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[Dr. Michael Mills] Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Dr. Kevin Long, Deputy Chief of Staff for Planning and Policy, and most recently convener and project manager of the Return to Campus Advisory Team. Kevin, thanks for joining me.

[Kevin] My pleasure, thank you.

[Mike] Uh... before we start talking about leadership, uh...knowing this is a podcast and there's no video, I want our listeners to realize that our pandemic hairstyles are going in a different direction.

[Kevin laughs] Uh...a completely different direction.

[Mike laughs] Yours is growing and mine is...is left...uh I got tired of mine and just got it cut and yours...uh is going a different way.

[Kevin] It's funny because I was going to do right before the return date... I was going to get it cut short again, but everybody keeps saying no and my wife is like no, so I'm going to let it grow for as long as I can bear it.

[Mike] Good for you. I wish I could do it without mine getting out of control but just doesn't happen.

[Kevin] It hasn't been this long since high school.

[Mike laughs] Let's shift gears a little bit and talk about...about leadership. Uh... what are some of the best traits a leader can have?

[Kevin] Oh gosh, that's a great question! I think...uh I think one of the most important traits a leader can have is authenticity...uh...sincerity, people...people will not follow you if they don't believe that you believe. So if they think you're trying to sell them a line or just trying to roll them over and trick them... to some trick them into doing something they're not going to follow along, so I think that authenticity...people have to believe that, you know, what you say is what you mean. It's true...uh you're being direct, you're being honest, you're being forthright,...uh with them and I think along with that is a...a good sense of collaboration. I think good leaders are good collaborators. No one does this work alone...um I always used to tell my students when I would give them a group project and they complained about it because they didn't like to work in real projects, I'd have to remind them that when you get out in the world, out in the working world. there will be very few instances where you're going to be working alone and so you have to learn how to work with others. You have to learn how to collaborate, share the load... uh cheer each other on, give constructive feedback, pull your weight, so I think, you know, that authenticity, I think that sense of collaboration is critical... uh I think a sense of

empathy... uh and compassion is also important... uh particularly as we've come in... we've gone through this whole pandemic and one of the mantras that I've heard repeated over and over, and I've said it myself, is that you know we need to treat each other with a little bit of grace and compassion and patience because we're all going through this together. This is our first time through it and that translates into any kind of work project that you're on or you're leading... everyone is in it together. They're on it for a reason... uh everyone's striving to a good outcome of the project and so I think having that compassion, that grace, that patience... um is also you know highly critical, it ties really...it directly ties into authenticity... uh so when people think you genuinely care, when people think you genuinely want their input, that when you ask what they think that you sincerely want to hear what they think. I think that goes a long way so I would say you know for me that's been the top, the probably the top three... uh attributes of a good leader, at least the ones that I've experienced.

[Mike] And does that collaboration, that authenticity, that empathy also lead itself to giving credit to the team and not taking credit for yourself, an attribute of a good leader.

[Kevin] Oh absolutely! Yeah the... the ultimate end goal of any project is... is a collaborative outcome, a success for the entire team, a success for the college, not an individual success. You know, we don't enter... you shouldn't enter into these things just so you can put another line on your resume or something else on your... on your CV. So it really is about lifting everyone up and everybody crossing the finish line and everyone getting the kudos, not just one person, but the team. That's why I've always loved our team effort awards here at the college. It's always been one of my favorite awards to get and I have a lot of them... uh just because I like working in teams and I think it's great to recognize when a team does well.

[Mike] Okay great. Um... a worst trait of a leader?

[Kevin] Uh.. worst trait of a leader? I would they say... uh non-responsiveness. If I had any pet peeve at all, it would be, you know, those who are leading something. People who look to them...uh for guidance, for advice, for a discussion. If they're non-responsive. So I think being present, being there, is... is an absolute critical and if you can't do that, then you're not being a good leader.

[Mike] When did you realize...uh leadership was something that you... you wanted to get into that...that you were good at?

