolanda Butler Stephens:** Thank you. Good morning. Excited to be here.

**Dave:** I'm glad you're here and I'm so glad my Keystone colleague in Chicago, Traci Delgado, introduced us for this podcast and she's joining us for this podcast as well.

**Yolanda:** Hey Traci.

**Traci:** Hello.

**Dave:** Yolanda, we always love to start the podcast-We'd love to hear some earlier life experience that still informs your work today. Maybe it was an inflection point for your career or your life.

**Yolanda:** I think I would say definitely was and is my parents. Both of them are from the South. One from Tennessee, one from Kentucky and then in Dayton, Ohio, someone set them up after college. We moved around quite a bit due to my father's career. He was a chemical engineer so he worked for all three of the automotive industries.

So as a kid that moving around quite a bit you always were trying to fit in. You were the new kid having always to establish kind of new relationships and connections. At the time, that seemed hard, but it really has been a really important life lesson about sometimes it's okay to not fit in. Those are the lessons my parents had to teach us to make us feel good about being the new kid. At the time as a kid,



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you know, you're like, "oh you're just saying that to make me feel better." But now particularly it is a testament, I think, of where we are in terms of you think about diversity and inclusion and culture. It really is about maybe not always fitting in, challenging the status quo, at least giving a different idea about how to think about things so I think early on I got comfortable with that. So there's almost any room that I walk into-I may not fit, but I'm comfortable.

**Dave:** That's great. Well, let's talk about your organization, The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. Not counting last year, you have a million and a half visitors per year. What an organization. Can you talk a little bit about the history and your mission?

**Yolanda:** The Museum of Science and Industry is a science institution, which means it's grounded in facts, but it truly is magical.

**Dave:** Yeah it's quite a historic building.

**Yolanda:** Yes very historic. It was the site of The World Fair. When you walk into the building itself, it's magical, it's big, it's huge. Then you walk in and it looks very serious, but then you see all these kids because a big part of our mission is about inspiring that there's a genius in everyone in math, science, and technology.

For me in particular, when I walked in for my interview it was during the holiday season and on top of that, we have an exhibit each year, "Holiday Lights Around the World." So we have trees represented for different cultures and so that just adds to the mystic, the magic of this beautiful, wonderful science institution. I think that's what makes us unique. It's not just the square footage of how large we are, but how big the mission is, which isn't just about science and education, which is critically important, but it's also about connections. It's about how do you connect people that maybe have been on the outside of traditional education, but still need science and education. The rigor of that.

When you look at the history of Rosenwald who founded it, he started to actually create coming out of the segregation of Jim Crow schools or African-Americans who weren't allowed to get educated. He actually propped up education centers through the South, focusing on educating people that were slaves, who were descendants of slaves. So that tradition is embedded in who MSI is in recent times. We've been intentional about calling back on that feeling and what it means to connect and to be a voice for everyone.

**Dave:** That's great. I know from Tracy and from the things that you write about and post that diversity and inclusion is very important to you. How does that extend DNI throughout your organization?

**Yolanda:** I'm happy to say that the work and the commitment that MSI has, didn't start with me. I think David Messina who's been president there for 20 years has really always talked about our mission is not only to build a world-class exhibitions, but also to be a science education center for the South side of Chicago and beyond cause we service Indiana and extending suburbs. So that piece of education for all has really been important.



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When I joined just kind of picked up what had already kind of been laid down in the institution, put more of a strategic focus around it and connecting the dots. I really thought about how you measure your progress with diversity, inclusion, and equity and how do you identify what those gaps are. It really has been a team effort across, I would say all the divisions within the institution in terms of what we choose to fundraise for, how we use those funds for programs in school, how we decide what we market communities, we're remarketing to encourage people who maybe haven't for whatever reason, come to the museum. We do all of that with a lens of diversity, inclusion, and creating this greater sense of belonging.

**Dave:** Yeah. I think you're starting to give some examples about how you really embed DNI into the organization. So it's not a program, it's not something separate. I know you've been on a culture journey for the last few years.

