

Story from The Daily, The New York Times

The Governor and the Protester (Excerpt)

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(...)

Phil Campbell

And then a technician who's been with us for a while and knows what he's doing, he can make in the high 50s or 60s. So with the 30 employees we have, we feed about 100 mouths, with their children and families. So we feel responsible for about 100 people's well-being.

Michael Barbaro

And what did the first Michigan lockdown, the one ordered by Governor Whitmer – what did it mean for your pest control business?

Phil Campbell

Her order did not exempt us. The text of the order itself, it did not make an exemption for wildlife control, pest control. And we were preparing to shut down. And then I noticed that it said for its definition of essential services, for further clarification, see this document by the Department of Homeland Security. And we found that we were allowed to stay open.

Michael Barbaro

Got it.

Phil Campbell

But very quickly after that we had to furlough a couple people after that, because even though we were allowed to stay open, our customer base, many of them aren't working. So if your customers aren't working, they're not spending money. And it doesn't really matter if you're open if all the people you serve aren't working, you know what I mean?

Asking a question like: "What does it mean for you?" creates room for the interviewee to reflect on an issue from their own personal standpoint.

Michael Barbaro

Right. I don't want to pry too much, but if you were bringing in — I think you said almost \$3 million a year in revenue — before this, **what did it start to look like once the lockdown was in place and the calls from customers began to taper off?**

A question like this can result in the source painting a picture of the direct impact on them. This enables the audience to better understand the motivations behind a person's positions and/or actions.

Phil Campbell

At first, it was a 50 percent drop.

Michael Barbaro

Wow.

Phil Campbell

Again, this is for a company that was allowed to stay open.

Michael Barbaro

Right.

Phil Campbell

And then around this time, the second shutdown order came in, which was the one that everybody started protesting about.

Michael Barbaro

Tell me what you mean.

A simple but effective way to deepen the conversation through: "Tell me what you mean."

Phil Campbell

Yeah, the second shutdown order just ramped down on the first. This was the one that went in and shut particular sections of stores that were still open. So like it said, you can't buy paint products, you can't buy gardening products. Because what was happening is people thinking, OK, I got to stay home, I might as well work on my house, you know? So a lot of those people were going to Home Depot, were going to whatever to get their supplies. And then the governor said, no, you can't get that stuff.

So this was the order that said you can't go out on a lake by yourself in your boat in your private lake, if the boat has a motor. But if it doesn't have a motor, you can go. Things that seemed a lot more arbitrary. The one that said you can't have someone come mow your lawn, even though they pull up in a truck, they drive the lawnmower off, they don't touch you, they don't go into your house. It's just one guy mowing your lawn. You know, things that people started thinking, like, the economy's already in freefall, is it really necessary to go this far with it?

From my own experience, if the economy takes a dump and we can't get back to where we were, we have to cut their health insurance or we're going to have to lay people off. We're going to take other measures to stay afloat. I don't know what we're going to have to do. I don't want to hypothesize. I don't want my employees to listen to this and be like, what did you say is going to happen? I don't know, we're going to have to do something. We can't just suddenly take a 30 percent to 50 percent decline. That's huge. What if you got a 50 percent pay cut? It would affect your life.

And so I'm thinking about the ripple effect. We take a 30 percent to 50 percent drop. Our employees take a dip. Maybe they can't afford to pay their debts. Maybe they can't afford to pay their own mortgages or whatever. I don't know. I haven't assessed the financial situation of each of my employees.

But I guess what I am frustrated about — and I don't want to minimize the risk of Covid-19 or the people who've had it — but as someone who's worked for 10 years in this business trying to build it up, get it to where it is, I'm frustrated with the attitude of some people that we can just shut it off for a while, and then just turn it back on when everything's safe, and just pick up where we left off. Like, no, that's not how business works. That's certainly not how small business works. If you take a big enough hit, it's hard to recover from it, you know?

By leading off with "Tell me what you mean," the journalist created a space for the source to open up and share his frustrations and his point-of-view from a personal and professional perspective.

Michael Barbaro

So I'm curious when you first hear about the possibility of a public demonstration, a protest, in Michigan of these lockdown rules?

Phil Campbell

I saw an event on social media, I think, or I saw people talking about it — like, hey, let's go down to Lansing and protest. So the owner and I — work's been slow, so we said, hey, we got time. Let's drive down to Lansing on Thursday. The way I understood it, we were going to drive by the capitol and honk our horn, basically.

Michael Barbaro

And what was that honked horn going to mean?