[Kevin] That's a really good question! I'm trying to think back... probably back in college. I was in undergrad... uh was something because I was, you know, I was, you know, new college, away from home, and I wanted to meet people and get involved in groups and activities. I thought was really fun and I always liked, you know, the collaborative nature of doing things together, of planning, of talking things out, of you know, debating...uh what to do, debating this approach, that approach and then kind of, you know, you know

coming to consensus, not necessarily getting what you want, but getting, you know, the end result that you want. Not the how you wanted to do it. So I think probably back in college is where I learned... uh and... uh early on I... uh you know, did they did the whole college experience, joined the fraternity, did all that and... uh and ended up...uh being president of the fraternity and then, my senior year, president of the interfraternity council. So, it was something that I just kind of gravitated toward... um because I enjoyed working with people. I just enjoyed working with them.

[Mike] And certainly in your role as deputy chief of staff for planning and policy, a lot of leadership there, a lot of collaboration is needed in that role... uh how do you... how do you find the leadership challenges in your role as deputy chief of staff for planning and policy?

[Kevin] I think that... I think the leadership challenges of this... in this role, is the same as they would be in almost any other role. It's finding that balance... um you know, everyone you know, no one does just one thing. We're all involved in multiple things and so it's really finding that balance and being able to give the proper attention, the proper... uh the presence... uh to everything that's going on and you know... you know, you may not... you may be voluntold to do something that you don't really want, but you have to have the same level of enthusiasm... uh that you would for something that you really wanted to do because people are depending on the work getting done. And so if you're lackadaisical, if you're blasé about it, then the team's going to be blasé about it, lackadaisical about it and you're going to end up with something that's substandard, that doesn't really meet... uh the qualifications and people aren't happy. Nobody wants to go to an unproductive meeting, and nobody wants to be involved in an unproductive project. No, people like to see forward momentum and people like to realize that what they're investing their time and their energy and their passions in has meaning and it's going to have... it's going to have an outcome that that's going to benefit people. So, you know, that's probably the... the challenge is finding that balance between different projects because you know my plate's always full... uh and it's getting fuller by the day. So, it's really finding that balance to make sure that, you know, I can... I can provide my time and my attention... my energy not only to the project itself, the process, but to the people that are involved too. Making sure that they're constantly involved, constantly updated, you know... you know, keeping that energy level up so that it just doesn't drag down because that can easily happen.

[Mike] One of my pet peeves from a leadership standpoint you touched on it is preparedness.

[Kevin] Yes.

[Mike] People coming and... and not being prepared.

[Kevin] Yes.

[Mike] And not necessarily here at the college but in previous experiences that I've had they... they want you to follow that, and yet they don't have a roadmap of where they're going.

[Kevin] Yeah. Oh yes, the worst feeling in the world walk into a meeting... uh or even to a class and... and ask did everybody read or review the stuff and people like nah they just didn't have time to do it. That just stops everything dead in its tracks. So it's like you said... that being unprepared... uh to go in... uh, so that's... that's definitely a pet peeve of mine as well. I think that's really tied to responsiveness as well... uh you know being present in the project and being there when you need to be there.

[Mike] Let's shift gears for a minute to your role as a leader, convener of the return to campus advisory team.

[Kevin] Yes.

[Mike] You were tagged for that role by Dr. Pollard before she left and obviously she saw the traits that you have as a leader...um what... what do you bring to the... that table... uh that may be different... um because you're not a Covid expert, right? You're not a scientist, per se.

[Kevin] No, no.

[Mike] ...um. So how do you... how do you juggle the leadership responsibilities of that knowing that you're... you're in an environment that really isn't your area of expertise?

[Kevin] Well, I what I bring to it is, you know, a strong focus on the end result. A focus on the goal. And what I bring with that is the humility to know that I don't have the answers... uh I'm blessed the R.T.CAT... we're blessed with a phenomenal team of experts from across the college in different roles, that they've had different expertise, levels of expertise and knowledge, you know that I don't have. And this is... this is the kind of project that no one person can do. You know, there's no way a single individual could develop the entire apparatus for implementation of a return to campus after a pandemic. You need everyone at the table with the expertise so, you know, that... what I bring to it is, you know, I know what the end result is and I know... and... I know what I don't know and I don't pretend that I know what I don't know [laughs] and so I rely on them to... to, you know, lead to, actually lead the project along. You know it's... it there's you know... I'm... I consider myself the convener. You know, I convene the group. You know, I send out the meeting requests, I do... do notes. You know, I pose the questions. But they do... but we all do the work collaboratively. It's... it's, you know, it's... it's a group of, you know, really good college leaders, you know, leading together on one... on one project.

