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[Dr. Michael Mills] Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals leading from where they are. I'm your host Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is one of my all-time favorite Montgomery College people Ken Nelson, Director of Business and Outreach for WDCE. Ken, thanks for joining me.

[Ken] Thank you, Mike.

[Mike] So, let's...let's talk leadership. Um, why is it so hard?

[Ken] Well, it's...it's a number of factors. It's, you know, it's confounded by what we think are good leaders. It's confounded by the context that we're leading in. And then...then it's challenged by, you know, whatever that task might be that we're trying to lead people to accomplish. Uh, those...those are, you know, three factors that I think that...that contribute to what, you know, leadership is. What draws people to leadership and then what really makes good leaders.

[Mike] So, what...what does make a good leader?

[Ken] I think a great...good leader is someone who accepts the mantle of leadership, the responsibility, and then decides to...to help others grow to a mutual objective, a goal. And they take all the strengths and weaknesses of everybody in that team or in that organization and they move them somewhere where they didn't think they could ever go before and...and they find through the...through the journey that the weaknesses that they have really become strengths, and the strengths that they have become also their...their strengths to move forward. And at the end, they realize they couldn't have done this without each other at this stage in time.

[Mike] What if they don't want to follow?

[Ken] Well, there's a couple of ways of dealing with... [Laughter from both] Followership is important. [Ken laughs] I mean, you know, depending on the leadership style. Either lead with, as Ted Turner said, either lead, follow, or get out of the way. [Mike: Uh-huh.] And we, you know, some other people have another fourth one. When you get out of the way, don't...don't stay in the office anymore. Just find something. But it's important that...that, to me in terms of leadership, if somebody's not on board, if everybody's not on board, there might be some concern because that might be the gem that we need to leave. If you're really opposed to the leadership in the situation then maybe it is best that you find another opportunity. But resistance is part of the process, and the resistance is there because people have not fully brought in to where it is. Some people are visual. They got to see it [Mike: Uh-huh] before they followed it. Others will never see it, and if they're hanging around, they...they can kill a good project because they are like, you know, they're just poisoned to the situation. They don't mean to be. Sometimes

people are, but for the most part, it's some disconnect with that project and the leader and the task that prevents everybody from getting on board. You know.

[Mike] So, we hear a lot about, um, people say you can lead from the front, you can lead from behind? What are your thoughts on that? Can...can you lead from behind?

[Ken] I think some of the best leaders use a combination. They lead from the front and they lead...from behind. You know, if you look at a military model you see the leader out there. He's the first one over, he's the first one to get killed. But then, who's the second leader? You know. Some leaders can lead from behind depending on what their...what their orientation is. I think whatever the vantage point is, it's important that you are still helping people to move forward on the goal or the objective that they're trying to have. That's the important thing. Uh, you know, there's a...there's a picture of a sheep herder [Mike laughs] in...in some country and it's like 50 sheep going up a mountain. He's not at the top. He's at the bottom. So, somewhere in there, he has a leadership style that allows him to be leading and directing from behind. And I think we have to look at it that way, you know. There's...the other point I want to make with this is when you're leading from behind that means you're closer to the group. You know what your team members are. [Mike: Uh-huh] You know what they need. You...you're assessing. You're not so far in the visionary part of it that you don't know what's going on in a practical sense.

[Mike] I don't know many leaders and...and certainly outside the military who would be ready to take the metaphorical death for leadership. Right? [Ken laughs] You know. The...the proverbial death. [Ken: Right.] I mean I...I know a lot of people who...who say, "Yeah, I...I'm leading from the front. I'm...I'm, this is the hill I'm going to die on." [Ken: Uh-huh] And when it comes time to do that, they back out of the way and say, "No, this was the team's effort. Um, I...I had nothing to do with it." Um, you know. It seems to happen too often.

[Ken] It...it...it sounds like you're describing what I call moments of truth. And I think every leader and every fol...follower has a moment of truth because as you said you can leave from anywhere and...and the best people have some idea of...of their truth. They know what they're going to do. They...they have a sense of what they're going to do, or they have values that says this is what I'm going to do in this situation. Um, I...I sometimes look at the story of, uh, uh, Audie Murphy who was a, uh, the most decorated, uh, soldier in World War II. And the storyline goes that he never pursued any of [Ken laughs] these leadership moments. He just felt like I'm the one that has to do this. I have to because I believe in certain values. I have to step up. And he never really wanted some of that stuff, but he had to do it because of the circumstances. That kind of situation is a little different than someone who...who says I'm really the leader for the show of it, and then when something goes wrong they...they start to cast blame on everybody else. I think the true leaders, if they're in it. their value is it's my leadership. It fails. You know. Don't hurt...don't hurt my people. Don't hurt my team. Uh, I made the

wrong decision. You know. Let...let that...let me die because of that not the others. And not many people have that. That's a quality that's...that's tough to deliver...to develop and even deliver on. But the best leaders find a way to do it.

[Mike] Ken, can people learn to be leaders, or are they born to be leaders?

