

An Interview with Mike Kazmierski

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Mike Kazmierski, Former CEO of Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada and was conducted on 12/1/22 by Kelliann Beavers. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Mike Kazmierski

Date: 12-01-2022

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Mike Kazmierski

Kelliann Beavers [00:06]

Okay. The first question is, can you describe your role and the role of your organization, as you saw it, during the crisis and since then?

Mike Kazmierski [00:17]

Well, we are a nonprofit that does economic development for the region. And businesses didn't really stop very long for the pandemic. The government did, but businesses didn't. I mean you still had our manufacturers at work. You still had logistics that had to distribute all the masks and equipment, and you still had the technology components and data centers operating.

So on the business side, all the pandemic was, was a different way to do business. The government never really got it – figured that one out, and pretty much, we shut down, went to ground, and started working remotely. Which made it much more difficult, in all honesty, for businesses to do what they were going in coping with the change.

So we were operational, and we never closed our doors. We were forced to close our doors for the first week until we were qualified as essential. But our operations were in the office throughout the pandemic. And, of course, we put our masks on, and social distanced, and all the things you had to do. But so did our manufacturing components; so did our technology, logistics, distribution, and everyone else – were at work and not at home.

The business perspective, in my view, was that the pandemic was just a different way to do business. It wasn't, obviously, the supply chain made it harder. Obviously, the lack of government interaction made it harder. Education institutions shut down as well. It just became more difficult for workers to get to work when their school closed, or their school decided they wanted to be remote. And now, you've got three kids and two working parents that are expected to be at a manufacturing site, a data center, or a logistics facility, and no childcare was open.

And so, on the business side, the government failed miserably. In my view, from an economic development perspective, we were very able to interact with the people looking to move to the region and the companies in the region that needed help. Most of that, obviously, was initially on phone calls and Zoom. But companies don't move to a region without first looking at it – I mean it's like you buying a house off Zillow. You're going to want to walk through it, kick the dirt, figure out what's going on, and everything else. And that's what the companies wanted to do, and so we were here for them, we met with them, we connected with them, and we talked with them. Our numbers for the pandemic did not decrease. We had as many job announcements as we projected with pre-pandemic projections. So it did not affect, at all, our ability to attract companies and respond to companies. And again, almost all of that was face-to-face across the table. They drove their own cars – whatever the accommodation was to make them feel better.

But we moved on, and life just went on. So that's kind of our initial assessment of the impact on business in the pandemic.

Kelliann Beavers [03:48]

Thank you. I think you covered the next question that I'm going to ask, somewhat, in your first question. So I'm just going to phrase it, and if there's anything you'd like to add, you can. Otherwise, I have a follow-up.

The question is, can you walk through a timeline, as you remember it, of what happened? What did you do? Were there pivotal moments that shaped your response and leadership? And so, if there's anything you would like to add to that, feel free. But you did kind of speak about the timeline as you introduced it.

Mike Kazmierski [04:15]

Yeah. And I think, probably, the key was the government, pretty much, shut down the state. Other states didn't do that. We did. We kind of mirrored California. And then they looked up and said, "Well, we can't do everything we need to do if we're shut down." So they designated essential businesses, which was really, almost everything up here, from my view, other than government and education, and life went on in a different mode. We put up screens, and we did all of the things, but that first week was pretty traumatic. I mean, obviously, some business occurs on phone calls and Zoom, but the less technology-savvy you are – and that happens a lot in many of the industries that are here – the less effective you're going to be.

I would note the difference between Vegas – Southern Nevada and Northern Nevada – as we have a more diversified economy, more heavily dependent on other industries that are not gaming, tourism or education. And the Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance, LVGEA, did shut down; did work from home, and did fail pretty miserably, in my view, to attract companies to the region during the pandemic.

Kelliann Beavers [05:45]

And part of what you're saying is that you observed that as related to the lack of diversity in the economy.

Mike Kazmierski [05:51]

Absolutely.

Kelliann Beavers [05:52]

Right. That makes a lot of sense. So the follow-up question that I wanted to ask, based on what you shared initially, was that you said, from your perspective, the pandemic introduced more of a different way to do business. It didn't stop doing business. It just introduced a different way, and some of those ways are things that are obvious you and I both know about – you don't have to list [them] out. But are there any ways you feel like it changed the way that business is done, that have held on, that you think was beneficial if you will, or created new opportunities for people to do business differently, that you think have been supportive – or vice versa, for that matter?

Mike Kazmierski [06:35]

Yeah. I think a couple of things from a business perspective. And you know, this is internal economic development in our operation, as well as what I've observed in other businesses. But obviously, there is some place for remote work. Some businesses had zero remote work and found out you could do some remote work. We actually allow our employees one day a week to do remote work. They like that, and that's a benefit. It allows us to make sure that we have the interaction and staff on board, to do what we're doing, on a day-to-day basis. But it gives them some sense of autonomy when they can do it. So I think it introduced remote work as an option, whereas that was not necessarily considered by many businesses before. So that would be one.