[Mike] But I was in a recent meeting with you and I...I think you're being a little humble. You... you came very prepared. You knew all the facts that you needed to know. It blew

me away. So it goes back to that preparedness that we talked about, right? That responsiveness.

[Kevin] And if you don't know it's... it's incumbent upon you to... to find out... uh you know this whole notion of self-education... of self-growth... self-growth of, you know, really doing your own due diligence and bringing yourself up to speed and not leaning on other people... uh to always have the answer... um, you know. I don't always have the answer, but I'm prepared enough to where I can evaluate an answer that's given. I think that's part of what it is... is having a good baseline knowledge... uh an awareness of whatever the project is and, you know, relying on the expertise of others that, you know, they're not there just because they're there to fill a seat. They're there because they bring a certain perspective, a... a critical... uh point of view, and a certain level of expertise and knowledge that complements everyone. So you know, I know what it... like I said I know what I don't know, and I'm not an expert in public health... uh but, you know, it's incumbent upon me as, you know, the convener of this group to bring myself up to speed, you know, because I can't... I can't identify... uh key projects or key issues that we need follow up on or more information if I'm completely unaware of what it entails.

[Mike] Did you think you'd be in this position 18-20 months ago?

[Kevin] No, no I did not. No I did not. Uh... and it's... it's been a challenge. It is... it has really been a... uh... an almost all-consuming kind of project and it's one of those things that it's... it's an additive on your plate, but you don't get to move any other plates off the table. So you've got to still manage all of your... everything else that's in your purview you still gotta manage all that, but you know, knowing the importance and the critical nature of this, you know it tends to take precedence and it tends to take a lot more time and a lot more energy. But again, if you surround... I'm blessed to be surrounded by people who know this stuff... uh who live this stuff... and bringing Chevelle in as our new public health director has been a huge benefit because we now... we have that absolute critical perspective... uh on the team but we had... we had all these other perspectives but from that public health, that actually in the trenches, public health work, you know we had people who had done pieces of it, and had some knowledge of it, but having that expert at the table has been critical and it really helps... uh lessen the load. It makes it more of a fun project, it makes it more of a, you know, a doable project, you know, when you can actually start to see... uh things develop and you know that you can get there now because you've got the right people at the table.

[Mike] are you looking forward to the... the end game?

[Kevin] Yes I'm looking for... I am looking very forward to... uh going back to my normal day-to-day... uh labor market planning and policy stuff and... and the other duties as a sign, which as you all know tends to take up a lot of extra time sometimes.

[Mike] Absolutely! I want to shift gears to... to your time in the classroom. I know you... you've taught for a number of years. The leadership in a classroom... is it.. is it different than the leadership outside of the classroom?

[Kevin] But it's... it's vastly different because the outcomes are different... uh what you're what you're aiming for is different... um you know outside the classroom, you're really talking about your peers... uh colleagues working together toward a common goal...toward common institutional goal. In the classroom, you know you're... you're pretty much alone...um, you know, trying to facilitate the learning toward these outcomes of the class which contribute hopefully to the outcomes of the program. so the leadership style is a little different. But where they, I think, where the similarities lie is providing that space for people to learn, for people to come up with ideas, for people to be creative, for people to, you know, get up to speed... um and master... master something and have the confidence to move forward and try something new, something more advanced. And so I think that's where the similarities lie between external leadership and in the classroom leadership... um and we typically, you know, I... I was an adjunct faculty, I was a staff faculty for a long time, but again it's the same thing... uh you're pretty much, you know, on your own in the classroom with students who are there to learn something. You know, they're not necessarily colleagues, they're not your peers. There's a power dynamic differential in the classroom that doesn't often exist outside of the classroom. It does sometimes, but inside the classroom there's a very defined power differential and I think it's really making students comfortable enough to where they're not intimidated by that power differential, where they're not turned off by that power differential, where it doesn't go to, you know, my head that I know everything about the subject matter and it doesn't go to the student's head that they know nothing about the subject matter because often they know a lot and often I don't know as much as... as I can pretend to know in front of a class of students but I think it's really in the classroom, you're all taking that journey together and it's all about making that journey as valuable and as rewarding... um and as consequential as you possibly can make it.

