

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 110

James Krstolich and Gabe Schlickau

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Don Sherman: [00:00:00] welcome to another exciting edition at the WCBA Powered, of course by Evergy. First, thank you for listening. Don't forget to like us, love us, share us. We truly appreciate you checking us out in the house. [00:01:00] Double duty. We got CoBank and Idea Tech in the house. E.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's right. This is pretty interesting today.

It's gonna be really fun. I have one of my best homies, Gabe. He's mine. No, he, you can't claim him. Alright. I knew him before you. All right. I guess Gabe settled this right now. Who's your favorite?

Gabe Schlickau: Oh, no, this is not what I came here

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Well, nevertheless,

Gabe Schlickau: I can be a good enough friend to be both.

Don Sherman: Okay. That's a win for me. Cause normally they say Ebony.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: They do typically, but apparently we're not real friends, so no,

we have a Gabe Schlickau and James Krstolich

James Krstolich: you got it. You nailed it.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yes. All right, gentlemen. Welcome.

Gabe Schlickau: Thank you. Thank you. Glad to be here.



Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah. Yeah.

So Gabe, let's start a little bit, with you, right? So you're the vice chair, of advocacy for the, the Wichita Chamber, right?

Gabe Schlickau: Correct. Yes ma'am.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: What does that mean?

Gabe Schlickau: Well, it means

I am, the volunteer board [00:02:00] member, , responsible for our advocacy efforts. And so what, what the Chamber really focuses on is making sure that we have. Vibrant, healthy business community.

And part of that is making sure that we have an environment where businesses can thrive and we advocate for that at the local, federal, state level.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's awesome. I think that's important because I, you know, a lot of people understand and know that's what, the Chamber does and that's a major role, but a lot of people, Understand that.

Why are we, or why it's the chamber in the business of making this a business friendly, environment? Like why is that so important to, to small business?

Gabe Schlickau: Well, the Chambers, first of all, Chamber's, a membership driven organization. And so we're made up of business members, largely small business members.

And so what's important to them is what's important to the chamber. And obviously operating environment is very important to small businesses.

The obvious things like tax and regulation are important to business, but

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: tax and regulation's important,

Gabe Schlickau: Important, very important.[00:03:00]

regardless of what you might hear

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: sometimes.

Oh, okay. .

Don Sherman: But

Gabe Schlickau: it's not just that though. Every year the Chamber does a legislative survey of our membership and.

overwhelmingly,

The largest issue on the minds of our members, at least in the, in recent history, has been workforce related issues.

And so what is it that the Chamber can do that advocates for, workforce related, programs, legislation that, that enhance the workforce of our community, that make us more competitive place for business and small business to thrive.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah, that's, I think workforce is a, it's a big one. Okay. And you've been involved with the Chamber for over what, 10, 15 years or so? Something like that?

Gabe Schlickau: It's hard to count. I think the only person that's been around longer is probably Don

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: well, you probably, just, I'm right here. You may be right.

Okay. . And you also sit on the board for, workforce Alliances, right?

Gabe Schlickau: Yes, I do. I'm the past chair of the Workforce Alliance [00:04:00] Board.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: You did a wonderful job of, of chairing that. Oh, thank you. Made it easy for me to attend the meetings.

Gabe Schlickau: Yeah, you're good. You're a good board member. Good to have you there.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Thank you. That's all I really wanted you to say,

Gabe Schlickau: Thank

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: you, Ebony.

No, but in all seriousness, so.

how

small businesses get involved, or participate in the legislative agenda survey? Can we talk about that?

Gabe Schlickau: Yep,

Absolutely. So I think that is, is one of the most important ways that small businesses should be involved, obviously. The chamber is your chamber. If you're a member of the chamber small business the chamber operates at your direction. And one of the processes in place to be sure that we're doing that is the annual legislative survey.

So in the fall of the year, Survey comes out that, that asks our members what's the most important thing to you re as it relates to policy issues at the local, state, and federal level. And it's it's a comprehensive survey and it gathers a lot of information, a lot of questions are asked.

And then that information comes back to our government relations committee where we use that information to develop our legislative [00:05:00] priorities for the year. And so it, it's like anything, If you're not participating in that survey, then your voice isn't heard and you missed an opportunity to influence the direction of the chamber in our efforts in that regard.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So you guys do that. How long is the survey?

Gabe Schlickau: Oh,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: said comprehensive. And so when you say that word, I'm just

Gabe Schlickau: 50 to 70

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: questions.

