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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 Chris Cusic, Interim Director of Instructional Technology. Chris thanks for joining me.

[Chris] Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

[Mike] So, I always see... look at you... I think of you as the IT guy from... from our time in Germantown you know. Now you're at the... the Central Services building. But you have an Anthropology background. So, can you talk to me about that and then I want to parlay that into a conversation about leadership.

[Chris] Absolutely... um and thank you and yes that's true. My... my undergraduate was in social-cultural anthropology... um at the University of Maryland. Go Terps. Um... and my goal was to be an anthropologist. Um...and wanted to travel the world and... and you know, research different cultures, and things of that nature. And cultural anthropology is really the study of humans, their culture, their social-biological aspects, their environmental aspects, and how that impacts them. And just all those mechanisms that make us who we are. And then, how those lead into how we operate as a group. And during the course of the study of cultural anthropology, I was taking geographic information courses on, you know, remote sensing and things of that nature. Learning how to use tech to be a better social-cultural anthropologist. And that's really what kind of led me into IT. And that was the course I took. And... and getting to Montgomery College was a dream of mine because I was a former student and being at a place that I believed in, was key ingredient number one for me. Um... and I love what our mission is of helping students, the community, and so on and so forth. And I've always felt that my cultural anthropology background has... has had a great, positive impact on how I operate, how I work with others, and to understand the various dynamics involved with not just IT but the College and working with people and so on.

[Mike] Wonderful. So, a lot of your background looks at individuals and emotions...

[Chris] Correct.

[Mike] ... and how that impacts their... their day-to-day and the organization. How do you use that from a leadership perspective?

[Chris] And that's a great question... um I...I know that there's a philosophy out there called emotional intelligence and it's... it's... revolves around individuals understanding that they have emotions, and how you can utilize those in positive fashions. And then manage those when sometimes they aren't so. Um... and using sort of my cultural anthropology background, I expand that to the group. Not just learning how to manage my own emotions and... and showing that emotional maturity or intelligence, but

understanding that others have emotions too, and that they need to deal with it in their ways. And there's a variety of ways to do so. So how do I utilize that and leverage that to interact with others? To sort of drive all of us in in a positive, singular direction where there's buy-in. Because at the end of the day that... that's kind of how I... I look at leadership is somebody who has the capability to positively influence others, to follow them towards a vision and to embrace each other. Because if there's that sort of collective... uh agreement and care, I think that benefits whatever industry you're in - from military to working at Montgomery College to, you know, the family dynamic.

[Mike] Does it always work?

[Chris] It does not always work and I... I think that's part of the beauty of being a human is... is understanding the... that we are imperfect. We may strive for perfection and probably never ever get there, but it's okay to make mistakes. It's okay to understand that we have some deficiencies. And I think knowing that allows us to improve on those um... and mistakes will happen. And I think you have to understand that, and be willing to... to not be afraid of some of those things, because from that comes creativity, innovation, group thinking, those sorts of things that I think ultimately have greater value than some of those failures that have occurred along the way.

[Mike] I was speaking with a potential employee two, three years ago and I was asked by this person: what is your leadership style? And I said, well, I'd like to cultivate an atmosphere, a culture, of failure. And you could simply see this person recoil. Because there was... no... she didn't understand what... what we were trying to get at. And I said you know, I want to develop a culture of innovation and the only way you can innovate is by failing. And, you know, we... we did this song and dance and I... I said to the hiring manager afterwards. I said, if you offer this person the job, she's not going to take it. And explained why. Um... and it was simply because she did not want to be in a culture of... of innovation and failure. Because to me, fail... failing is simply an opportunity to learn, right? And I think as a good leader, you want to encourage that.

[Mike] Yes and... and I think you hit on a perfect point. It's fear. Uh... fear of how... of what will happen if we do our jobs differently. Fear of what will happen if we step out of the sort of standards that we set to do things. And you know I've always been a believer in having processes and standards. And... and I always think at the College particularly in IT we... we can always look to improve on those. But the whole concept too is that it's always evolving. Those just provide us... uh a fence line... um and then you can kind of operate with freedom within and around that. And then they constantly evolve. And it... it's one of those interesting topics. Uh... looking to hire we're always working with HR - okay this is the questions, the tests we're gonna ask, this is you know where we want to try to find people. We want a dynamic you know, set of people that come in and apply for positions. But how do you measure those soft skills? How do you know you're getting somebody who has the attitude that you want? The... the... the willingness to

learn and... and... and as you said fail. Um as opposed to just kind of going down the resume. I have this degree and this experience and... and so on and so forth. And it's an imperfect model and it's hard to find very good people. And then once you have those you know it's sometimes even harder to nurture that.