[Mike] You've got me thinking about this... this idea of in both in the classroom and outside the classroom of... of leaders allowing people to challenge them.

[Kevin] Yes, yes.

[Mike] And I...I think, you know, at least from my experience in the classroom and certainly outside, that is a culture that you want to foster within professional context.

[Kevin] Yes, absolutely!

[Mike] But... but being able to... to provide that space where someone can say, like I... I hear what you're saying but I don't necessarily agree with what you're saying and here's why and let's take this path.

[Kevin] And... and you're... what you're talking about is really, you know, cultivating that a culture of inquiry is like, you know, if a student says that they disagree with something...I there's something in the book, or something I said, I don't just take it, okay, you disagree fine, let's move on. You want to explore why, you want to inquire, why don't you believe it, what... what aspect of it did you not... did not resonate with you? You know, what...what other perspectives have you heard that you found more valuable and why? It really is, you know that level of inquiry... uh and you find that outside of the classroom, you know when someone challenges, you know, the ...you know, the way that you're going about doing a project is that, you know, you don't take that as a challenge to authority and challenge the leadership, you take that as a moment of inquiry to find out... okay what is this person thinking? What... what perspective are they bringing that I might be missing... uh in terms of how the work gets done or even the... or even, you know sometimes the end result? So it's really about, you know, being willing to ask the questions and also being willing to, you know, have people ask you questions. So to getting that two-way dialogue of sharing an inquiry back and forth... uh either in the classroom or the project. I think really makes... uh you know the experience a lot more valuable and I think you learn more that way.

[Mike] Do good leaders have an ego?

[Kevin] ...Um to a degree and... and I want to... I don't say ego in the bad sense but I think you know a self-awareness, you know, I think, you know, a good leader should be self-aware, they should be aware of, you know, their limitations, their expertise... uh what they can, what they can't do. So I think, you know, you can call that ego but it's also self-awareness... um, you know, I don't think they should have that attitudinal ego of, you know, I'm better than you, I have a degree therefore the presence of letters after my name confers certain privileges on me. Same thing with the title, you know, a title after someone's name is simply a title. It doesn't, you know, it doesn't confer special privileges or special knowledge on them. It's a recognition of some knowledge and experience and abilities that they have, or they've developed over time. That's why people's job titles change, you know, you either advance or you... or you go backwards. And so that's all part of how you as an individual can, you know, take in, absorb synthesize... uh interact ...uh with... uh that kind, with those different levels of knowledge and awareness. So, yeah I think ego, self-awareness, yes, but not... not... not that, you know, egotistical piece.

[Mike] If there's any ever any indication that titles and letters after your name don't mean a thing just ask family members right?

[Kevin] Exactly! Absolutely... absolutely. Yeah they don't care, yeah no one in my family calls me doctor, they don't care.

[Mike] When... when I first got my doctoral degree, I... I sat down my... my kids. We were having dinner and I...I said, I just want you to say one time... just one time, you know, just

say doctor can you pass the ketchup? Uh... and I'm still waiting and that was some 15 - 16 years ago.

[Kevin] My mom, bless her heart, will still send me holiday cards addressed to uh... doctor... uh with doctor on it so it's always great to receive that... so she... and she does that for my wife too because she has a PhD. So it's always like, you know, the Doctor's Long... uh which is... I always find... just... it just tickles me whenever I get those.

[Mike] Kevin, thank you for taking time out of your busy day. You have a lot on your plate. You're trying to get us back to campus safely... um and so I appreciate your... your taking time out. It's... it's been a pleasure for me.

[Kevin] My pleasure. I really apprec... I really appreciate the opportunity and... uh like I said before the podcast tonight. I absolutely love this idea... uh of... uh doing these. I think this is just a remarkably... uh impressive idea... uh and just a really creative way of kind of, you know, getting people involved and getting, you know, certain types of knowledge and experience out there in the world.

[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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