Gabe Schlickau: questions. Okay. It's a long, it's significant.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I ask that because sometimes when businesses see that it's that length , they get scared off. But I really want them to understand the importance Right.

Of, of getting it done and, and why we need them to participate.

Gabe Schlickau: Yep. And then yes, it's a time commitment, but it's not a huge time commitment. You can probably knock it out in 30 minutes to hour. But the significance of it is that and the reason that is there's so many questions, is we truly wanna know at a detailed level what's on the minds of businesses in this community and what is it that we need to be advocating for at the state, local, and federal level.

And [00:06:00] then we can take that information and we can develop our priorities. And as you might imagine with a, a. Membership mix of the chamber. There are some issues where we're, we don't have an overwhelming majority that believe one way or the other, or we might be split 50 50 on an issue. And, and we don't know that unless we do the survey and we don't know

where we have consensus unless we do the survey.

So the survey brings us consensus and confidence about what we're going to tell our legislators is true in the minds of our chamber members. And that's the reason it's important that folks participate.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah, I agree.

Now, when I have conversations sometimes with some of our smaller businesses such as those persons, with five employees, maybe 10 employees, sometimes they don't know or understand that their voice too, in this particular matter is important. Is there a message or anything that we should be sharing with them to say that, you know, to make them feel as if this too, we need to hear from them.

Gabe Schlickau: Yeah. Well, what I would say is if you're a small, especially when you're a small business, you [00:07:00] may not have the time to dedicate to go and meet with your legislators in person.

And you may not have time to personally track the issues that are gonna be of significance to your business. And being a part of the Chamber's government relations process gives you that power without the time and the money that it would take to do it on your own. And it brings you into collaborative.

Of like-minded business owners who all are pulling the same direction and brings a, a shared voice to, to our state and local leaders on your behalf that you may not be able to do otherwise.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: that's important. Thank you for sharing that. Sure. Done.

Don Sherman: Excellent. Ebony likes getting into that government relations thing. That's her jam. Mm-hmm. . That ain't my jam. . Okay. I'm just saying. I wanna get to know the folks. Gabe, I've known you for a while. James, I just met you. I think you come to our open house at Every Connect. Sorry. Ebony butchered your name.

She went to Southeast, so it's what it is. I got it, sir. No, I [00:08:00] don't think she got it.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Miss Gabe.

Don Sherman: Tell us about Gabe and why are you in government relations?

Gabe first.

Gabe Schlickau: so the reason that , that this is important to me is obviously as we talked, I've been involved in, in the Chamber for quite some time, and I just believe in the virtue of good

business in our community and, and I've seen firsthand the importance of, policy issues as it relates to the growth of our business in the community.

So I have a passion for it. I enjoy the relationships that come of it, but, See a great value in the unified voice that we're able to take from the chamber to the decision makers who need to hear it, as a unified voice and how important it is to the growth of our community. Ultimately, you know, the success of our business community is the success of our community as a whole.

And I see that, and I think that, legislative government relations, issues are a significant driver in that. So that's the reason I'm involved and enjoy.

the

Don Sherman: work. Excellent. Now tell us about Gabe De person.

I mean, [00:09:00] give us a snapshot of your life.

Gabe Schlickau: Oh wow. That's a big

question.

Don. I mean, well, let's,

Don Sherman: did you go to Southeast?

Gabe Schlickau: No, I can't claim that.

Don Sherman: That's a win. Okay. Now you can

Gabe Schlickau: I think Ebony and I have this in common that we're both K staters we can agree on that.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: We do agree on that.

Don Sherman: Okay. I'm down with K State. All right. You know, , we always chat

Gabe Schlickau: Otherwise, I, a family wife, my wife's a teacher at, live in a rural community.

Actually, I'm the definition of Wichita Regional Chamber of Commerce cuz I live. Out in, Northeast Harper County, but, have two kids and active in, sports. And, we like to raise cattle for a hobby. And, that's just, just, little bit of the glimpse of my life outside of professional

what company are you with now?

I'm with CoBank. CoBank is the, is a lender part of the farm credit system, and we lend to the, ag cooperative space in agri, agri industry and rural.

Don Sherman: Okay. Excellent. And I wanted our audience to see that you, you know, you don't have to. Just rooted in government relations to be able [00:10:00] to, participate in government relations.

James, tell us, give us your four 11. Did you go well, did you go to Southeast?

James Krstolich: I did not go to Southeast I, okay. I am actually from Hutchinson, area, so I guess you say I'm a Salt Hawk. Yep. Was, raised up there my entire life. Stayed there, went to the community college and then I went to Wichita State, so not K State, but Wichita State.

