

Conchita Robinson
CEO, C Robinson & Associates

“Cool Girls” Make Cool Leaders

Conchita Robinson, a former IBM vice president and currently the head of her own Atlanta-based consulting firm, is the quintessential “Cool Girl” – no pun intended. But, if you don’t know her story, then I guess you don’t get the pun. So, here’s the story and what a story it is!

Cool Roots

Growing up in a middle to upper-class family in Jacksonville, FLA and being the daughter of two highly educated and inspirational parents, Conchita definitely has good roots. Her father, Dr. Andrew Robinson, was president of the University of North Florida and her mother, Mildred Cooley Robinson, was an elementary school teacher. Clearly, education was a central theme in the Robinson household and young Conchita excelled, so much so that she completed high school at the age of 16.

Having attended both public and private secondary schools, Conchita chose a small Lutheran college for her post-secondary experience. Between the ages of 16 and 19, she attended Newberry College in South Carolina, her mother’s home state, and once again she excelled both academically and athletically. She received a B.S. degree in math in 1982...at age 19!

But before she graduated, Conchita’s father guided her towards a summer internship that would ultimately shape her future. In 1981, with specific guidance from Dr. Robinson, Conchita worked as a corporate intern for none other than the IBM Corporation. During her 10 weeks of work there, she said, “I did every job there was from the mailroom to the sales department and everything in between. Little did I know how beneficial that experience would be!”

Worklife begins – for real

On September 1, 1982, Conchita began her IBM career as a Systems Engineer. But her very first assignment had nothing to do with math or engineering. She went to work as a Loaned Executive for United Way. While she may not have realized it at the time, this community service role would set the tone for much of Conchita’s life.

When she began her IBM career in Jacksonville, Conchita still lived at home with her parents. But in 1985, she was promoted and moved to Atlanta to begin her role as a manager and leader. Other moves and promotions followed which took her to New York and Stamford, CT and back to Atlanta. She had become one of the youngest women, specifically African American women, to move up the executive track at IBM. Some of her responsibilities included Director of Marketing and Vice President, SoftwareSales. By most measures, Conchita had definitely “made it” and was managing people the age of her own parents.

But as good as it was, Conchita wasn't satisfied to continue on that same path. And in fact, she rather dramatically altered her executive path. At her own request, she went to a new role and a new sales channel: telephone and internet sales. Imagine...selling IBM hardware and software...not face-to-face which was the traditional and existing channel...but sight unseen, over the phone and via the computer. (Had she lost her marbles?)

Well, the results of this career "detour" answer that question without a doubt: Conchita not only hadn't lost her marbles, she made the best possible choice for herself and the company. In only a few years, she was able to take this business unit from \$100 million to \$4.5 billion (that's billion with a "b"). In addition, she built multiple facilities from Georgia to Texas, grew the organization from 800 to 1800 associates and established IBM's most profitable sales channel.

How'd she do that? In her own words, Conchita explained, "I think my real strength was - and is - coming in and assessing what is needed. I listen, plan and execute. People and teamwork make the difference in our success."

She went on to say, "I was probably seen as tough and demanding, and I held people and myself accountable. I'm extremely proud of the diversity of the organization and the fact that we created a team that others respected. In fact, in every community we were part of, they were glad we were there; there was a waiting list for our people and for people to join the team; AND...we had the best customer satisfaction in the entire company!" (Not bad for an organization that no one was very interested in...before Conchita.)

A turning point

Just when everything was going so well, Conchita's thoughts began to go in a much different direction. Corporate career success had been achieved and even more lay ahead if she wanted to continue on that path.

"But for me," she said, "I knew it was time to go. It wasn't my dream or aspiration to be a senior officer at IBM. My dream was simply to lead a team. Besides, at that point in my life, there were other significant considerations, namely my widowed mother who had suffered a stroke and was living in Jacksonville and my two sons, Chaz and Caleb."

And so, Conchita was ready for the next phase of her life. And it wouldn't take long for a new path to emerge – executive search. At least two search firms pursued her, and with the advice and counsel of one of her IBM mentors, Tom Smith, Conchita accepted an offer from the venerable firm of Spencer Stuart. It was the fall of 2000.

What would happen in September 2001 – less than one year later – could not possibly have been predicted. But the impact was swift and certain. One specific result was the dramatic downturn in the search industry. Conchita left her "new career" just prior to Mother's Day 2002.

“My father always said that I was not waking up before the alarm clock on my 40th birthday (over 20 years in the work force), it’s time for a change.”