Two is, medical issues matter. So businesses would be – life goes on. You've just got work. If you're sick, stay home. And never really had to deal with or address the impacts of something like a pandemic, a serious flu outbreak, or whatever. They just, pretty much, ignored it and let the employees figure it out.

What the pandemic did was, it pulled the employer into addressing and dealing with medical issues that were impacting their staff and their employees, and how to protect them. And it required certain equipment and certain operational differences. It required dealing with some employees that had a very, very high level of sensitivity, whether actual or perceived. Many healthy millennials thought they were going to die if they came to work. Whereas the 70-year-olds, that were probably at a very high risk of dying, had no problem coming to work.

So some of it was an actual risk. Some of it was perceived risk. So that forced the employer to get into that game and figure out okay, I need these employees to be effective. How do I manage them on the medical side, and their concerns and fears? Some real and some perceived, so that I can still achieve the needs of the organization?

Kelliann Beavers [09:01]

Thank you for that. The next question is, how did you work with, or observe, groups who were hardest hit by the pandemic, and if you'd like to speak a bit about how you perceived who those groups were?

Mike Kazmierski [09:13]

Well, for us, the hardest hit was probably the gaming tourism industry which depended on discretionary spending and travel. I mean Vegas has more of that, so that impact was there. Those industries and their employees were made whole by the funding from the federal government and all the other subsidies. Whereas if it was just a layoff, it would have been more of an impact.

Kelliann Beavers [09:45]

Mm-hmm.

Mike Kazmierski [09:47]

So the employees were made whole through other programs, but the businesses were not made whole. They just suffered huge losses. In many ways, that's the name of the game. When times are good, they're good. When they're bad, they're bad. The difference is when things started to

pick back up, and they said, "Okay. Employees, we need you to come back to work," the employees were comfortable being paid not to work – and so there was friction driven by government-supported not working versus coming to work and having to earn a paycheck, which then allows the employer to make the money to pay you. So that it forced the government almost into the bad with the employer and the employee in a way that was unhealthy, in my view, and caused a lot of issues across the board. We're still dealing with some of that.

Kelliann Beavers [10:45]

Yeah. Thank you. You're definitely intuitively reading ahead into my questions. Because the next question is, is there anything you wish the government, at any level, did differently, or could do differently now, in response to the pandemic, or the economic downturn – which may be part of that question that is about, could do differently now – is something we haven't talked about yet. Or if there's anything that you would like to add, as a whole.

Mike Kazmierski [11:09]

Well, we have that benefit of hindsight now. Of course, early on, it was a little scarier.

Kelliann Beavers [11:13]

Mm-hmm.

Mike Kazmierski [11:16]

But the government just went to ground and said, "We're going to throw money at you. Stay away, and let's wait for the pandemic to end." Which, to me, that's the least common denominator solution. That's not a complex analysis solution. If you look at how states dealt with it – and obviously, Texas and Florida did a very different job and had similar impacts from the pandemic. Similar casualties, similar – I mean I don't know how dramatic the difference is. I can tell you, though, I have family in both locations, and life was very different for them, than it was here, in California, New York, or other places.

So the government response in other states was more empowering people, and less China-like, if you will, where they're still dealing with the problems in China with the zero-COVID policies. That's obviously one extreme. I think we were closer to that extreme than we were the – okay, people have brains. Let's let them make the decisions on what they want to do and empower them to decide on certain things.

So that's the other extreme, and somewhere in the middle is – obviously, Florida leans one way, and California leans the other. We felt the impacts, and now, hindsight is, okay, the Florida solution is a lot smarter, one, from an employee perspective, in getting them back to work and getting schools open, so they could get back to work. All of these other – I mean there's multiple complex components to this. That the government's imposition made it nearly impossible to do things the way businesses needed to do. And we still needed to manufacture things. We still needed to make distribution of food and masks. And all of that still needed to happen, and yet, the government, in my view, was just fine with "Well, everyone, just go home and wait for the pandemic to end." And oh, by the way, I don't know who's going to deliver my masks. I don't even know who's going to make my masks. I don't even really care because I'm safe sitting in my bedroom doing my Zoom call.

Kelliann Beavers [13:37]

Yeah. I think that's a really good point and a product of both haste and sort of misthinking. And I'm from Texas as well. I mean I've lived here five years. But it has certainly had – and my parents, my sister, and her family still live there. So it was interesting to have not only the perspectives that you learn about on television, as far as what's going on elsewhere, but to have a really direct experience of the difference. My sister is likely to – she has a chemical engineering role at a plant there, and so she had to go to work the entire time. There was no shutting down. It was just a very different experience that they had there.

