

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Come back, everybody, and thanks so much for joining us in what is a very important episode for a very important year here at IHS. We've done a few shows like this one before. I like now and then to bring on a few folks who work here at the institute to share their own ideas, explain a bit more about how things work here, and why it is that we do what we do, the way that we do it, and ultimately, I hope, just to help folks get to know us a little better.

Anthony Comegna ([00:47](#)):

This time around, we'll be joined by IHS's executive director, Chad Thevenot, and academic programs director, Emily Birchmier. It's a particularly special occasion because this year is also the Institute for Humane Studies' 60th anniversary.

Anthony Comegna ([01:04](#)):

60 years ago, Baldy Harper founded this place in his garage and all this time later, people like Chad and Emily have kept that work going, and continue to expand the project in new directions. But for more on that, let's hear from Chad and Emily themselves.

Anthony Comegna ([01:21](#)):

All right, Chad, thanks for being with us today. Let's get started just by, you haven't been on the show before. So go ahead and give our audience an idea of who you are, what you have done here at IHS over the course of your career, and maybe we should start with how you ended up here. So tell us a bit about yourself and how you got here.

Chad Thevenot ([01:41](#)):

Okay. Well, my name is Chad Thevenot. I'm the executive director here at IHS where I've been the executive director for the last six-plus years. Prior to that, I was the COO, which is the role that I was hired into in 2004. So if you're doing the math, that's more than 16 years. So it's been quite a while. I got recruited into that role because I was an alum of IHS. I attended IHS seminars in 1999, and again in 2001, when I was in graduate school at Georgetown University. I also received two humane studies fellowships from IHS when I was in graduate school. So that's what got me into the IHS orbit and on their radar.

Chad Thevenot ([02:28](#)):

Prior to IHS, I worked in criminal justice reform. And because of my work in criminal justice reform, I was closely connected to the DC policy community, as well as the DC libertarian, classical liberal community, attending events at Cato and things like that. That's how I got connected in part to IHS and stayed involved in that community, and was ultimately recruited to become the COO in 2004.

Anthony Comegna ([03:00](#)):

What was your grad school background like? What were you studying at the time? I'm really curious, for example, do you remember what you wrote about in your fellowship applications?

Chad Thevenot ([03:10](#)):

I'm not sure I remember what I wrote about in my fellowship applications since that was 20-plus years ago. I started grad school in 2000 so I was attending my first IHS seminar the summer prior, in part to get a feel for what IHS was about. I went to graduate school in Georgetown in an interdisciplinary

program called Communications, Culture, and Technology, or CCT, which I found very appealing because it reminded me of IHS, certainly at the time and still does, which is, IJS focuses on a interdisciplinary approach to the humanities and social sciences.

Chad Thevenot ([03:53](#)):

This program at Georgetown CCT was very similar. My interest in particular was in the cultural part of it or what they call cultural studies. I didn't necessarily agree with a lot of the findings or conclusions of cultural studies, but I was fascinated with the idea that culture matters, and that if we're concerned about the world or we're concerned about policy, that we have to go upstream from that and see what's happening within the culture.

Chad Thevenot ([04:20](#)):

So I wrote a lot during graduate school and I very much spent a lot of my time reading and, to the degree that I was writing, it was about cultural issues. It was certainly about social change. I spent a good part of graduate school reading Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, folks like that that I was fascinated with, how those kinds of changes occurred, particularly in the mid 20th century.

Anthony Comegna ([04:51](#)):

Now I'm really curious to hear how you think your exposure to that kind of material has impacted the kind of work you've done here. But let's start with a little bit of the backstory because, did you start at IHS as COO? Because that's a pretty big hire. I'm wondering what kind of steps were in between your exposure to IHS and your hire for that kind of a high-up position?

