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[Mike] 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 Sharon Anthony, Chair of the English and Reading department at the Germantown campus. Sharon, thanks for joining me.

[Sharon] Thank you.

[Mike] So, I want to start off this conversation about leadership with my first memory of you when I joined Montgomery College about 12 years ago…

[Sharon] Okay.

[Mike] And you were… I started in January and it… I don't know if it was that January or the following fall, but it was football season and your team had won, you came in a jersey, okay?

[Sharon] That's right. A good day [laughs].

[Mike] So, it's an organization that is known for its lack of leadership, if you will. Talk to me about that, and how… how do you look at it from a leadership standpoint?

[Sharon] Well it's funny I… I think that, and I don't know the ins and outs of the business, but I can tell you from a fan… and I've been a fan for many years… is that from the spectator point of view, there seems to be a disconnect between what people are doing on the field and what the office… what the owners and administration is planning on doing. And from a fan who's sort of been through the highs, the few that they have there have been, and the many lows… um I have felt that oftentimes, you know, winning on the… on the field has not been the priority of the organization, and money-making commercial enterprises-those sorts of things have been more important. And I notice a lot of, you know, sponsoring organizations making money, but I don't see a lot of investment in the leadership of the team, like actual players, you know, and having them have an integral role in that. And that to me is so disappointing and as you know, I grew up in Baltimore and my entire family including my wonderful son-huge Ravens fans and of course the Ravens are just such a well-managed, well-organized organization. They just have such good focus from the top down and it… it shows in everything they do, and of course my brother, who I'm very close to, is brutal… he's brutal… because he just constantly points out the shortcomings of my team, so it's a little bit tough. But I like to say that, you know, it makes us tough fans. [laughs] We've been through the low points and we're still hanging in there, so I think the fans have got grit… um I wish that the organization of the Washington Football Team had the same amount of grit [laughs] and focus.

[Mike] But…and from a leadership standpoint… they're… I think it points out the difference in organizations, right? No matter whether it's football, education, private

business, if your leadership is not in touch with the rank and file there's… there's a huge disconnect there.

[Sharon] And it's really bad and the negative effects just ripple throughout, and it's really felt, I mean, I have seen games… um… football games, where, you know, you can see that the fans and the team, they're just demoralized. Like they just feel so down about themselves, and… and that's not a good thing for any organization… um and I do… I don't see the same… um demoralization among the Ravens fans because they… they know everybody's working towards the same goal and I guess that's something… there's a disconnect with the Washington team so… but I'm hanging in there, I have hope. [laughs] Every year…

[Mike] Aside from football, what makes a good leader?

[Sharon] Um… well I can tell you that based on my own experiences working with good leaders, and I've worked with many actually, I worked with some ineffective ones in other organizations, but I work… at Montgomery College… I've been very lucky to work with excellent leaders and mentors here and I really believe that the first thing is that a good leader listens, like they… they have to understand what people are doing, what the goals are, and where the problems are, and where the successes are. So, you have to really be a good listener and that is a skill that not many people have. Um… it's easy to talk… it's easy to think about, think that you're listening when you're really just getting ready to say something. [Laughs] And you're not really hearing what people are saying. The other quality I think is important in a good leader is flexibility. I'm a very organized person. I like structure. I like process. But I also know that I have to be able to pivot to meet… like challenges and, of course, we know that with the covid pandemic…I mean we've had to be incredibly flexible in all aspects of our work. And… and meeting student needs just in the classroom - you've constantly got to be flexible and I think that's really important in a leader wherever your role of leadership is. And the last thing I think is really important… um is humility. Like, I think a good leader has to say: I'm vulnerable in certain areas. I don't …I'm not perfect. I make mistakes and own up to them and then move on. And I think that that's really important to… to show that you're vulnerable, to show that you… um have humility. That you can laugh at yourself and that you can learn from the problems that arise. And I have been really lucky to work with people who have done all of those things and inspired me along the way. Even though they weren't always perfect, they were great leaders. They are great leaders.

[Mike] You've been at Montgomery College for about 20 years.

[Sharon] Yes, yes.

[Mike] How have your thoughts on leadership changed over that time?

