



PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH MAYOR SLY JAMES



LIST OF PARTICIPANTS:

SLY JAMES

Mayor of Kansas City, Missouri

STEVE KRASKE

Veteran Journalist and Radio Host

STEVE KRASKE

I'm Steve Kraske, and this is the Overland Resource Group podcast series – “Profiles in Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement.” These are stories about the surprising results organizations achieve by experimenting with alternative approaches to working collaboratively, empowering employees and leading more creatively.

These stories are told by leaders of corporations, government agencies and the unions which represent their workforces as well as leading experts in the field of organizational change. The series is underwritten by Overland Resource Group, a change leadership consultancy bringing transformative results to organizations for more than 30 years.

We're visiting today with Kansas City, Mo., Mayor Sly James, who leads the largest city in Missouri, the sixth largest city in the Midwest and, with 475,000 people, the 36th largest city in the nation. A lawyer, Mayor James was re-elected in 2015 with 87 percent of the vote. We visited with the mayor in his 29th-floor City Hall office.

Mayor, good to have you here. Thanks for taking time.

SLY JAMES

Steve, it's always good to talk to you.

STEVE KRASKE

I wanted to begin by going back a few years to your first campaign for mayor, which was your first campaign for public office of any kind. You and your opponent in the general election of that campaign, Mike Burke, made a joint decision not to go negative in any way. And I should point out this was a highly competitive race. I've covered a lot of campaigns in my career, but I'd never covered one quite like that. Neither of you wavered from that commitment. My question is why? In an era when negative campaigning seems to be in the air we breathe, what were you thinking?

SLY JAMES

Well, I was thinking quite frankly that—and I know it to be true now—I have the best job in politics. And the reason I have the best job in politics is I meet my

constituents every single day. We are held accountable every single day. We have to get things done every single day. And it's harder to get things done when you've fought with half the city in trying to get there in the first place. It's a truism, and it's something that we live with. It's something that I think propels us throughout the day and throughout the course of these first two terms or these two terms, and that is that when we collaborate and get along, we get a lot more done. I knew Mike Burke before we started running. I knew that he was going to run. He knew that I was going to run. And we made an agreement that whoever won would incorporate somehow the other person in their administration. And the reason was very simple: If you've got people who are committed to the cause, and you're not that far apart on the issues, and they have talent and desire, why would you ever want to do anything to exclude them from the process? So he wanted to be engaged, and I engaged him. I wanted to be engaged. He engaged me. And there's just nothing to be gained by more negativity. One of the reasons I wanted to run in the first place is because the city had become so negative, so down in the mouth, so moribund. And I really couldn't stand to see my city like that, to be quite honest.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, as mayor, you brought Mike Burke into your administration, as you just said. You appointed him to chair two key committees: a bi-state innovation team that ushered in Google Fiber and a task force for the arts that led to the formation of the Office of Culture and Creative Services. Again, such an unusual move. Is this sort of the "Team of Rivals" idea that Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote about in her biography of Abraham Lincoln?

SLY JAMES

Well you know, I don't know, because that book was way too thick (laughs), and so I didn't actually read it, but I heard about it. To me, it was common sense. We had two important things that we needed to get done. I had a guy who had just made a pretty good name for himself, established a pretty good group of collaborators when he was running for office. Why not put him in charge of a couple of different things that needed high profile (attention) and move forward? How better to unite a group of people than to bring the parties or the people who were supposedly the champions of those groups together in order to have them work together? It's very simple to me. You know, it just makes more sense to work together. Mike and I weren't enemies. We didn't get engaged in negative name-calling and all that. It wasn't personal. He had his ideas about how to do things, and I had mine, and we weren't really that far apart. So, I had to have somebody do it. Why not him? He was good at it. He did a great job at it. He took it seriously, and because of his recent run for the office, he had the profile, credibility and—what's the word—"veritas" (sic) to pull it off.

STEVE KRASKE

And I gather you think this might apply to other fields, other endeavors where leadership is so important, whether it's governing or whether it's running a major corporation.

SLY JAMES

I think any time you are working with people, as opposed to working against people, you're going to get more results and better. You're going to farther. The old proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." And I think that we have an example of the opposite when we look at state government and federal government, where it's head-banging arguments and gridlock. I think our way works better, and I think that because we're in a city, we have to produce. And by doing this, we are producing, and that makes everybody happier, and we are able to get more done. Negativity takes too much energy that needs to be spent on getting things done. It's just that simple. It's not in my nature to be real negative.

STEVE KRASKE

Let's turn to the leadership style you've come up with to guide this city, because people will be interested in this. You are pulled in a thousand different directions on any given day. How do you choose how to spend your time? How do you decide what to focus on on any given day?

SLY JAMES

Well, I think sometimes that very question confounds my staff to death, because there are thousands of options. Larissa (Westenkirchner, Director of Administration), God bless her, takes good care of me. She schedules everything that I do, and once every other day or so, she pulls out a folder and says, "You have 10 minutes?" And it's like OK, and she goes through, "OK, these are for these two or three days," and she reads off 20 or 30 things. And it's like, "OK, what time is that? We'll do that. We won't do the other." And we look—I look at it from several things. There are some things that I do because they fit right in with our agenda on the four E's, and it's necessary. There are some things—

STEVE KRASKE

The four E's being?