Chad Thevenot ([05:16](#)):

Yeah. I did start IHS as a COO in October 2004. It was a bit of a stretch for me at the time, which was good. Just enough of a stretch. At the time, IHS was a lot smaller. It was maybe 25 or 30 people, instead of 100-plus now. The freedom movement, so to speak, was also a lot smaller. And so, when IHS went into the market for a manager, basically, that's what they needed in the COO. They needed somebody to help manage this growing operation. There just weren't a lot of managers in the freedom movement. In the movement at the time, everybody was sort of a public intellectual or maybe some kind of administrator. So if you think about all of the public intellectual types that think tanks in the DC area, that's what the talent pool was like.

Chad Thevenot ([06:16](#)):

That was not me. I wasn't a public intellectual and I wasn't interested in that. I was very much interested in building things and managing, and I think I had some talent for that. So the organization I worked for at the time when I was being hired, I was growing a grant-giving program. I was establishing a training program and some things like that. So I had a management background. I was also a musician for fun fun, sort of doing things at night at the time. I was actually at a concert, my concert, giving a show and all I remember was, the show ended at midnight or something and I hadn't eaten in maybe four hours, and I was really hungry. I mean, really hungry. And so, all I could think about was making a beeline towards where there was some food.

Chad Thevenot ([07:12](#)):

As I was making a beeline of the food, I ran into a colleague or a friend rather, who worked at IHS at the time and she sort of cornered me and said, "Hey, we have this role open an IHS, it's this new role for COO and you should think about it." All I could say to her was like, "I have no idea. I will call you tomorrow. I'm going to go get some food."

Anthony Comegna ([07:35](#)):

Let me get this hot dog real quick.

Chad Thevenot ([07:37](#)):

Right. Literally. I mean, I kind of blew her off and in my mind it was like, "Well, isn't IHS at George Mason University, and isn't George Mason University way out in Fairfax, which is a long way from where I live in DC?" So I kind of brushed off the idea, but then I think I contacted her the next day or something and said, "Well, tell me more. Sorry for brushing you off." So it was probably an inauspicious start to thinking about the role, but the more I dug into it, the more that was very appealing because, just like my graduate studies, I was very interested in culture and ideas. And so, to me, to be able to spend time around ideas and doing it in a role as a manager, which kind of suited my temperament and experience, was like a perfect match.

Anthony Comegna ([08:33](#)):

Can you tell us a little bit more about what a COO does at a nonprofit like IHS, and now that you're executive director, what does an executive director do exactly? And then, in what ways do you get to still interact with ideas while you're managing?

Chad Thevenot ([08:50](#)):

Yeah. Well, when I started as COO, the role is pretty broad for a COO role. So it was kind of close in some ways to an executive director role. So basically, a lot of the functions within the organization, so marketing and comms, programs, office management, those kinds of things, would report up to me. And so, I would help make sure that all of those functions aligned with the IHS strategy and also integrated well with each other. So it was basically managing those managers and keeping everything sort of moving forward, in line with our goals and in line with our values and culture.

Chad Thevenot ([09:38](#)):

So I wore a lot of hats at that time because we were small. And so, in some ways you're doing ... We didn't really have much of an HR department at the time so I was involved in a lot of the hiring directly for many years, for example. Of course, as you grow, the departments start to fill out and so on and you're less involved in the day-to-day and you're more involved in just meetings, which is what I've done a lot of. My role is a bit unusual in the sense that I got increasingly involved in fundraising as COO pretty quickly within a couple of years. And within a few years, I would say maybe half of my time was being spent in some fundraising capacity. Whether that was writing and editing proposals or reports, or even doing some visits or donor events.

Chad Thevenot ([10:29](#)):

I really liked it. I was really starting to enjoy that part of the work and I was enjoying less the strictly operational things, like IT and office management. Where I don't think I was strong. The more technical it gets, probably the less strong I am at it. So the more technical aspects of the operations were not

areas of strength for me. So when I was promoted to executive director, let's see, in 2014, so this was 10 years into my tenure at IHS, it was basically to focus more on the vision and the strategy, and to focus more on fundraising and really connecting the dots between those two.