[Ken] Oh, that's a good one. That's a classic one. I think people can learn, and I think they're...they...they have some innate skills that help their learning. Uh, I talk about values, and I talk about how your rear, you know, if you're rear enough, you don't have to be reared in the...in the military leadership family. Uh, there's just some common principles that in terms of responsibility. If it's your turn to take out the trash, that's a leadership role. If you...if you know it's your...your duty, you don't have to be reminded. You...you assume the leadership. You prepare the bags. [Ken laughs] You go empty the trash and you go on about your business. And...and, but it's still a leadership principle. Uh, there...there are people who...who, uh, create that question, but I think the best leaders are always learning. They don't stop learning, don't stop learning about themselves. They don't stop learning about their people. So, to me that part is you...you learn how to...to be better in the context that you're in. And if you really want to be successful, then you have to really be willing to learn. I mean you might, you know, you might...you might be a Patton. But then again, [Both laugh] Patton had to learn how to be Patton. I mean, I know some people, I don't believe he said Patton, but...[Ken laughs] but, you know, especially when you can...can...you compare him with Bradley. I mean [Mike: Uh-huh] in those two leadership styles, you see two people who are very effective, but you see their style and how they were affected. And most of the guys on a given day would probably say I like Bradley. But then, there are other guys who would probably say women, guys at that time, it was something about Patton that made me stand up more. And I was willing to do more just to prove him wrong. And I think, you know, leadership has that kind of a...an attraction. It motivates. It attracts people to do...do more or do...become better than what they were before.

[Mike] But you've been around the block a time or two. What's Ken Nelson found out about himself as leader over the years?

[Ken] Well, uh, that's a tough one. [Laughs] What have I learned?

[Mike] Uh-huh. About yourself.

[Ken] Uh, I've learned that, uh, I have a lot more skills than, now, than I use. And they have become...shown in leader situation...leadership situations where I realize nobody's going to do this. I'm going to have to be certain I do it, or I'm going to have to take the first step. And I could not hide my skills any longer. I had to go do...I had to do it. Uh, the other thing I learned. In some leadership things, it doesn't hurt to have a good vision and be willing to...to...to fight for that vision and share that vision. I think, uh, in the...in the 25 years that I've been at the College, I can remember where we had a vision for our unit

that we were going to be better. And...and better was we're going to get out of last place in terms of [Laughs] educational units in the...in the...in this...in the state. And...and we started to make momentum. Now, I, you know, we're in a good place right now, where we are, but we had to make that decision we're going to do it. And, you know, good leader has to deal with the confusion and doubt not only from others but themselves. There's some in your...in you that says, I see this happening even if nobody else does. So, I've learned, you know, to do that. I guess I've learned to be flexible, you know. Another thing about leading anywhere, just because you have the position, the formal role, that doesn't mean that you're the leader of that group. There are other people in that group that influences how the group will work. Sometimes for the good. Sometimes for the bad. But if you're one of those, uh, team leaders or silent majority leaders, uh, you have to be aware that...that you can shift something, uh, positively or negatively. And hopefully for your own ethical good reasons that you would do this, but...but, uh, you have to recognize that just, you have to earn the right to be a good leader whether you have the post or not, whether you have the position or not. You have to learn to be a leader for yourself. So...

[Mike] I...I like the story you were talking about the education unit and moving that out of last place. I was a newspaper editor for a number of years before I got into education and I...we...we were in this market where we were second in...in the market. And I sat down with the publisher one day and was explaining to him what I thought we could do to overtake this other publication. And he said, you know, Mike, sometimes second is okay. And I looked at him and I said, I'm...I'm sorry but to me being second is the first loser. Um, and it was just a different leadership style. I wasn't willing to...to be complacent and...and settle for being...being second and...and he was. Uh, needless to say I didn't last much longer than that...[Both laugh] uh, at that publication. Um, but I want to go back and, uh, revisit something you...you were talking about the...the sheep and the shepherd. And that's gonna transition us to your pastoral work, um, as the...the leader of a...of a flock, if you will. How's the leadership as a pastor different than leadership as an educational professional? Or is it the same?

[Ken] I think there's...there's some differences and then...and then there's some similarities. Uh, the similarities are that...that everybody's on a mission. Everybody has a mission that they're trying to accomplish, uh, in the educational venue. Uh, there's an education piece you're trying to help people to learn better. That's also in ministry. A lot of people don't realize that but we're really helping people to be better, uh, followers, better community people. So...so...so, those are similarities. The dissimilarities are when, uh, the...the focus, the function of it, uh, one spiritual and then the other is...is a...is a secular approach. And it's...that's...that's where the differences go. But they do overlap. Uh, for me, I find that in the ministry you...you, it must be a little more, uh, collaborative. Uh, the servant model that's mentioned in some of the literature, uh, takes on a different angle in...in a biblical or spiritual faith-based situation. You...you have to