SLY JAMES

Education, employment, enforcement and efficiency in government. So if it falls into one of those things, I do it. I'm the president of National Democratic Mayors. I'm the president of African-American Mayors. I'm a trustee of Urban Land Institute. I'm an adviser in U.S. Conference of Mayors, so if it fits in one of those categories, I definitely try to do it. If it involves kids or education, I do it and try to do it. And if it's just something that somebody really wants, and I can help, and it doesn't cost me anything, I try to do it. I look at it in a descending order of what's going to advance this city the most and then there are some things where I just say, "That sounds like fun," and I'll do it. But a lot of things don't get done simply because I can't be everywhere all the time.

STEVE KRASKE

How often do you meet with your staff?

SLY JAMES

I met—had a staff leadership meeting this morning. They had a staff meeting this afternoon. I meet with them—I don't meet with them very often on a formal basis, but I do meet with them on an informal basis all the time. All the

meetings that I have are staffed by staff, so they come in with me when I'm meeting with somebody, and we meet together, and then we talk about it and what we're going to do from that point on.

STEVE KRASKE

In your private time, are you constantly making to-do lists? Are you meeting with a kitchen cabinet, or how are you—how do you find time to think about what you want to get done?

SLY JAMES

Define private time. I'm just kidding.

STEVE KRASKE

Because there's not much of it.

SLY JAMES

There's not much of it. There really isn't. You know, you know last week, I got home a couple of nights at nine, 9:30, 10 o'clock—whatever. When I get home at that point, I'm usually going to head straight upstairs, get rid of the jacket, pick up my portable speaker, my cigar-cutting tool and my beer-top opener and a cigar, and I'm going to go back out on the porch, and I'm going to either have a beer or drink some scotch. I'm going to listen to some music. I'm going to play games on my iPad while it's—as long as the cigar's there and the beer's there, and then I quit, and I start over again. That's my quiet time. That's my down time. I don't make a lot of lists. I tend to react immediately. Like if I think of something, I'm probably going to send an email to somebody. If it's something I need to do, I'll send an email to Larissa: "Please check this out. Put it on the calendar." Joni (Wickham, Chief of Staff) and I talk every night, and so if there's something on her mind or my mind, it's usually disposed of then. I do a lot of stuff. I've got a brand-new iPad Pro, and I love it, because I can write on it, and I can send emails in writing—don't have to type. But I'm not a big list-keeper, but I'm a big writer. I write a lot of stuff down. So sometimes, I go back through it and see what I've done or what need to do and go from there.

STEVE KRASKE

So your time for thinking comes when?

SLY JAMES

Usually, I would say—to be honest with you—my time for thinking usually comes sometime between the hours of 10 and two.

STEVE KRASKE

When you're lying in bed.

SLY JAMES

Or when I'm sitting there just kind of vegging out, yeah but yeah, when it's quiet, and I have a chance to think.

STEVE KRASKE

You decide how to delegate whether—how do you do that, whether it's something you want to—you should do for yourself or something your staff should do for you?

SLY JAMES

First of all, I decide when and how to delegate first and foremost when

I decide who to hire, because I want people who I think can handle the delegation. My staff is all responsible for something discrete, and I happen to think—because I want to be treated that way—that I don’t want somebody to tell me what to do every minute. I want to have something that I’m responsible for, and I can produce, so they’re doing that. The delegation comes with meetings. If I have a meeting with somebody who wants to talk about our summer programming, and Chantelle (Garrett, Special Assistant Office of Civic & Community Engagement) is here, and Chantelle is sitting in on the meeting because that’s her gig, is the summer programming and all of that, after that meeting, it’ll be, “OK, what do we need to do?” “Well, I’ll do this, and you do that.” I let them do as much as they can do. I will do whatever they ask me to do, and there are some things that I will volunteer to do, because I think it’s going to have the best impact that way. So we just kind of split it up based on a what-makes-sense approach.

STEVE KRASKE

This is your first public office. What has surprised you about this world of being a big city mayor and the politics that go with it?

SLY JAMES

I think one of the things is—it surprised me, but it’s pleasant—is the almost infinite variety of things. I mean it’s a remarkable—remarkably complex, interconnected situation, and it drives me. I love it, because I never know what’s going to happen in a day, and even if I have the day all planned, something always pops up. That’s one thing. The other thing, too, is that I’m a little disappointed sometimes that there are people that just want to be pains in the rear for the sake of being a pain in the rear. I mean, they refuse to listen to facts and logic. They just don’t want to be pleasant, and that drives me nuts. Or people who don’t want to see progress, or people who think that because of the way they lived for the last 40 years, that’s how things ought to be for the next 40. And I look at it differently. You know, we are about building a city for the next 40 or 50 years. I’m not going to be here. My kids will be. My grandkids will be, but I recognize—based on my life—that things that I enjoyed when I was a kid don’t exist in that way anymore. Technology is driving a lot of stuff, and if we’re going to compete and be real big cities at the table, we’ve got to make those adjustments. And it bothers me sometimes that there are just people who refuse to want to make those adjustments.