[Sharon] Well it's interesting because in teaching, it's a very solitary activity. So, when you're teaching in a classroom you are in your classroom. You're in your space. You

organize everything. You don't really think too much on a day-to-day basis about all of the management that goes on outside of your classroom to make that possible - the curriculum decisions, the scheduling decisions, the support decisions, you don't really think about those things. And so, as I slowly edged my way into broader and broader management leadership roles at the college, I've seen more of the policy decision making that I never even really thought about. I just figured yeah somebody made this somewhere, but I didn't realize all of the… the steps of the process, like the collaboration, and getting feedback, and making mistakes and asking for, you know input, and then making something better. And I've had a lot of respect because I always just thought that, you know, these things just evolved, you know, leadership just evolved but what I've realized is they're people. Leaders are people and… and they learn, and they grow, and they talk to lots of people, they take feedback, and they make decisions based on so many factors. It's actually kind of dizzying at times and I think just in my daily routine of going in my classroom at the beginning of my career, I just never appreciated that. Um… I've also found that a true leader really is advocating for people. You're working with people. And the majority of my job as department chair is working with people. I mean, I talk to people, and I listen all day long. And the actual paperwork and stuff is such a tiny bit of what I do. Most of the time I'm just listening to people and helping them figure out ways of dealing with challenges. And I didn't really think about that you think of, you know, somebody in a Dean position just kind of making decisions, you know, you don't really think about all of the time they spend cultivating people, helping them develop, and grow. People like me, you know, they helped me develop and grow and you just kind of take it for granted… didn't know that's… that's the really huge part of being a good leader.

[Mike] Why are we so hesitant to allow leaders to make mistakes?

[Sharon] I don't know. That's a good question. I…I think it boils down to the leader. Because I know in me… um I, you know I was teaching. I love teaching. And my first leadership role, I mean, besides just being like a course coordinator, my first big college-wide role here at the college was working on the Gen Ed committee. I was co-chair when we implemented that and there was a very dynamic program. But it was vastly different than what we had in place and there was a lot of anxiety among all of my colleagues… far and wide about this. And for me, I was hesitant to step into that role at first because I knew it was going to test me. And I knew I was going to have to be strong and be able to handle challenge and conflict. And I wouldn't have all the answers right away except something brand new. And I think that as a leader sometimes you feel like you have to be strong, you have to have the answers, you can't make mistakes, you can't have people… when people are disagreeing with you or in conflict with you, that's somehow negative. But it's not at all! It's all part of the process and I had to learn in that role, that conflict… disagreement is actually good because it points out where the problems are, so I could deal with them. But you have to kind of go through that layer

and I think when you look up to someone as being in charge of something, you know, we expect them to be good, to be perfect, to be 99% on at all times and, so I think that's tough because no one can live up to that. [Laughs] They would… they would be machines and not people.

[Mike] And I don't think that means we have to embrace conflict or enjoy conflict, right? It simply means that we have to understand how to deal with it as a leader because it's inevitable.

[Sharon] It is and actually sometimes it's good because when people disagree with me, at first, I'm like…grr… but I have to put that aside. The emotion aside, you know. Okay, let me listen to what this person is saying. And then sometimes when I listen to them, I find out, okay, the feelings are all tangled in there with their ideas, and once you can kind of… let them kind of…go through it you can find out there sometimes there's a very valid point underneath. And sometimes that's a good thing, because we can kind of say, hey what can we do to move forward? One thing I've learned is you don't assess blame. You just kind of keep moving forward. [Laughs] How do we solve the problem? How do we address this? How can we bridge this problem? And sometimes the best things come out of those conversations, but it's hard because I think that we all… we're hesitant to get into those difficult, tough conversations. We're hesitant. We want to look like we know what we're doing and there's a lot of "us" involved in leadership and in our work and it's hard to separate the personal from the task. But you have to, otherwise you drive yourself crazy.

[Mike] But that's that humility that you talked about too. Admitting your own vulnerabilities and that you don't have all the answers.

[Sharon] Yeah. It's tough [laughs]

[Mike] Do you enjoy it?