Chad Thevenot ([11:15](#)):

That's a slightly different version of an executive director. I was still overseeing the major components of IHS, but I was much more involved in, what is our vision? What is our strategy? And importantly, how do we communicate that vision and strategy to the world? That's both in the form of our marketing and communications, but also in the form of our donor communications. So I've always been very strongly involved in our donor communications, particularly in the last six years, and that's something that I've enjoyed particularly.

Anthony Comegna ([11:51](#)):

I think, even though do have one clearly-stated, overall organizational mission that goes back literally 60 years now to Baldy Harper founding IHS in the first place, all of us who work there kind of have our own different internalized version of it. So could you give us your own personal version of what IHS is all about? And tell us a little bit about how your work contributes to that and has for 16 years, and maybe try to tie in Malcolm X too, because I'm still curious about how those readings have influenced you.

Chad Thevenot ([12:31](#)):

Yeah. We'll have to see whether I can tie Malcolm X into it. Yeah. Hopefully, the staff actually don't have too much of a different version of what the IHS mission is. Because in a word, it's about ideas and maybe two words is better, which is ideas matter. That ideas shape the world. If you really understand that and agree with that, then you say, "Well, okay. Well, how? How do ideas shape the world?"

Chad Thevenot ([13:06](#)):

We have a theory that we operate on how ideas shape the world. Which is Hayek's essay on the intellectuals and socialism, which is that ideas are developed and synthesized and disseminated by intellectuals or scholars. And so, that really gets to the heart of the IHS mission. Which is, cultivating those intellectuals and those scholars who have an interest, not just in ideas, but in a specific set of ideas. What's called classical liberal ideas. Classical liberal ideas is just simply the ideas of a free and open society. The ideas of free enterprise and limited government and constitutional protections and free speech and so on.

Chad Thevenot ([13:55](#)):

And so, the IHS mission is straightforward. Which is, we identify and cultivate those intellectuals and scholars who are working within and exploring ideas within the intellectual tradition of classical liberalism. That's certainly how I've always understood it. I think that's how the staff certainly understand it. How much does that touch on my own experience with ideas to the degree that I was involved in ideas? I mean, all of my background in ideas was very much around either management in a more sort of a geeky kind of sense, or it was more involved in social change. Certainly, social change is definitely about ideas.

Chad Thevenot ([14:41](#)):

Probably even more, social change is about leadership with ideas. That's how I believe the social change process occurs. It's not an engineering problem. It's ultimately, a leadership problem. Meaning that intellectual leaders, if you will, and I think we could say that Malcolm X counts, believe in something. Right? Believe in something that's new or different. That's the priority or criteria number one, is that they believe in something. And two, is that they have the courage to actually pursue those beliefs. And three, that they ultimately have a platform by which to communicate those beliefs and develop a following. We certainly saw that with Malcolm X and we saw that with the other major figures I mentioned earlier.

Chad Thevenot ([15:30](#)):

That's not dissimilar from cultivating intellectuals within the academy, within higher education. It's the same idea. Which is, you have a scholar at a university who believes in something and they believe in classical liberal ideas or maybe a specific part of classical liberal ideas. They might believe in some radical ideas of how to reform the legal system, and then they have the courage to pursue those beliefs, and ultimately, they need some kind of platform. IHS is part of I think that platform, if you will. We're part of helping them gain access to a broader network of scholars that they can collaborate with and where they can find opportunities to grow their audience, grow their influence. So in that sense, it's all connected.

Anthony Comegna ([16:49](#)):

Emily, thank you very much for being here. Now full disclosure, everybody. Emily is my boss here at IHS on the programs team. Emily, you've held a couple different jobs here though. So tell us a bit about your background at IHS. How'd you sort of end up in the orbit in the first place? How'd you first hear about IHS?