The next question is, do you have any opinions about the policies that the federal government implemented like CARES, ARPA, or otherwise, and how they impacted people, whether that was positive or negative?

Mike Kazmierski [14:42]

Well, I think the government needed to do something, but I think they went way overboard. And that made it harder, ultimately, to get employees back to work.

Kelliann Beavers [14:50]

Mm-hmm.

Mike Kazmierski [14:52]

And they just started printing money, and now we're paying the price with inflation. We're all paying for it. We'll all pay for it at some point. But that overreaction, I think, has caused what we're seeing now; people can't afford to buy a house because of the cost of housing, and the cost of this. People can't afford to – gas prices have come down only because we're likely to go into a recession. So I mean some of the policies at the national level, certainly, shutting down the pipeline and causing energy prices there – I mean there's a lot of issues out there, and I'm not – I think both parties are idiots, so I really don't care which party ultimately; I'll look at, how do things run most effectively and take care of people in the long run. And there were a lot of miscues early on, and in my view, just a total overreaction at a time when we needed leadership. What we got was fear.

Kelliann Beavers [15:52]

Yeah. Before I ask the next question, I'm curious, with respect to what you just said. I understand, obviously, your job and what you do. But as far as the early days of the pandemic when, presumably, you were having really direct conversations with business leaders about what they needed, and what would happen next from their perspective. Did you feel like it was aligned with what you were saying, of feeling hemmed-in and paralyzed by – or did you have some folks who were fearful, in the same way, that you're articulating, so that you had people coming from both perspectives? Or, in your opinion, did you feel like it was more of a broad, unified – echoing what you've basically been saying was your sense of what business needed versus what they were given? Does that make sense?

Mike Kazmierski [16:47]

Yes. I think there were both. Fearful and people that just said – well, people were overreacting, if you will.

Kelliann Beavers [17:03]

Right.

Mike Kazmierski [17:04]

The majority of business leaders and business owners were in the camp of "Let's just deal with this like we deal with everything else." So, a very small, in my view, a small percentage of business people were willing to just go to ground, and then ultimately, go bankrupt. This is the solution to going to ground because you have no revenue, solutions, and you have no ultimate outcomes. You can only count on the government to write you so many checks and to carry you for so long. And then your entire life savings and business operation fails.

Kelliann Beavers [17:36]

Yeah.

Mike Kazmierski [17:38]

So they were kind of in a box that, pretty much said, "Okay. Everything I've done for my business life is ending, and I'll just wait for the pandemic to end." Or "Let's figure this out, like we figure everything out, and we'll deal with it."

Kelliann Beavers [17:53]

Yeah. That leads to the next question. What do you think were some of the most innovative ways that you observed organizations and citizens deal with the challenges of the pandemic and/or the economic downturns related to it? And this could be any example of collaboration, programs, or just something that comes to mind that you thought was particularly unique.

Mike Kazmierski [18:18]

Well, the state and the lieutenant governor did a program; "Deliver with Dignity." Which was really about getting people who were elderly, unable to go to work, or unable to get out. Getting them food and getting them resources. So, high-risk individuals that would die if they got COVID kind of thing. So "Deliver With Dignity" was the program. And I thought that was an innovative program. It addressed a real need. Not a 20-year-old sitting there, not wanting to do anything, and just wanting someone to deliver food to him. These are people who, if they were exposed, would probably die.

Kelliann Beavers [19:01]

Mm-hmm.

Mike Kazmierski [19:03]

So the "Deliver With Dignity" program was an effective way. The government wasn't solving that, so we worked a coalition up here. There was, obviously, the coalition in the South to do that, identify, and then help make – get the meals out to the people that needed them. So I thought that was a good innovative program that helped address certain needs. My view on the protocol that was set in place, I thought was effective because it minimized risk by allowing people to come to work. Most people were not stupid enough to sit in their offices with their masks on, even though that was required. But when you're out in the common areas, you wear the mask and you social distance. I mean I think the protocols were fairly effective at giving

people comfort that they weren't going to – as soon as you step out your front door, you're going to drop dead because there's this lightning bolt of COVID that's going to kill you. People's –overreacted to the fear factor and started to realize that life could go on.

So I think just the use of the protocol was helpful. We just sat too long and didn't adjust to reality. And the reality was, almost nobody died that was under age 30, even if they got COVID. So why are we shutting everything down – schools and universities? How many kids lost – I mean the loss is yet to be measured on education, mental health, and all of the other issues associated with the isolation that came with the lockdown. Which was an easy government solution but failed to consider the complexities and the impacts on people.

Kelliann Beavers [21:01]

Yeah. That's, in fact, become one of the most significant focus areas that we realized this project is becoming about if you will. Because really, as this project began, we were just here to listen and learn. And it's only now that we're realizing what we should focus on in terms of deliverables and what people are talking the most about. And the aspect of youth mental health is right there at the forefront, as far as something that needs really broad and immediate response and attention because it's definitely pretty dire.