**Yolanda:** Your culture of which diversity and inclusion should be part of it as is your talent planning or talent process as is your engagement. We've been really intentional that diversity and inclusion doesn't stand separate and apart from performance management. It's part of the nucleus of what drives the execution of each of those things. Obviously you want to have racial and gender representation, but it's also different discipline functions that you have because that can bring a different idea when you're thinking about an exhibit. So you may not have someone let's say, in an area that is bilingual by nature of that division that builds exhibits, but I may have a bilingual staff member in HR that can add some value that can give a perspective. So we've been really intentional about collaboration, ensuring that we have different disciplines that maybe traditionally haven't been involved in the ideation process of coming up with ideas and brainstorming and helping with our creative process.

We worked with IDO to come in to really think about how you do that in a really intentional way because people say we want to collaborate all the time. So they really helped us look at developing four areas that we can really think about. One, how do we reimagine the execution of our experiences. How to do things better in a way that can maybe reach through in different audiences. It's still a core to what we think is important. And what I really liked about IDO that it wasn't just about what you're building and exhibits and education, but talking about your greatest resource, which is the talent. Sometimes that is forgotten from these huge initiatives and so HR was brought into that and ensuring that as we grow as an institution, we're growing our talent within the institution as well.

**Dave:** I think these are really great examples. Are there any other examples about how you embed the DNI component into your work?

**Yolanda:** About a year and a half ago, we established core values and really looked at our competencies to ensure that they reflect this enhanced culture that we were creating that had a focus on collaboration, that had a focus on diversity and inclusion, that had a focus on what it means to create a supportive work culture. Within that year we did focus group work with an outside consultant surveying to do some benchmarking to really kind of figure out what were the right competencies that reflect the organization the way that we want it to grow. Then from that help develop core values around diversity and inclusion, around creating a supportive work environment, about ensuring that we have an inclusive



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atmosphere and really took the time to define what those mean. And we're starting that process in 2020 to roll that out and then the world changed.

**Dave:** Why did it change?

**Yolanda:** Now it put it on pause and so the core values are there. The competencies are there, but everything has been stretched strain with this pandemic, right? When you're talking about creating a supportive culture in a museum and all of a sudden everybody's remote and we're a museum. So it's been unique challenges to try to continue that work in a positive way.

**Dave:** Right. It leads to a question about culture. How do you make sure your organization stay in tight knit? And that you're getting everybody what they need.

**Yolanda:** True transparency it's been tough. We are like other institutions that maybe already had a remote working because they had multiple sites. We are a museum. So as a museum, everybody works in the museum. So it was, I think, a shock for us to even begin to think about how do we even work when we are closed. Right? And then how do you think about that in an equitable work way?

**Dave:** Because it's such a physical experience, right?

**Yolanda:** It's a physical experience. There are some people who their role is tied to being on the floor and talking about this science experience or this exhibit. One of the things that we tried to do early on is over communicate. We have a newspaper electronic-type called Dateline. So we were almost over communicating like every day with things going on when it started, you know. Staff Q and A, we had virtual noon town halls and then we've done a lot of training support about emotional wellbeing with our leaders about how they need to connect with their teams, how to do that. So I think just transparent, ongoing communication till people start saying, it's too much, then you start figuring out, okay. I mean literally, that's what we did.

**Dave:** Enough Yolanda.

**Yolanda:** Right. But then there's some that, you know it never is enough. So you get back to that normal HR, where you get complaints and half the people happy in HR. That's success right?

**Dave:** Well, as you start to think about reopening, as we get to the warmer spring and summer months, what are the things you're doing now to plan for the reopening?

**Yolanda:** Dave I was just on a webinar yesterday and I think the challenge is there isn't going to be a new normal. It's going to be a new difference. So what our challenge is, is to figure out what pieces of this remote working world is going to be permanent in a cultural institution and a museum.