[Sharon] I…I like it, yes I do. I…I found that it's not easy. It's not easy but I enjoy it. And I think in the long… I mean… I have days that are difficult because I have a lot of problems… challenges to deal with. Mostly people… personnel issues - students complaining about something that is unfair and then I have to kind of weed through it to find out… like is there an actual problem here? What is it? How do we move forward? So somedays those kinds of problems - they're… they are exhausting. Number one dealing with people and the anger and kind of being calm, you know, being the one who listens. Sometimes is hard but I enjoy it because I think I've grown a lot from it. I think I'm a different person now than I was 10 years ago here. And I appreciate the people I work with who are just incredible experts and know so much and… and one thing I've learned is that it's okay to ask for help. Like to ask for support. Ask for advice. And as a leader you never think that leaders are going to have to do that. That managers are going to do but you do, because that's how you get better. That's how you come up with the best

solutions and it's great. I work with two other English chairs at the different campuses, and we talk all the time. We are texting all the time. It is great because it helps us all… like come up with ideas and make time calm and… and come up with solutions. It is really helpful, but I had to learn that it was okay to ask for help sometimes. And just to have people to lean on. And so, I love it, actually but it's not always easy. [Laughs] I can't imagine that your job is always easy either. I mean you're really working at a top level, and you've got so many things that you have to consider for every decision, every idea that you have. It's tough, I can imagine.

[Mike] Well it is tough and I… I will tell you that I think the thing that that helps me get through is that, while I take the work seriously, I don't take myself seriously.

[Sharon] [Laughs] I think that's the trick, really.

[Mike] Because I…I have kids and grandkids who tell me: why are you so serious? Don't take yourself too serious. Right? They keep me grounded.

[Sharon] Oh yeah. I have two sons and they keep me very grounded. [Laughs] When I take myself too seriously, they're like oh no that's not [inaudible]

[Mike] What you learn what did you learn as a faculty member that you can take from a leadership standpoint to your role as chair?

[Sharon] Well interestingly, when I'm in the classroom I try to keep everybody, like super actively involved. I think that's really the trick about learning anything - is you have to keep them hands-on. And one thing I found by doing that is I noticed that certain people have certain strengths. So, I would I taught writing… or I teach writing… and so I would learn okay what is this person's strengths? What does this person have to work on? And I have them pull from their strength to have the most powerful message that they could. So I was kind of used to kind of digging into a person. Kind of figuring out what they do well, because they're constantly practicing, constantly demonstrating in my classes. And so, and then I would have them kind of work on that, enhance that, but the same time pull up their other skills as well. So, one thing I've learned with working in any kind of leadership role, whether it was a Gen Ed program or the English department, is… it's still people. So, I… I try to figure out… like what are people's strengths? What are their interests? And then I try to give them opportunities to flourish, and I encourage them to try new things and to talk about what they're doing. And what's not working. What is working. And I put a spotlight on their strengths and their successes, and I have conversations around things that we're all struggling with. And I guess that comes from teaching and managing my classroom the same exact way. And the other thing I've noticed is that sometimes you have to help people figure out what do they want to do to improve? Like where do they want to go? How do they want to grow? And I'm used to having those conversations with students, you know, what are you going to do? Like, where do you want to go from here? And… and now I find myself in similar

conversations with the people I work with. You know… like what do you see for yourself? Like… what are your interests? And then I nudge them into opportunities for fellowships or sabbaticals or courses and that sort of thing. Um… helping them write goals for their evaluations. The same kind of thing. So, it's similar although the content is different. It's still about people and growth and learning. And that's one thing MC is so good at. Because they give you so many opportunities here to try new things and to learn new things and to showcase what you've done. That's the… that's the beauty of it. That's the fun, of life - is growing and trying new things and I like to bring that into the department as well. The other thing I've…I've done in this department is, I try to make us feel like a unified group. It's like in the classroom. I'm always building community. You know, like we have snacks, and we have parties, and we have, you know, just sometimes… we just ask silly questions, and we play games about educational information. And then the department I'm trying to make it light, like we have Wednesday lunches, and we do, you know, at our department meetings, we have different people talking and we play bingo occasionally and stuff like that. Just to kind of make us laugh together and talk together. So that's one thing I found that's important because if not, you know, how do we make ourselves feel like a team and feel like we can rely on each other and support each other. So, I think that's really important. And your… your whole program helps with that. I mean everything you do kind of builds us and gives us opportunities to grow and to learn and… and to laugh and… and play with new ideas and that's the beauty of it.