Okay. I just have two more questions. The last one is, what do you think we can learn from the COVID crisis that could be lessons for a future crisis? I'm just thinking forward about emergency response or anything as a society that you think would be of value.

Mike Kazmierski [21:51]

Well, I think it's important that leaders lead. And you don't lead from your bedroom, close down the office, call people, and set up – you show up; you're where the trouble is. I mean, we didn't see the governor at hospitals. We didn't see our mayor in the business locations. We didn't see any of our leaders anywhere in this state, anywhere but on a Zoom call.

Kelliann Beavers [22:17]

Mm-hmm.

Mike Kazmierski [22:19]

And leaders need to be – let's face it. Seventy-five percent of the state was out in the world trying to do something, and our leaders went to ground and hid for two years. So I think, in my view, the biggest thing is that leaders need to lead, and the way you lead is, you show up where the danger is. You don't hide from it.

Kelliann Beavers [22:40]

Yeah. Thank you for that. That's well-put. The last question is, are you hopeful, and if yes, what are you hopeful for?

Mike Kazmierski [22:47]

Well, I'm hopeful we learned something. I mean the more analysis you and others do to say, "Well, you know, we hit these decision points, and some people left, and other people went right.

It looks like left was the right direction," or "It looks like right was the right direction, and here's why."

Kelliann Beavers [23:02]

Mm-hmm.

Mike Kazmierski [23:04]

So that when we're running down that same, similar path in the future, everyone will say, "Well, let's go right because that worked last time." So I'm hoping we learn from it. I hope we value the full impacts – second, third, and fourth-order effects, and not just "I'm just going to shut everything down because I'm going to get reelected." As opposed to okay. How does this affect our kids? How does this affect business, that the parents can't go to work because their kids are at school? How does it affect teachers? How do we make sure that teachers – I mean all the third, fourth, and fifth-order effects that were dealing with now on the mental health issues? And how many kids committed suicide, and how many this, and how many that? And just start to lay out some of the data, so that our decision-makers in the future are a little bit more – do their job, and not just go to a default safety, "every life is important" solution, as opposed to really understanding the scope of the problem.

Kelliann Beavers [24:10]

Yeah, I really like the way you phrased that as far as the third, fourth, and fifth order effects, and just the image when you think about it that way, really clarifies what I think many people are understanding more now but didn't understand early on.

This has been really valuable to me. We're interviewing leaders in education, government agencies, elected officials, the business community, and community organizations. And I feel like the business community because our scope is so broad, is the one in which it's challenging for me to ensure that I've gotten a nuanced enough perspective. Because there's so – that means so much, right? Our business community means a lot of different things and includes a lot of different things. So if anyone comes to mind that you think would be of value for us to interview or for me to speak with, please let me know. Because I think, certainly, the most valuable interviews I've had have come from folks like you, who are really connected, and can kind of say, "This person will give you an interesting peek into what was experienced."

Mike Kazmierski [25:14]

Do you have Ann(e) Silver, the chamber? She had a chance to hear from a lot of small businesses, and what the impacts were on their small businesses.

Kelliann Beavers [25:26]

That would be excellent. I'll reach out to her. I think that's – thank you.

Mike Kazmierski [25:29]

Yeah, she would be able to give you the perspective of someone who's put their entire life into a restaurant. And people at home eating, they could just as easily eat at a restaurant – with the social distance and with the other safety measures. And yet, they were not allowed to do that for a year and literally crushed probably 30% of the small businesses in the state.

Kelliann Beavers [25:54]

Oh, it just makes my stomach hurt. And thank you. That will be a really important connection to many of the things that we want to ensure we include that we are sort of making sure we're including directly, versus just by things that we know intuitively and have heard. So, I will reach out to her. I appreciate you suggesting that.

Mike Kazmierski [26:13]

Okay.

Kelliann Beavers [26:14]

Well, thank you so much for your time. This has been really meaningful. If you think of anything else that you think might be useful for me to think about or look at, let me know. Any random publications or releases that you think we're interested in being really comprehensive? And I appreciate you sharing what you shared with me, and your leadership. I know the role that you play can't be an easy one. So I also am appreciative of you for that.

Mike Kazmierski [26:37]

Well, thanks. And I look forward to your analysis, and hopefully, a path that other leaders can take in the future.

Kelliann Beavers [26:46]

Yeah, absolutely. We'll be sharing with you as we start to develop any drafts. And like I said, we'll also send you a transcript of this particular call in case you want to add or change anything.

Mike Kazmierski [26:55]

Okay. Well, I appreciate that.

Kelliann Beavers [26:56]

Thank you so much. Have a good afternoon.

Mike Kazmierski [27:00]

Thanks. Bye.

End of audio: 27:00