exemplify, uh, the...the values of the organization as much as you can while at the same time recognizing not everybody can walk on water, so to speak. So, [Laughs] you...you...you have...you...there's a certain, uh, quality that's in both that...that...that might not be the same. And that...that quality is you have to have some level of humility, uh, to do it. And it's a con--...It's...it's really, um, it's a contrast because most people think of leaders as being bold, dynamic, uh, tell you, you know, very directive, you know, we're gonna go here, go there. Uh, and there...and that is that even if you look at any of the biblical examples. Uh, no matter which one you...you pick, [Mike: Uh-huh] any...any name comes to mind. They had a mission, and they had a focus, and they were going somewhere. Not everybody understands that. So, when you cast your vision and you explain where you're going, you're really explaining that to a lot of people who are going. Let's wait and see where you're going [Laughs] cause...because today we're not certain where are we going [Laughs]. And you're talking about there's going to be more food going [Laughs] [Mike: Uh-huh] the next day. Where did that come from, okay? [Mike: Uh-huh] So, you really have to...to, uh, exhibit, uh, your faith and your conviction in a way that people identify with it in a very silent but very, uh, actionable way. Uh, that's also, it's...we...I think on the...on...on the secular side, we say it's passion. They have a passion. It's just something about this person. I want to do what they're asking because I want to be there too. It's like your example, nobody really...people...another thing about change, about leadership is you're always dealing with change. And most people do not want to change. They like stability. We...we pick leadership, political leadership, because we want a certain way of life and wanting sustain. We want predictive...predictability in something, and...and leadership is really about changing the dynamic of...of the situation, which means that people's comfort level are going to be challenged because there is something better out there. And whether you believe it or not, others believe it can be better and we want...we want to...we want to pull you along. We prefer that you walk along but sometimes I guess we have to drag people along [Laughs]. And they'll be the first one to say, I told you it'd be great. [Both laugh] So, just live with it. [Laughs]

[Mike] I was taking a course a number of years ago and the...the professor was on change and innovation and the professor said if people view it as positive, they call it innovation. If they view it as negative, they call it change. [Ken: Oh] And that stuck with me.

[Ken] Well, I might have to use that one. Innovation is change. [Laughs]

[Mike] Yeah, well, you know, it depends on the...on your perspective, right? [Ken: Yeah, yeah!] If as a leader you're leading someone through change and they see it as positive, they see it as innovation. Uh, if they see it as negative, they say, oh, here we go again. Just changing something different.

[Ken] Yeah, that is another challenge of leadership that in this...this process of, uh, innovation. [Laughs] I'll use your word innovation. Uh, it [Pauses] people have to...have a

comfort level with that culture, and...and in their use, some people are very used to 8:30-5:00. And there's a...there's a process and they're used to that, and if...and if things are changing, if their 8:00-5:00 changes drastically and it creates stress, it may not be that...that may not be good for them nor good for the organization because the change doesn't fit that context. I mean, it's...it's like if you're building a...renovating a building. The building's livable [Laughs]. The water runs. Uh, it's functional, but it's deteriorating, you know. Every day, a part is getting old. Every day something's going to...to...to has a greater potential of breaking down [Laughs]. You have to have an innovation. You have to have a change that...that adds some more value to that structure. But to do that, you have to move people out [Laughs]. You have to demol...destroy certain things, demolition, and then you have to rebuild the structure. So, it works for you, and it's much more functional. That level of discomfort is challenging for a lot of people in leadership and followers. And...and what you have to do is create enough of a vision and a practical enough division, and...and it's on the stages of, this is not another guess game, but this is really, a substance systematic change, is going to make a big difference that people will buy into that new building, that new structure. And...and that not only takes place in in a literal sense but it's also figuratively in terms of whether you know your heart and your mind, and your hope are there. So, you gotta help people get there, and you have to keep yourself on board. You have to see something that is not [Pause] visible now. I mean you were talking about your example of you didn't want to be second place. You saw a first place. I mean in my sports career, believe it or not, I went from being, uh, the last guy on the...on the relay team to the first guy on the relay team almost first but close. But in between that transformation, I had to work harder. I had to see that being first meant that we would all win, and once I could see that, even though it wasn't there, it took a year to two years, and we really got good at that. Uh, and we won championships. I had to see that it was possible in the work that I was doing. And that's what leaders do, is give people that hope and that determination, and the best ones, you know, you move heaven and earth for the leader, the...the...the followers. You do...you move heaven and earth to make certain they get stuff done. I mean, um,, we've had people who [Laughs] classic, the line, I...I'm not certain how I'm gonna tell this, uh, for them to succeed, they needed a s....space to do their work. And...and anywhere else, you hear someone say, if you just keep those folks away from me, I'll do whatever you need to do. So, you have to be a blocker for your best followers. You have to give them the tools. Let them have the space to excel. And...and then that trust, they...they excel beyond, you know. If you said you wanted 20, in 20 minutes, if you...if you do the blocking form, you keep the distractions away, that's leadership. Some people might argue differently but it is. But that person who values that, in 10 minutes, they'll produce the document, the report, whatever, in such a way that it's better than what you had undone on another one because they knew they could perform their best. And I think that's what leaders do. Help people perform their best.

[Mike] Hey, Ken, this has been a blast for me. I appreciate you taking time out of your day. Thanks for joining me.

[Ken] Well, Mike, it's been a blast with me, too. [Laughs]. I appreciate you doing this and thank you, thank you so much for this opportunity. Appreciate it.

[Mike] If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu. Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward!

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