Emily Birchmier ([17:11](#)):

Oh, wow. That's such a good question because it's been awhile. I first got involved with IHS back in 2011 as a graduate student. I was a grad student at George Mason University, which is of course, our home university, and some friends of mine in the department had told me that there was these summer seminars that I needed to check out. So I went to my first IHS program back in 2011. I did a summer seminar. I did an advanced topics shortly thereafter, and just really fell in love with the organization.

Emily Birchmier ([17:48](#)):

And then, when I was looking for a job, I had originally planned to get my PhD in economics and become a professor. About halfway through my program, I realized that wasn't the right path for me. But as I was trying to figure out what the right next step was, IHS seemed like a really obvious fit for me because my longterm goal of joining the academy to help people and being able to make an impact in the world in that way, if that wasn't the right fit, maybe supporting other grad students and other people who wanted to make that impact would be.

Emily Birchmier ([18:27](#)):

I was lucky enough that they wanted to hire me. So I joined IHS first back in 2012 as an academic programs assistant, and was able to work on a lot of our academic programs and funding programs that supported graduate students. Which was just a really great transition for me to be able to sort of help figure out what I really wanted to do if a professor of economics was not the right answer.

Anthony Comegna ([18:56](#)):

So you were in the econ program at George Mason?

Emily Birchmier ([18:59](#)):

I was. Yep. Yep. Yep. Which is a great program, by the way. I loved the people I worked with. It was a great place, just not right for me.

Anthony Comegna ([19:09](#)):

What about, looking forward at academia, boy, let me say, good on you for realizing that you didn't actually want to do it. Because, oh my gosh, the worst thing is when people decide to keep at it and just grind their nose into the ground doing something that turns out they really hate doing. So what about that traditional academic career didn't really seem to fit with you? And then, how did you want to pivot your work life at IHS to still satisfy your other goals?

Emily Birchmier ([19:45](#)):

Oh yeah. I will say that I am a great consumer of academic research. So I love reading about staying on top of, finding out, what are these great new ideas that people are coming up with and exploring, and what new solutions are coming out of the academy?

Emily Birchmier ([20:04](#)):

I am not a good producer of those ideas, and that became pretty clear by my second year of grad school. Was that, I loved the coursework. I loved the seminars. I loved spending time discussing the work, but that sort of mindset of there's just always more to do. There's always more you could be doing, it just did not fit at all with my skillset. And I was able to apply some of the things that I am particularly good at. I think, especially in working with people and in more project-based approach and working in an organization like IHS, and especially in my current role, I wish you are pretty familiar with, Anthony, but in our programs team, I think being able to use those skills here is a lot more useful and being able to design and create, and implement some really, really great programs and other resources for our network is just fantastic.

Anthony Comegna ([21:14](#)):

Now, I was talking with Chad the other day, as you know, and I asked Chad, even though we do have one overall organizational mission going all the way back to Baldy Harper and Hayek along with them, everybody nonetheless has their own slight spin on it and slight inflection points in the mission because we're all doing different things and have slightly different perspectives from the ground here. So if you had to put IHS's mission in your own words, what would you say it is?

Emily Birchmier ([21:49](#)):

Oh, that's great. Oh see, now I can't just parrot off our mission. You're making it a harder question.

Anthony Comegna ([21:55](#)):

I know. Chad already did that.

Emily Birchmier ([21:57](#)):

Oh, that's great.

Anthony Comegna ([22:01](#)):

[crosstalk 00:22:01] that down.

Emily Birchmier ([22:02](#)):

No. I think one of the things that resonates the most with me about IHS's approach is the kind of hierarchy and model of social change, and part of how IHS is designed and structured is around helping to support that model of social change. So overall, we are hoping that we are going to have a more just peaceful prosperous world, but how do we get from where we're currently at to this vision of a better society? One of the ideas that Hayek had was that, a lot of these things start with the academy. So this is the production of these good ideas, and then from there, they spread to the rest of society. And then once you reached this kind of tipping point within societal acceptance, you'll start to see that social change happening. But the academy was an incredibly important piece of social change. So I think that our mission in supporting the academy can really help us have that eventual long-term impact as we see these ideas spread throughout society.