[Mike] That segues me into a conversation that you categorized as a dance. And that's scheduling. Because that really is about working as a team as a unit. How has scheduling classes challenged you as a leader?

[Sharon] It's interesting… um because I want to respect faculty needs and what they need to build their schedule. At the same time, I have a responsibility to students to make sure that the classes they need are offered when and how they need it. So sometimes I'll have people who have small children, or they have, you know, other responsibilities outside of their work. And so, they can only teach at certain times, and they like to teach certain classes. But I don't schedule for them. I schedule for students. So, what I've learned to do is… I kind of do this dance… kind of balance. So, we make a schedule that works for student needs based on data collection from the past few years. And then, what I do is I work individually with the professors, and we try to figure out what kind of schedule do they want? I let them choose. I give them a schedule. What we do is, we have a rotation. So, it revolves every semester, you know, the top person goes to the bottom and then individually they look at the schedule and they pick the courses that they want to teach. And we have certain… like guidelines they can only teach one distance class to start with… blah …blah… and then as we go along once everybody picks their schedule, we do a second rotation. They can change things, but what I've learned is people want the freedom to choose their own work schedule. And so I'm not going to tell them what it is so… um but I set up the big schedule and then I

have the faculty pick the classes that they want and that way they have control within a certain parameter. And then what happens is, there's also the point of… like when semester is beginning, we have certain classes that are empty. You know we tend to… hopefully, not have too many, but we often have to add classes and that's the real dance. Like how much do you add? What do you think students need? When do they have to be like? What kind of format should they be in? And what day? Should they be structured remote virtual? Should they be… that is the real dance because that information comes in the last second. [Laughs] And it's hard to figure out. So that takes, you know, data analysis. And that's just me looking at the numbers, looking at the wait list, begging people, you know. Do you want to pick up another class? You… and… and we have to find teachers who go to teaching certain courses or like teaching certain courses so… so many people-issues, and criteria there that you have to constantly consider, and that's the dance and it happens fast and that is something that, for me, I like to think and be methodical, but I have to be flexible at that point. As soon as the semester starts, like two days before it… it happens every semester. So that's why you gotta sit down with the numbers, you gotta watch the numbers on the computer, as people are signing up for classes. And then what I try to do is, I try to have people who I know want to teach classes, who are ready to step into those roles. So, it is a constant dance and a balance because you don't want a class that's too empty, but you also don't want to have zero seats left [Laughs] in anything. So, it's really hard… um that has that has really taxed me because I've learned to watch the numbers fast and furiously and to make, you know, instantaneous decisions. But I have developed some shortcuts for that like, I do know I have some people who want to pick up classes at the last minute. I have them ready and waiting and I slip them into that role… um so I have done some of those kinds of… um preparations I suppose. But still every semester, it's different. For example, this semester, part of our classes were offered on campus, many were remote. I thought students would be flocking back to campus and they were not. [laughs] And so, our class is originally empty here until the last minute… um so, you know, we had to add a lot of virtual classes. And it just became, like, this last minute push. We had to hire people. We had to train them. So, it's one of those things you just you never know what people are gonna want and when they're gonna want it. It's just crazy, it really is. But it's interesting and I have noticed some trends. I've worked with the other chairs to kind of identify some things and plan as best we can.

[Mike] But what I love about what you were saying is that you're making these decisions not based on emotion but based on the data.

[Sharon] Absolutely. And we have students who will call and beg us, I need a seat, please add a class. But you know that you only have two students and it's a class of 25 - you can't open a whole class for two students. So, you find other places for those students to go. And so that's been… that's been a challenge, because you want to help

them but sometimes, we can help them, but it may not be their first choice. So… luckily, people are pretty flexible.

[Mike] Thank you. This has been wonderful. It's been so exciting for me to see your enthusiasm and your growth that I really…

[Sharon] Thank you very much.

[Mike]…Glad you took the time to join me.

[Sharon] Oh, thank you very much. I really enjoy… I really enjoy talking with you as well, so thank you for inviting me.

[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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