And I love my time there and I really. Route, like grew a love of Wichita. I worked for a company here for about six years, and then, I currently work for ID Tech, which is a fiber optic internet company out of Bueller, Kansas, which if you know Hutchinson, you know, Bueller's about maybe five miles east of the town.

And so, coming back to, to my hometown to be able to help provide internet to, to folks who might not have other options is a really. Good feeling because a lot of times our mission is to serve the underserved and people ask, well, what is that? And a lot of times we realize, especially when covid hit, people don't have a whole lot of options, especially in western Kansas, but maybe that, you know, they might have had like maybe one option or [00:11:00] maybe they had like a wireless option that they couldn't get a good signal for.

And so when all the children were sent home from school and they didn't have any option to do their homework, we came in and brought fiber optic in with the state. And so it was really nice to be able to get those phone calls to be like, You guys really made a difference. And so to me, I guess I never thought I would be in the, the internet realm, but, I couldn't think of anything different.

And so it's really, it's been really exciting these last few years

Gabe Schlickau: for

Don Sherman: sure. So,

Excellent. And I'll come across your company. Over the last couple of decades, you guys were trying to do broadband when in rural communities before Covid. I mean, you guys have been trying to do it a lot.

Tell us how what Gabe and his team is doing affects your business.

James Krstolich: it, it affects it a lot. The advocacy that, you know, Gabe and Tony especially, is just the connections because a lot of times we work off a lot of grants from the state and well of the federal government as well. And so having the opportunities to, to meet key figures in the community to be able to help.

Share our story to the state and as well as to the [00:12:00] FCC about who Idea Tech is and what we're trying to achieve. Has really opened the door for us to be able to, you know, win some of these grants that we just won recently. By Liberal out in Seward County for \$8 million. It really helps bring an economical impact into the state of Kansas.

And the Chamber has been so good for us because they've just been really big advocates of who we are. And I could talk about the time when, John Rolfe and, and Jill Johnson came down to Bueller. And really what was nice because they took the time outta their day to find out who we are and learn our story.

And a lot of times people don't do that. Like chambers. You know, you just, you pay your membership and you go, but they're being involved and invested and say, okay, what can we do to help you? And that was something that the Chamber has helped us and it really opened your eyes. Like, we wanna partner with the Chamber and be good chamber members.

And you know, and that's, it's just been a good thing for us because they care and they've opened that door of, whether it's networking opportunities or [00:13:00] introducing us to different organizations. It's been a really good, experience to be a part of the Chamber.

Don Sherman: Excellent. And just two things. You mentioned Bueller, and like you said, this is a Wichita regional Chamber of Commerce and they Yes. They came up to Bueller and to hang out with you guys to figure out what you guys were doing.

Second thing, who's.

Tony?

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Oh,

James Krstolich: Tony. She's sitting right over there. . And she, she has been awesome. Is she? It's just,

Gabe Schlickau: her name?

James Krstolich: Tony Porter over there.

And so she

Don Sherman: I don't know her as, she makes me call her Mrs. Porter,
Ms.

So I don't know her as Tony. I just knew her first name just now.

James Krstolich: I tell you what we have a local office here in Wichita and we work with some people that know Tony professionally, the pack bushes and the family.

And they couldn't speak highly of Tony more highly.

Gabe Schlickau: I

WCBA_Ep110_DonEbony_raw: call

Don Sherman: you Tony? I guess

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: so now that the, now that the

Don Sherman: secret's out, the secret's
out.

Everybody loves the Queen Tony

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Porter.

It's true. So very true. We're gonna hear a [00:14:00] word from our sponsors and we'll be back to hear a little bit more about government relations in the Chamber of Commerce

Welcome back friends. We're here. Welcome back friends. We are here hearing from James and Gabe. So gentlemen you've kind of shared, a lot about how small businesses can be involved, but I don't think we've talked a little bit or any about the political action committee.

Gabe, can you talk or speak to what is the pack?

Gabe Schlickau: Yeah, well, the pack is one of the resources that are at the disposal of the Chamber to try to influence and encourage, a strong business climate for our businesses in Wichita. And so the pack exists, to raise money and to encourage, the election of officials who are business friendly and, and we work hard at that.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's wonderful. And so you guys have a scorecard, is that

Gabe Schlickau: Yes. Yep. Yeah. And so really the process of the pack is that there's a scorecard that [00:15:00] measures, that, that keeps track of the votes that are taken by our public officials and, eliminates the ambiguity from which, someone may receive support from the pack.