We're going to open likely before they say the general public has access to vaccination. So we have to figure out what are you going to do to one: protect your staff so that their wellbeing and their health is a priority, but at the same time encouraging guests to come here and say, we're a safe place. And because



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we are a science institution, our education division along with our marketing division are really starting to work with the city of Chicago and in thinking about what can be our role with them as they want to encourage people to get vaccinated, as they're looking for needing community sites, maybe help with that. Then what is our position as an exhibit or as an education piece around vaccinations, around pandemics, around COVID. So we're trying to really spend intentional time to figure out our position as a cultural institution on those, but also just as a member of the community.

**Dave:** You have quite a challenge here later in 2021.

**Yolanda:** Also, I'm really excited about our new CEO that just started, Chevy Humphrey, who came from Arizona Science Center. She's going to bring a lot of enthusiasm and pick up on this idea of innovation and technology and really invigorating the museum. What I'm really excited about is that her and David Messina had a working relationship for many years as leaders of Hyatt Centers and so I think there's a lot of connectivity there of what his legacy was and kind of what she's going to create forward.

**Dave:** The other thing I wanted to mention to you, we talked about partnerships before, when Tracy first introduced me to you. Can you talk a little bit about your corporate partnerships and maybe how new technology in the interactive nature of your organization come into play more and more.

**Yolanda:** These partnerships with Google at times, whether it's about technology or how do we digitize our elections department. Then of course there is the relationships that our education division, led by Ravi and Mas, has with the city of Chicago and the education department there, as well as school districts, around the city of Chicago. So we do a lot as you know, in terms of educating, providing resources to teachers about how to teach science. So we're in a lot of schools, we had a lot of teachers when we were open that came to the museum to do a lot of that. Then we have a fab lab, which had been a physical place where people came either for school groups, for additional lessons around science lessons and technology. Then we also just recently launched virtual teaching labs for teachers, as well as students, as everyone in this remote world.

**Dave:** Anything surprised you about your experience at Google?

**Yolanda:** We're a big cultural institution, but they're Google, right? So we were excited, but I think what was pleasantly surprising to me is how interested they were in working with us and how important they saw our mission, particularly around education and how eager they were to figure out ways that they could support us.

**Dave:** That's cool.

We produce this podcast in cooperation with the Northeast Human Resources Association. Meghan Mandino is on a subcommittee of the emerging HR professionals at NHRA and I'm going to welcome her in to ask you a NHRA question.



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**Meghan Mandino:** For those currently supporting HR in the legal field, like you had started in labor relations and considering a transition to HR, what advice would you tell them such as, what are the major differences they should be expecting and what skills should they be honing now?

**Yolanda:** I think the first thing I would say is how much more influence you will have on shaping the organization as an HR professional versus a legal professional. I did go to law school, wanting to make a difference, wanting to give back to have a positive impact and thought I was going to end up in civil rights and, you know, ended up in employment and labor, which, for me, was a way to give back and give influence and to try to make sure that everyone has a fair shot in a work environment. I didn't find that as much when I was in traditional practice.

You certainly advise and you'd counsel typically, it's when there's a problem that has gotten maybe out of hand and particularly here in employment and labor rights. That's what drew me to making the shift. It was wanting to be more involved and preventing things from getting to me. And then I would say the other piece is really authentic communication so that people don't feel like they can't have a different opinion or that the way you're saying it makes it seem like that's the way it has to be done. Typically attorneys are direct communicators, which people can perceive sometimes as being inflexible. You're not bad. You're just trying to get to the point so you can give advice about what needs to be executed. So it took years, I think, of kind of un-training. It wasn't what I was saying, it was how I was saying it.

**Meghan:** Going from fixing the problem that had already existed to trying to get to the root of the problem in HR, I feel like that's mirrored in your role now trying to spread scientific education to the masses and how that's connected to education and scientific fact and social behavior.