Phil Campbell

The honked horn was going to mean like, we are workers, and we want the freedom for people to be able to work. Please consider opening things back up a little more. The capitol in Lansing, it's on a loop, so you drive around in like a circle around the capitol. So I thought that all the traffic would come in, we'd kind of loop around and we'd honk, and then we'd go back home, you know? But they were anticipating a certain amount of people — I think 10 times more than they anticipated showed up. So it took us two hours to get to Lansing. We got in Lansing, and then we were just — Michael, it was a traffic jam. That's what it was. It was just a big traf — it was like an organized traffic jam.

Michael Barbaro

But what did it feel like to be in that traffic jam? Because it's a particular kind of traffic jam with like-minded people there to protest something.

A question like this ("...what did it feel like to be in that traffic jam?") enabled the source to personally reflect on that moment.

Phil Campbell

It was really neat. It was nice to not feel so alone, because I was really sick of people on social media telling me I'm selfish because I don't want the company I helped build for 10 years to just collapse.

Michael Barbaro

Who's calling you selfish, do you feel like?

Thus far, it appears as though the journalist has accurately reflected his understanding of the source's perspective. That may have opened up the source to share more detailed and personal thoughts.

Phil Campbell

Oh, just people on social media, my friends. People in my broader circle. You know, not people I'm necessarily close to, but I'd say I lost some friends over this, honestly. When the governor shut the economy down, I said this is going to be very hard on businesses and this is going to be very hard on us. And a lot of people's response seemed to be like, what, do you want people to die or something, you know? And it kind of degenerated into, like, either you want people to die or you hate my business and stuff like that. And I was really glad, because I was starting to feel kind of isolated, to see a solidarity of so many other Michiganders who were similarly frustrated at the situation. Afterwards, when I got home, I saw there was a lot of people with a lot of Trump stuff, and I was kind of thinking, like, no, this isn't political. Don't make it into a political thing because this isn't about the governor happens to be a Democrat or a woman or something. Because I would have gone down there if it was a Republican, you know? It wasn't about her party affiliation. So I was frustrated —

Michael Barbaro

What did you make of the flavor of the protest? It seems like you didn't see this yourself in your car, but as you've hinted, there were strong strains of libertarianism and conservatism, and pro-Trump posters, as well as people with guns, as well as some, you know, some more vulgar and extreme sentiments. Some people compared Governor Whitmer to Hitler.

Phil Campbell

Oh, like Governor Whitler? [LAUGHS] **Oh, I don't know, I think that's just juvenile. I mean, I think it's pretty juvenile in public discourse when the only thing you go to is compare your opponent to Hitler. I wish it wouldn't have been so much anti-Whitmer, because this isn't about like Governor Whitmer, the person, you know? I wish that it would have been more on point and focused about "let me work," you know?**

The interviewee has the space necessary to clarify where he stands—less about politics or a certain politician, and more about his own point-of-view on the given issue.

Michael Barbaro

I wonder where you fall in the political spectrum. Did you vote for Trump? Did you vote for Whitmer? And how did your political views apply to this event?

Phil Campbell

My political views didn't apply to this event really at all. You know, like, I would've been there if this was a Republican. I did vote for Trump. I don't particularly think he's doing that great of a job. So I'm not a gung-ho Trump supporter. I didn't vote for Whitmer, but I didn't like the guy running against her, either. So.

Michael Barbaro

You're saying you're not seeing this crisis or the lockdowns through a political lens?

An example of Looping.

Phil Campbell

No, no, not at all. Not at all. The little match between President Trump and Governor Whitmer is making it more political. When Trump tweets, "Liberate Michigan," when he refers to her as that woman from Michigan, obviously, that sets Governor Whitmer up as a foil against President Trump, which politicizes it. When rumors start coming out that Biden wants to consider her as V.P. material, that politicizes it. I really liked when I was there that it simply seemed like a spontaneous expression of working class frustration.

After the journalist Looped, the interviewee had an opportunity to share a more detailed response that clarified his motivations - that this is about "working class frustration."

Michael Barbaro

Phil, I want to tick through what your governor said when she began this process of locking down the state and basically enforcing social distancing. And here's what she said: "The only tool we have to fight the virus at this moment and to support our health care system is to give them the opportunity by buying some time."

Phil Campbell

Yeah.

Michael Barbaro

And she went on to say, "Without aggressive measures, more people will get sick, more people will die, and our economy will suffer longer." And in her telling, the disease spreads if people are out there. If people aren't out there, the disease doesn't spread. So she is making the case in the beginning that these sacrifices are required to prevent a system overload. What do you think of that?