And so if an.

official

Scores high, based on their votes in support of business, then they'll receive support of the pack. If they don't, score so high as a business, as a supporter of, the business environment in our community, then they may not receive support. And so, you know, a lot of times I think the question comes up, well, how does the pack choose?

Who to support

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That was gonna be my

Gabe Schlickau: question and why. And really, the scorecard is the answer. It tells us, we, we have a defined set of things that are important to our business community, largely tied to that legislative survey process that we talked about earlier. And that defines what's important. And it says, okay, here are the issues that took place in the legislature last.

How did each of you vote on it? And if you voted in, in favor of pro business, stance on the issue, then you scored well, and if you voted against it, then you didn't score so well. And so it [00:16:00] eliminates the ambiguity, it eliminates the partisanship, and really just bases, support on the facts of how do you support the business community, because that's what's important to

to

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: us. Yeah, no, that's really, that's really key. Can you maybe describe some of, what are those top things? We talked about workforce being one of them. What are a couple of the other things that are key?

Gabe Schlickau: Yeah. Well, workforce, taxation regulation if you look at our policy agenda, which I think you can find out on the chamber's website in full detail it, it outlines the, I think there's about six or seven main topics.

Those two, there's transportation related issues. There's diversity, equity, inclusion. There is Energy competitiveness. I may be missing one or two, but but I, I think by far

probably

probably the most significant from what we hear, like I said in earlier from our members, is that workforce related issues are the things that, that are keeping them up most at night at the present.

And so if you look at our agenda the longest, most detailed list of bullet points in support of that topic is workforce and education

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: [00:17:00] Workforce and education. So, out of the number of years you've been a part of this there's been a few things that we've advocated for as an organization. Can you maybe speak to some of those things we've advocated for and maybe some of the successes we've had?

Gabe Schlickau: Yeah, absolutely. I, well, I think first of all The big buzz in Wichita right now is the announcement about Integra, right?

Yeah.

and that, that took legislative action. The Apex Bill that supported the winning of that that announcement, Integra to invest 1.8 billion in our community and bring 2000 jobs.

Okay? And so you might say, well, what does that mean for small business? And it's our belief. You know, that kind of investment in our community brings lots of ancillary opportunities that will definitely impact small business over time. And so that's one that's like recent hot off the press.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: and I, Integra itself is a business that was here in Wichita that, and I don't know what you I, Brett and his team are amazing, the CEO and the work that they've done.

[00:18:00] So I mean that in itself to say that, hey, a company here in Wichita is able to do this and bring this type of success.

Gabe Schlickau: Absolutely exciting times. There for sure. In addition to that, you know, the other issue last year, I think one of, one of our major wins was the aviation tax credit.

Which, which put into place tax credits that are gonna support the growth of aviation jobs in our community for the employer. Who employs new aviation employees, but also for the workforce. It, it allows a tax credit for those who choose to enter aviation as a field of work. And again, those things trickle out into our community for the impact of small business.

But as it relates I'll throw one more out there. I think very specific to small business related issues. If you think back to the pan, the times of the pandemic the Chamber was very active in advocating in support of our small businesses as related to, to shutdowns. We know that small businesses.

Proportionately impacted at a great, at a higher level due to shutdowns [00:19:00] during that

time. And so the chamber was active, making sure that the collective voice of our chamber members were heard related to that issue. To try to keep small business open so that they could continue to have a revenue stream and remain in business past the pandemic.

And then I'll throw one more out that I think is recently relevant. I was just reading in the *Advocate*, the *Advocate* this morning, which I'd encourage everyone, every chamber member to go sign up for the *Advocate*. It's a weekly briefing of what's happening in the legislature and you can find that information on the Chamber's website as well.

But in the *Advocate* this morning it was updating, it wasn't this morning, it came out yesterday. It comes, it's today, Tuesday. It comes out every Monday. So it came out yesterday and it was highlighting the.

Legislation that would allow businesses to implement a sur credit card surcharge for when a customer buys something with a credit card and they want the business to have the choice whether they implement a surcharge or not.

And so there's the active legislation at Topeka now that would be a direct impact, a small business that the Chamber has boots on the ground advocating and working on as we [00:20:00] speak in Topeka.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Sound like a lot of wins. A lot of wins.

And you know, just for those listeners who you referenced Apex, but you know, they may wanna go back and look at what Apex is. And really Apex is what attracting powerful economic expansion. So that's what it stands for. And that legislation was critical to, to our state and has brought some significant wins.