**Yolanda:** Absolutely. I think the environment that we're all living in now with the pandemic and then overlay that with the social justice issues that occurred last summer and then the things that occurred at the beginning of January, as we're looking to make this transition of leadership in our country, it is also connected and there is no way around not being connected and being inclusive, whether you like it or not. I think that argument has left. It is here. So we just figure out how to work together and make it work for all of us. Our survival is dependent on it. Even having people on the fringes affects all of us.

**Dave:** Well said Yolanda.

**Dave:** Well, now we're going to bring Tracy back. Tracy is the President and Chairman of the Talent Management Executive Consortium and you are a member of that Chicago based organization.

**Traci:** Yolanda. My first question is around talent management in HR. Given the remote situation in 2020 and the likelihood that many employees will continue working from home in the future, what suggestions or insights can you share with HR leaders to successfully manage talent reviews and the performance management process?

**Yolanda:** So often we can think that we can just apply a process to the current circumstance. Do your competencies need to be modified based on the fact that you are completely remote? Are there core values or things that need to be expanded? And if you've done good work in developing your core values



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and competencies, the answer's probably no, but I think you should do that exercise anyway to be sure. The next step is really evaluating the tactics to make each of those occur in a way that's meaningful to the institution. We, over the years had moved away from more performance management, more to a goal setting and trying to really tie people's performance to bold conversations that should be occurring more frequently throughout the year, as opposed to once a year sitting down and just doing an exercise that we know everybody loves right?

**Dave:** It's painful for the manager and the employee.

**Yolanda:** And it just becomes kind of meaningless and an exercise, right? So we had slowly been trying to move for more bold focus, where it's more of a conversation with the leader and that employee, as opposed to just sitting and listening and going back and then forgetting about it until next year. So I think if you haven't already made that adjustment, that's critically important. Then I think the other piece for us that we've had shift to was really, really pulling away from performance management with that narrative, because what happens when you then are faced with a crisis financially and all of those things become things you have to look at, does that mean you throw away how you evaluate talent because you aren't able to either give as much as part of the merit or there is no merit, right? So I think really ensuring that those things are separate become really important as uncertainty faces us all.

Then I think there's the piece of ongoing education and training with your leaders. You cannot refresh enough how to think about evaluating talent in particular, if you have developed new competencies. You need to talk about what does it mean to say you're inclusive. People use those words, but how are you ensuring that leaders have the right skills to appropriately measure that? That leaders really understand when you say you want people to be agile? What does that really mean? Does that mean just doing what I want you to do when I say to do it? No right? It's like, I think there's this constant kind of defining what that means and I think when you're in a crisis, it becomes something different. Agile when everyone's remote when you're used to working in a museum is different now than it was a year and a half ago.

**Traci:** Oh, Yolanda. That's great, great insight. It's so important to get those leaders on board, right? Because they support and they drive it. My second question: over the past 10 months and as you mentioned earlier, the very first week in January, presented unprecedented challenges and disruptions to us and our families and I think I shared with you, Keystone partners is having that fireside chat with Joan Loveland around how executive moms like yourself navigate working life. So Yolanda as a wife, as a mom, as an HR executive, juggling many hats, many important hats. How do you strike a balance between work and home life with so much going on in the world?

**Yolanda:** So in real candor, I don't. Traci called me on Wednesday and in true candor, I was having a moment with what was going on in the world. My kids are just back into remote learning this week after the break and my husband is out of town. So I had a moment where there was no balance over these past 10 months. That has become my reality and I've decided not to shy away from it. It's all just out there because I'm on a call and my seven year old comes here and wants to just rub my arm. No reason. He just wants to do it. You will drive yourself, in my opinion, crazy, trying to pretend like there is a



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balance. There are times when I'm meeting people new for the first time and I share I'm working from home remote and I have kids that are doing class in the room next door so I may be interrupted right?