[Mike] How do you work with or lead individuals who have this fear of failure? As a leader, how do you... how do you cultivate that?

[Chris] And that's interesting and... and we have some of that in our current environment across the three campuses. There's roughly 40 technicians. And some of them are very comfortable empowering themselves. Some of them are... are, you know want to make sure that they're following the process and the rules and so on and so forth. So, I... as you state, try to work with them on an individual basis, show them where I have had failures. Um... talk to them about you know, exploring some of these... these feelings and... and how they perform their work. Um... with the ultimate understanding that you know, we're all in this together. And I think that's the key... is trying to prove to them that you truly trust them. That you truly support them. And that when issues arise it won't be blaming the people but looking at the entirety of the picture. So that we can understand how we can do something better. And I think that does take time. It's time and patience I think that are the two ingredients.

[Mike] Have you ever encountered someone who had a fear of success?

[Chris] Yes, yes, I have. Um... and I've always found that always relates to being comfortable. Um... I am comfortable in this situation. I know it's comfortable and I don't want to move from that standpoint. And... um I've always found that to be an interesting concept. And you know leaders around the world depending on what discipline you're in and so on and so forth. You know for... for IT, you could say a Steve Jobs or something that nature. And you always hear quotes that you know. once you're comfortable it needs... it's it means it's time for you to move on. You need to find something else. Because being uncomfortable is how growth occurs. And you know, so that's a basic concept I believe in. But I think that human nature is something that... uh most people want to find that comfort zone and stay there. Um... so that... that definitely is a very hard um... trait to... to try to get out of, both personally and... and from a leadership standpoint with dealing with others.

[Mike] As a leader would you rather deal with someone who has a fear of failure or fear of success?

[Chris] Um... that's a great question... um and I don't know if I have a... an ideal answer. I see a little bit of both and it... it ultimately, in my opinion, depends on the individual. Their background, what they're doing, what opportunities may exist, and... and those sorts of things. But if I had to generalize it a bit, I would say somebody who has a fear of failure. Um... because being a human being, I think you can prove pretty easily... uh that

failures occur all the time. On a micro level. On a macro level. And they're easy to display. And I think from a certain standpoint you can build some of that understanding, empathy, that we're all in this together. And you can... you can sort of grow that. When a person has... um... on the other, I guess the flip side of that coin, sometimes there's a situation where there isn't growth. There isn't opportunity available in this particular arena and they may have to look outside and sometimes that's a bit harder, I think. Because then there's higher levels of complexity that are involved that are outside of our ability to manage... um and so I... I think that can be a bit difficult, in my opinion.

[Mike] Tell me what you think the difference is, or is there a difference, between being a leader and being a manager?

[Chris] Absolutely 100%. And I would start with being a manager. Supervisor, manager director, whatever the title may be. And there's a series of responsibilities. You have to ensure that these people are doing this job, they're following this process, they're looking at this procedure, and... and...uh I think that's the most basic requirement... um of holding that title. And there's ways to do that. You know, I...looking at a time sheet, this has been followed, looking at work tasks that has been done, was this followed correctly so on and so forth. I think the difficulty gets in to how to be a real leader. And for me what that means is investing in people. On the individual level and on the group level. How do I help you grow? How do I help you become the better... the best you in this environment? How can I help you find other opportunities in this institution or even outside? How can I help you help me collectively move the vision of the College forward? Um and I think that takes a lot of different characteristics. I think it's an investment in people. I think it's an investment in... in time and really at the end of the day, I think it's consistency and commitment that are key ingredients to being a leader

[Mike] Let me play devil's advocate for a minute and you know there's individuals who say but Chris that takes a lot of time and energy. How am I going to get my work done if I have to invest in all these people to help them get their job done?

[Chris] And that is a great question. Um and it's something that we do battle on a day-to-day basis... um and I... I think I look at that as you want to be proactive or reactive? Proactive in... in terms of investing that time now to build that culture of positivity and empowerment and... and fearlessness so that we can innovate and create and improve all the things that we do. And that does take a lot of time and patience. And there will be mishaps along the way. Doing that early and doing that consistently I think ultimately at the end of the day results in a better success. As opposed to saying okay that takes too much time, you have these tasks that you have to do, let's just focus on that. We'll get to these other soft skills or the... uh these other non-tangible items later. And I think you continue to push it off and all that you get is the same - day in and day out. Work task comes in, it's completed the same way that it was before. There's nuance to it and that is just sort of standardized. And there is no growth from it. There's no efficiency gained

from it. There's no impact... impactfulness of it. So I think essentially it does all take time. but I've found the more you invest, the more you schedule your time, the more you proactively plan, you oftentimes realize wow I didn't realize how much time I really have to do these things and that I can accomplish this.