STEVE KRASKE

And you deal with that frustration how, mayor?

SLY JAMES

By drinking. (laughter) No, I have a—it’s not totally untrue—but I have a safe house here, you know, I have a safe house with my staff.

STEVE KRASKE

You mean here, this office?

SLY JAMES

Yeah. I don’t feel like there’s anything that I can’t say to my staff and burn it off. And a lot of times, they let me burn it off and then they bring me back to

reality. I'm climbing off the ledge. And then we figure out, "OK, after you've gotten it off your chest, now what are we going to do?" And so we find a way to address it. And that's really—you know, and it doesn't happen all the time, but it happens enough so I'm aware of it. And if you're living in this day and age and watching the national political scene, I think you know exactly what I'm talking about.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, like the leader—speaking of setbacks—like the leaders of any big business, you face obstacles all the time.

SLY JAMES

Sure.

STEVE KRASKE

This city has a weak-mayor form of government. It's easy right now to mount petition drives to block your initiatives.

SLY JAMES

Right.

STEVE KRASKE

Federal support for cities is declining, not increasing. You have a whole host of new council members as you've started your second term.

SLY JAMES

Right.

STEVE KRASKE

I'm wondering how do you deal with hurdles like that and the frustrations that come with it?

SLY JAMES

Well, first of all, I believe that this system is weak-mayor in—technically, but I happen to think that you act like a strong mayor until somebody stops you. Now I don't have the authority to do some things like my friend, Francis Slay, does down in St. Louis. I don't have an executive order pin, which I think would be great. I'm much more involved with the council, because I vote, and I chair those meetings. He doesn't have to do that, and I think that is an impediment, and I think that strong-mayor government cities move faster and are—and build more and tend to get more done than this system. This system emphasizes the breaks a lot. The strong-mayor system emphasizes the engine, I think. It has breaks, but the breaks are not the same as here. You know, the other parts of it, too, are that we're in the Midwest, and we're not necessarily going to always be on the cutting edge, although we're starting to be there on a lot of different things, really taking our place in that area. The frustrations I have are simply because I'm an impatient person. And one of the reasons that I wanted to be in the position in the first place is because I truly do see the potential of this city. I love this city—always have. And when I feel like we're being held back, it drives me a little nutty sometimes, but I get it, and I'm happy with the progress that we have made. And I think some of that's been truly very interesting and remarkable, but I just want to see us be the best. And that's what I've always said: "Make Kansas City best."



STEVE KRASKE

You know, having watched you for a number of years, I wouldn't want to get in your way.

SLY JAMES

(laughs) Yeah, a lot of people say that, I think, sometimes.

STEVE KRASKE

Do they?

SLY JAMES

Yeah, they do. They do. And quite frankly, to be honest with you and to be quite frank, some of that is, "We're afraid of the big black man." There's—you know, the angry black man thing doesn't take a whole lot, just like for a woman. If a woman raises her voice, all of a sudden, she's shrill, OK? If I raise my voice, I'm an angry black man. So I get that, so that does fuel some of this but not all the time. The other thing is is that I am very committed, and I'm a lawyer by trade. I'm a trial lawyer by trade. I love a good argument. If you're going to beat me, put your facts on the table. Let's go toe to toe. And if people don't want to do that, and I do, they sometimes want to "whoa" back up, but once I get something going, and I think I've got the facts, I'm more than happy to put my facts on the table. If you can beat me, beat me. If you can't, stop.

STEVE KRASKE

So, one theme of your tenure so far is keeping Kansas City a major American city. How tough of a job is that?

SLY JAMES

You know, not right now. I think we're on the ascendency of that. I think at the beginning, it was tough, but we got lucky on so many fronts. Google. Right off the bat, that gave us leverage to go talk about this city around the entire world. "How do you guys get that? Why Kansas City? What do you guys have that we don't have?" Yadda, yadda, yadda. And we got to explain a lot, and so we leveraged that. We turned that into things, and we had people come from outside in to see what was going on, talk about what was going on, how do we do the same thing. So we kept leveraging that, and we leveraged that into this program and that program and this partnership and that partnership. And then we got lucky again. All-Star game. Voila. All of the sudden we're all over the place, so we leveraged all of that and now we've got more people in for Google. And we have people come from all over the world for the All-Star Game, and they were running around, and they were saying, "I had no idea," meaning they had no idea about Kansas City. And then we had the smart and connected city, the streetcar. Everything started coming together. Development downtown. What it showed me is is that when you have success and believe in yourself, and you leverage that success, you just keep growing. And that's what we're doing. We're keeping rolling. We have a very high profile now relative to where we were. We're not still. We're not where we want to be. We always want to be mentioned in the top five of everything. But we're really getting there, and people starting to know that across the country.

STEVE KRASKE

Mayor Sly James, thank you very much.



SLY JAMES

No, thank you. Appreciate it.

STEVE KRASKE

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