Then I'm real with my family too. There are times that I have to say to my kids, "I'm in a meeting right now. I've got to shut the door. You cannot come in for this." I had moments this summer when things were breaking with George Floyd and for me personally, I'm raising two black boys and so that was very difficult, but I'm also the person in institution that helps prepare other people for how to have those conversations with their teens. What's our response. So I had to say to my colleagues, I need a moment. I can't respond to what the institution needs right now because I got to answer questions for my sons and I'm going to keep that going. I've just chose that I think this is the time where you just have to be real and it's difficult to balance.

**Traci:** Yolanda I tell ya, that's one of many things I love about you is every time I speak to you, there's this realness and there's that candor and vulnerability that we all enjoy when speaking with you. So I definitely-I feel okay now. So I love it. Gosh, thank you for that.

**Yolanda:** Yeah. I mean, we all have those moments, right?

**Dave:** Thank you for those questions, Tracy and Meghan and your answers Yolanda. Powerful responses. If you could write a letter to your 25 or 30 year old self, giving yourself advice, going back, what would you write? Dear Yolanda.

**Yolanda:** Get real, sooner right? Like I was a serious law school graduate, getting ready to start my legal career and you will connect faster with people and people will trust you and people want to work and be with people that they trust and like, and so I would say get real, loosen up.

**Dave:** All right, that's good. So what's something 10 years from now, your fear-that you will regret that you haven't done or didn't do the way you want it to?

**Yolanda:** When I think about where we are now and the world with so much going on. Sometimes I feel like, did I push enough? Did I challenge enough? Did I play it too safe at times? Did I raise the right question? Have I made enough change? Have I tried to make enough gains? Have I used my influence enough?

**Dave:** That's good. A book that changed your life?

**Yolanda:** Maya Angelou, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." It's more so related to how I was exposed to that book. I moved around a lot. So at this point I was in sixth grade, West Bloomfield, Michigan, very few black kids in high school. I was an avid reader, but I was reading all teenage romance books and most of them didn't have people that look like me, but I still liked them anyway and Mrs. Carpavich gave me this book and she said, I know you love to read, but you need to read this book. I didn't even really have that much of a relationship with her. She was my literature teacher. So I read that book and the book itself was powerful, but it was the first book where I read on my, about someone who looked like me and their story. That book was powerful. One because it was Maya Angelou, her poetry, her words,



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her writing, her inspiration for truth, but it also was this teacher truly seeing me and giving me something to connect to.

**Dave:** Wow, that's great. Is there any cultural icons, maybe somebody that's an idol or you just really appreciate in the creative world?

**Yolanda:** So obviously money Angelou was one. The other would be Prince. They're similar in that he was always about his truth, his musical talents, whatever he was feeling in that year for that decade, that's what he put out. But when I was younger, my parents would not let me actually go to a Prince concert because in their mind he was risqué. For a-past years ago, my sister surprised me and got me tickets to see Prince live. It was just the best experience, one of the best experiences of my life. The legacy he left is unparalleled in music.

**Meghan:** I was just wondering what your favorite exhibit is at the museum?

**Yolanda:** "Numbers in Nature." It speaks to one: science is all around us. It's everywhere. And then I think it's also one that really does a phenomenal job of bringing kids into science. It's my kids' favorite because it's when they're starting to get introduced to science and math and it's so visual to connect that it's there, it's right in front of you. So I've had discussions with my kids in the car based on things that they've seen in that exhibit. Then we have this wonderful mirror maze that you're going through when you bump your head, which is really what science is about, trial and error. Right? And so there's just a great symbolism.

**Dave:** That's cool. Yolanda it's been so great having you on the podcast and I'm so glad Tracy connected you to us. Now we know why she loves you so much. That passion that you have or what you do and what you believe in comes right through. Thank you so much for bringing your heart to this discussion.

**Yolanda:** Thank you for having me and giving me a voice. Tracy's been a fabulous partner. We've been through some things I think as HR professionals that neither of us have ever seen. So it's nice to have a colleague that you can grow with and talk to, but also just have a moment with. You don't always expect that with your external consultant partners so I greatly appreciate it.

**Dave:** We're glad we had a moment with you today.

**Yolanda:** Thank you. Thank you.

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