Anthony Comegna ([23:18](#)):

When you're doing your day-to-day work managing a team of people, program owners like myself and other folks, you're managing relationships and budgets and stuff like that across the organization, how do you see that day-to-day work sort of building up to service that overall mission?

Emily Birchmier ([23:40](#)):

Yeah. I love the work that we do on our team. I think that we get to have a really clear impact in the lives of the people that we're supporting, which I really like to see. Whether it's designing a mock interview or a dossier review for a graduate student who's currently on the job market to help them be more successful in finding an academic job, or seeing the community building that can happen at a discussion colloquium, where now you get to come to one of these programs and be surrounded by 15 other people who are as interested and passionate about these ideas as you are.

Emily Birchmier ([24:26](#)):

Well, also, again, this is one of the things I love about a lot of our programs is, many of them have an interdisciplinary approach. So you might find a couple of people who are approaching it from your same field of study, but you're also going to find people with completely new perspectives and approaches and just the amount of new creativity and ideas that that diversity can bring, I think is just fantastic. So being able to see that kind of impact, like I said, whether it's helping someone get a job, inspiring new ideas, helping people workshop a new research project. I think that there is a lot of value that our team brings to IHS's overall goals, supporting these ideas in the academy.

Anthony Comegna ([25:15](#)):

Do you remember the faculty who was lecturing way back at that first summer seminar of yours?

Emily Birchmier ([25:21](#)):

I do. I will say that that summer seminar was also pretty much my first serious introduction to philosophy. I'm going to be completely honest, I was kind of an economics elitist, which Pete Beck, he

would be very upset at me for saying. But I didn't have much time for philosophy or see the real world application for it because I've always been very focused on like, "Well, sure, that's a cool thought experiment. But what's the actual practical application? How do we action that now and help people now?" And then, Jerry Gauss and Dave Schmitz were both at that summer seminar. I'm listening to them and their approach to philosophy was world-changing for me. I'm still a huge proponent of public reason philosophy. I think it's fascinating. I know nothing about it, but I think it's fantastic. Not only do I remember the faculty, I will say the faculty at that seminar had a life-changing experience for me.

Anthony Comegna ([26:29](#)):

What about programs you've attended since then? Can you think of say, maybe the most interesting one or two program topics that you've been to over the many years of attending programs now here?

Emily Birchmier ([26:45](#)):

Yeah. We've had some really good ones. Outside of the summer seminar, the only other program I did as a participant was on intellectuals and how intellectuals influence ideology, which was definitely an interesting set of readings. Another standout one that actually was the first program I directed when I came back to IHS was on, I think our name for it was Freedom, Peace in the State. But it was a historical look at freedom over time. And so, it was using Pinker's, *Better Angel of Our Natures*, was the primary text for that. But just looking at those claims that overall, things are improving. I think we had some really, really interesting discussions coming out of that.

Emily Birchmier ([27:37](#)):

Another program, actually two programs I'll mention that are options for any faculty who are listening who want to run these on campus that I really like. We have an excellent program on toleration that explores it from the perspective of Mill, from the second wave feminism perspective, just a really broad set on toleration and free speech that I think is excellent. And we have a excellent reader on policing, especially the militarization of the police state that I think is just fantastic.

Anthony Comegna ([28:17](#)):

All right, my greatest. Thanks, first and foremost, to Chad and Emily for joining me on the show this week, sharing their stories with us, and for working so hard for so long to help fulfill Baldy Harper's 60-plus-year-old vision. It's not easy work, but it is tremendously fun, especially when you get to work with great people like Chad and Emily. With that, I'll say a happy and hearty happy birthday to IHS. We'll have plenty more 60th anniversary theme content on the way for you in the coming months. As ever, thank you all for listening and for doing your part, whatever it might be, to keep the progress coming.