With her 40th birthday quickly approaching, it was time. At this turning point, Conchita decided to do some true introspection. What did she really want to do and how did she see her future? Over the years, many people had come to her for coaching and mentoring – both formally and informally. One thing she knew for sure: she loves to develop leaders.

With this self-evaluation and the encouragement of many supporters, Conchita decided to launch her own enterprise, C Robinson & Associates, a consulting firm specializing in human capital development. Her focus is individual and organizational effectiveness. She also specializes in executive search, helping companies to find the best person for a particular position.

Beyond her own business, Conchita has an even larger vision...but hold that thought. We’ll get to it later.

A passion for community...and Cool Girls

Conchita has always tried to give back because she feels she has had a very good life from her childhood to adulthood. “Simply put,” she said, “I did not come from a difficult background...I have none of that baggage. That makes it even more important for me to help others.”

Over the past 15 years, Conchita has served many different organizations and causes including the Boards of the American Kidney Foundation, Teach for America and the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. But no organization has received more of her personal time and commitment – inspiration as well as “perspiration” – than Atlanta-based Cool Girls, Inc.

Cool Girls, Inc. is dedicated to the self-empowerment of girls in low-income communities. Conchita served as chairman of the board from 2002 to 2004. During this time, the organization received a major award from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to support a much needed strategic planning process. Conchita – along with two of her board chair successors – initiated a five-year planning process.

In early 2005, a new challenge emerged. A national search was launched in order to find a new Chief Executive Officer. To find the right person might take months, so the Cool Girls board had to address the need for an interim leader. Conchita, now head of the board search committee, was asked to help identify such a person. However, the board already had a person in mind...Conchita herself. With her expertise and passion for the organization, it wasn’t much of a stretch, except that - Conchita had a consulting practice to run.

Being the person that she is, and being advised that it was really only a “part time” job, Conchita agreed to do it. What transpired after March 1, 2005 was quite different than

planned, however. The part-time position of “interim CEO” quickly turned into full-time in order for Conchita to do what she felt needed to be done. For the next six months, she would immerse herself in Cool Girls, Inc. – personally interviewing each and every staff member, evaluating strengths and weaknesses, and interacting with the board.

“I don’t have the answers,” Conchita told staff and board members, “that’s what our team needs to come up with.” With that, she made a bold and courageous commitment. “In thirty days, we will be back to the board - ready to present our plan.”

For the next month, Conchita and her team worked night and day, from can to can’t, to answer the questions that needed to be answered and to create a detailed plan of action. The objectives were substantial: to double the organization by the year 2008; to add eleven more schools to the existing nine schools already served; and to grow financially from a \$1 million budget to whatever it would take.

“In case I get hit by a bus or something terrible happens,” Conchita told the staff, “someone other than me needs to make this presentation.” With that, the staff prepared itself to take the lead and when the thirty days were up, it was the team – not Conchita – who presented the plan to the executive committee of the board. Of course she was very instrumental in the outcome and was there to support them. But as any great leader knows, it’s not about you. It’s about the team and about getting results through other people. That’s what Conchita so ably modeled to this group - and in virtually everything she does.

The next chapter – and Conchita’s “big” vision

Well, as you might have guessed, this story has a happy ending. The organization sees itself much more clearly now and has a much better chance of long-term success. The immediate result was a solid plan, endorsed by the board, and soon to be executed by the new CEO. Yes, the national search was successful in finding a new Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Kimberly Sutton, who is expected to take Cool Girls, Inc. to the next level...and beyond.

Conchita Robinson will now join the Advisory Council and return to her consulting practice.

Worried that she doesn’t have enough to do? Well, not to worry. C Robinson Associates has a healthy client base and is preparing to launch an exciting new program called “Leadership Development U.” Under Conchita’s watchful eye, Leadership Development U will “enable individuals to take charge of their personal, professional and network development.” The nine-month program is designed for people in all stages of life and can assist and direct them to achieve their goals in all of these areas. A full description is available at www.leadershipdevelopmentu.com

But what about the “rest of the story” as Paul Harvey would say? What about Conchita’s “really big vision?” Well, imagine a “21st century village” as a place of intergenerational harmony. A time and a place where seniors and children and everyone in between are

inextricably linked together to reduce the decline of society; where the “family” means all generations recognize their interdependence and seek ways to help each other, young and old, old and young; and lastly, where human capital is neither wasted nor misused.

Lofty goals? You bet, but they are not just Conchita’s big ideas. “The business plan is already about 90% complete,” she said.

I don’t know about you, but I can’t wait to visit the village. I’m also eager to see what else Conchita Robinson does with the next chapter of her life.

Interview Completed August 2005
By Susan B. Hitchcock, VP-Client Services
Executive Director Women’s Initiatives
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