Phil Campbell

Well, we were willing to go along with that, because we were all expecting this huge crunch on all our hospitals. We were worried about not enough beds, not enough ventilators. But the fact is the curve is flattened now. We now have hospitals, they're not overwhelmed anymore. So what we're saying is that was all well and good, but now, we can start to open up again because we flattened the curve. Even if infections go back up at this point, as I grant they could if we start being more economically active, it seems highly unlikely, given all the empty hospitals, that were going to get to another crush where we don't have enough beds or something like that.

Michael Barbaro

So I want to make sure I understand what you're saying when you talk about where things are in Michigan. The Times has maps about where the virus is in each state. And just pulling this up, Michigan has about 38,000 infections, and there's been about 3,300 deaths.

Phil Campbell

Yeah, we're the third highest state, I think.

Michael Barbaro

So when you talk about your frustrations with the different phases of this lockdown, how do you square it with those numbers?

Another example of the journalist Looping. NOTE: This is an opportunity for the journalist to slowly build up to and present important data to the source. The questions being posed may be uncomfortable. Therefore, starting with Looping to understand the source's perspective is essential.

Phil Campbell

Well, I square it because my understanding is that the lockdown wasn't supposed to be like, we're going to lockdown until this goes away.

What we were told was that this lockdown was to distribute those amount of cases over a longer period of time, so that the health system doesn't get overwhelmed. So I look at the total number of deaths and infections and say, OK, this thing is here to stay whether we like it or not. The hospitals do have the ability to take people in. So it seems like to me that the goal has been met. The goal is not to —

A compelling response from the source in regards to his understanding of the lockdown order and the measures taken by the Governor.

Michael Barbaro

It sounds like you're saying that if we assume that the measures taken so far have flattened the curve to some degree in Michigan, that you're willing to accept the risks of restarting the economy, even if that means that the curve might go up a little bit. That you think that so far the measures taken have done enough to merit that kind of experimentation with, essentially, taking the risk of reopening.

Another example of Looping. The key is to not show agreement or sympathy, but to work to genuinely understand what other person is saying.

Phil Campbell

I think so. And again, I'm not saying just a full, like — the economy isn't a switch, you just turn it on, everybody comes back out, you know? But I think people who want to work and can work in a way that is maintaining safe protocols, I think they should be able to. Because the thing is, what I would like people to understand is that it's not like either we stay home and stay safe, or we all get the coronavirus and die. It's like staying home and nobody working has its own inherent risks and dangers and devastation that's going to come. When I talk about the economy, I'm not saying I'm worried about the stock market or the financial sector. I'm talking about the ability of the average person to provide sustenance for himself and one's family. So we could have negative outcomes because of the shutdown, not because of Covid — negative outcomes that dwarf Covid.

The response to the Looping question results in self-reflection from the source. It also generates more clarity in terms of where his concerns are coming from which are complex rather than clear-cut.

Michael Barbaro

Mm-hm. So we're now talking on Monday, April 27. And that protest was about two weeks ago.

Phil Campbell

Yeah.

Michael Barbaro

And I'm curious if you think that protest, which was one of the very first protests, had any kind of impact?

Phil Campbell

Yeah, I think it did. I mean, this is just me kind of blue skying this, but I think it let her see that she only had a limited amount of political capital that she could keep carrying this out indefinitely. She started to say, we'll let lawn service in again, we'll let various things start.

Michael Barbaro

She rolled back some of the more, in your mind, problematic restrictions.

Looping by simple paraphrasing.

Phil Campbell

Yeah. She rolled back some of the more problematic restrictions and she started talking about an end game, you know? So in that respect, I think it was helpful. I think it got the message across.

Michael Barbaro

We plan to talk to Governor Whitmer and I wonder what you most want to communicate to her about what you think she may not understand, what she might not be getting in this moment?

This connects to one of the 22 Interview Questions to Complicate the Narrative: "What do you want the other side to understand about you?"

Phil Campbell

Well, first, I would say to her, Americans are responsible people. We're creative people. Tell us what social distancing guidelines you think we should be maintaining when we're out there, and let us find a way to do it. If you think we need to be six or seven feet apart, if you think we shouldn't have more than six people in a room, give us a safe paradigm of personal behavior and let us work within it. Don't lock us down and say that we can't provide for ourselves. That's the most basic human right — is to provide for your own well-being. Just let us find some way to work.

[Music]

Michael Barbaro

Well, Phil, thank you very much. We really appreciate your time.

Phil Campbell

Yeah, thank you. I was very happy to be with you today.

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