And I think we get two times to use that and. This is the second here in Wichita. We had one in northeast Kansas earlier with the announcement of Panasonic and now I'm with Integra down here in South central Kansas. So really excited about that. Thank you for mentioning that. Done. Excellent.

Don Sherman: I think I only got a couple questions for it.

Let's go to James. He's sitting over there. not doing anything. . So how about what advice would you give businesses like yours to get involved with the government relations?

James Krstolich: Yeah, I mean, my biggest thing is to connect is one of the things that we've realized is that the Chamber has resources that [00:21:00] we might not even know about and they have the connections that can really help elevate your business. And they have a great

staff who. Really wants to see you succeed. And so I guess that's the biggest thing I could recommend to somebody is connect.

Whether that's just through the government portion of that or if that's just being a local there's a lot of different opportunities with networking events. Resources. They have a directory of different businesses that we've utilized to be able to say, okay we need an IT company. What can, who can we recommend?

The, the Chamber. Has been really good at sharing those contacts. And it's just a really good resource to have for business owners

Don Sherman: Speaking of resources as you're listening to this podcast, you might check out the show notes. We have a couple of links out there. We got the chamber legislative agenda page. We also got the legislative scorecard, the advocate legislative update. And the win loss agenda is excellent.

So

Anything else? E do we have to ask?

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: No, I think it's [00:22:00] time for a little word association.

Don Sherman: The best part, you've dealt with Ebony for a long time and now you're gonna be rewarded.

Oh wow.

So sometimes you gonna do word association. I'm gonna ask you one word.

You gimme one word back. It's not wrong cuz it's your word and you both get

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: to answer. And I wanna throw some in as well. So go ahead. This is gonna be fun.

Gabe Schlickau: This is the part nobody told me.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Welcome . Welcome.

James Krstolich: Nice.

Don Sherman: Here we go. You

Gabe Schlickau: ready?

Ready, ready.

Don Sherman: Okay. Verbal answers. Here we go. Leader,

Gabe Schlickau: I'll give you one. Joy Eakins.

Don Sherman: Hi. Nice.

Nice.

James Krstolich: Patrick

Mahomes.

Don Sherman: Oh, okay. Very nice. There you go.

Success

James Krstolich: Elon Musk.

Don Sherman: I thought you was gonna say either one of you .

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: No, I was gonna say Ebony

Don Sherman: game. Hard word.

Gabe Schlickau: Nice. That's two words though. I'm sorry.

Don Sherman: No, it's fine. I'll ask this. College.

ca, Kansas State,

Yes. Woo.[00:23:00]

I'm not sure what you're

asking. one word.

Gabe Schlickau: Education.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Okay. Very nice. Workforce development. Mm-hmm.

Gabe Schlickau: critical.

Don Sherman: Nice. Failure,

Gabe Schlickau: Growth, not an option. Nice. Transportation, infrastructure,

James Krstolich: automation,

Gabe Schlickau: entrepreneur,

brave

James Krstolich: thinker.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Hmm. The PAC survey. Do it important

James Krstolich: do it.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I like it. That's

Don Sherman: pretty good. Wichita

home. Home vacation.

James Krstolich: Cabo

Don Sherman: Oh, oh.

Gabe Schlickau: Not enough. Not enough. Nice.

hero. Grand.

That's a good one. I'm in. I'm going Grandfather as well. Okay.

Don Sherman: Wichita Regional Chamber.

Gabe Schlickau: The best advocate? [00:24:00] Family,

friends, important.

fun,

anytime

James Krstolich: exciting.

Don Sherman: Last but not least, and you gotta tell the truth and we gonna verify beverage soda. Boo

James Krstolich: I know I know, I know that's, everyone says, but if they're my friends are gonna be able to see this and if they know I said something different, they would have me. Yeah. So,

Gabe Schlickau: yeah. Since it's just us talking here. Yeah. Local micro brew. How's that?

Don Sherman: It's perfect. We can do that. Thank you guys for showing up and putting up with Evan here. I know it's a lot, but We appreciate it. Anyway, thanks for coming through. Thank you

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: for thanks, gentlemen.

Gabe Schlickau: Very good. Thank you. Thank you. Well done. Yes, it

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: fun. It was a fun time. We appreciate you friends, if you would, you know, we've come to the end of our time, so if you would, please make sure that you share this with someone who might find value.

Make sure that you like us. Make sure that you let us know who you wanna hear from next. Until next time, peace. [00:25:00]