[Mike] When did you realize, one that you wanted to become a leader, two that you had fulfilled that goal?

[Chris] That's a great question. Um... I'm not sure exactly when I realized I... I wanted to become a leader. I think I've always wanted to positively influence people. Um... and it never mattered to me where I was on this sort of hierarchy if we can call it that. You know, a somebody who reported to somebody. Somebody who was on the same level or somebody who has people who reports to them. And I think it took me years to realize that...that wanting... that desire to want to influence people in a positive manner is leadership. And it can happen at any level regardless of your title. Um... and so that... that started to click for me a little bit before I got to the College. And I've been here almost... well I've been here eight years. Um... and... uh and yeah I guess that's when that's set in. And there's a second part to your question but I... I think I've already forgotten what that was.

[Mike] That's okay. We can... we can move on. What do you look for in a leader?

[Chris] It's the willingness to be human. The understanding that you're a person. Your perceptions and thoughts but [inaudible] about that ... um and I think that's a key ingredient. As you come into an environment that objectivity that understanding that you're dealing with people regardless of the discipline. Um... and I think that's a foundational piece in leadership. Um... and from that anything can be learned. You can educate yourself. You can get these certain degrees. You can learn a certain trade. Um... but having those foundational pieces of being human, being objective, understanding that at the end of the day, you... you need to work with others, and get others to work with you. I think that's that critical piece. And it's hard to detect in people and I think it's... it's, again we go back to this time factor. You have to invest time in somebody to understand whether that's there or not. Or whether that can be incubated and fostered and grown. And that's hard to do. And...and I think the world has proved that there is no one way that measures how to do it collectively and correctly. Because we're always looking at different ways to... to find leadership.

[Mike] Have you been surrounded by good leaders in your career?

[Chris] You know, I think I've collectively had very good leaders and also just managers, people who just simply come in and do their job and have that title of authority. Um... so it's been a very mixed bag um... and I think as a whole you know, that... that... that's I think... that's in tune with humanity in itself. You know we're all sort of a... a collection of different people, different thoughts, and so on and so forth. So it's been predictable I

would say of what I would expect, um... but definitely would love to find some way to better pick leaders and better put leaders in... in positions to lead um... across the board.

[Mike] If I were to ask you where do you see yourself on the leadership growth spectrum two or three years from now? How's it different than where you are today?

[Chris] And that's a great question... um and... and I think it... it... it is that sort of bird's-eye view. You know as I've sort of developed both personally and professionally, the picture gets bigger. There's more of it to assess and analyze. There's more detail and complexity to it, and it becomes harder to be a good leader as you sort of move up in your career, so to speak. Because the... the picture's broader. There's more dynamics to it um... and it's... it's very hard to assess and... and I think that fear factor plays in. I'm comfortable here. I'm... I think... I believe I'm leading well here and there's... I... I get that positive feedback from my team so I... I'm comfortable here. I don't want to take that next step up because it's a larger picture. It's a larger pond, so to speak. Do I have the capabilities to expand my leadership to cover that? And that's a fear I... I believe that I do have... that... and... and... and again going back to that wanting to challenge yourself, um... I'd like that opportunity to see if I can do that. Because I believe I have value that I can add from that leadership perspective.

[Mike] This is interesting. It all ties back in with your undergraduate work on anthropology and the look at human nature, doesn't it?

[Chris] It really does. I can't ever seem to get away from that culture anthropology perspective. Not that I want to, but it was one of these early in my career. I thought wow I've got this undergraduate in cultural anthropology... um... yes I ended up getting a master's in management information systems and services, but, on a resume, people look at that and they go what does this have to do with IT? And it does always go back to that because at the end of the day it goes back to people. Um and this is definitely a degree platform that helped me understand the value, importance, and complexity of... of the human race.

[Mike] Leadership is about people not about tasks.

[Chris] Agreed.

[Mike] Chris, thank you. This has been a fascinating conversation. I appreciate your taking time out of your schedule to join me

[Chris] I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you very much, Mike

[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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