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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 Kim McGettigan, Administrative Manager of the Office of the Vice President and Provost on the Takoma Park Silver Spring campus. Kim, thanks for joining me.

[Kim] Good morning. I'm so happy to be here.

[Mike] I want to start off talking about a recent trip you had. You were working as part of a group. You were a civilian intercultural communications resource working with Afghan refugees. Can you tell me a little bit about that? What that entailed?

[Kim] Sure. I joined Team Rubicon, which is a... an international group of US and other allied veterans, along with civilians, who have specific skills and a desire to give back. In the case of refugees, like our Afghan guests who are here in the United States, or major disasters, they have deployed to Louisiana, Haiti, and places like that. Because of my background in working for the State Department and other government agencies, and my degree in intercultural communications, I thought I would be best utilized at Fort Pickett where we have almost 6,000 Afghan guests staying with us now, that we are trying to welcome and get ready to apply for some sort of status so they... they can join us permanently. So, I was there for a little over a week and I had 10 teammates and primarily we were working on a very basic subsistence level for them. Many of the guests, when I got there, had been here for three weeks and they were still wearing the clothes that they got onto the transport plane. So, we also had 17 births among the mothers, so finding them baby formula and diapers and things like that were... um were a wonderful challenge to be presented with. And it kind of took me back to my State Department days. Um but it was interesting being in a group where many of the team members were the leader in their group and so to have a whole group of leaders trying to function as a team was an interesting dynamic. Um and one that I think we successfully managed. But the first day was with majors and generals and other people whose ranks weren't... weren't um revealed but obviously were used to leading minions, rather than being a minion. It was... that was an interesting challenge for us. But incredibly rewarding, because the smallest kindness done to our Afghan guests was repaid tenfold and um it was also rewarding to see how um our young military members who were brought in from all over the country. Um this week we had marines from Camp Lejeune, most of whom were 19 or 20, and so for... for them it was eye-opening just in trying to sort through thousands and thousands of bags of donated items to find things that would be suitable for our guests. And so, explaining the cultural needs that they had um and how certain things were inappropriate and so by the end of the week they were far more educated, informed and um aware of the needs of our guests and... and... and able to help them not only getting clothed and... and supplied, but just having a better understanding of them and a more gracious way of interacting with our guests. So that was nice.

[Mike] Let's talk about the leadership challenges you mentioned. How did that play out? Because in... in all organizations, when you have people who believe they're all chiefs that doesn't always work well.

[Kim] So um there were two dynamics at play. One um most... most of the higher ranking um individuals who felt they should lead the mission were male. Um however, the leader of the entire mission was um a woman who had extraordinary um diplomacy skills and an ability to say no. So when... when there were challenges in communication between the different leadership styles, of all of the members and those of us who either had a background in diplomacy, and there were three of us there with a background like that. I also taught hostage negotiating at the FBI academy so I...I was able to throw that in every now and then. Those skills that I learned. And um we refocused on the mission being a no-fail mission and how critical it was, and that everyone had to contribute based on their strengths and so we were able to leverage the... um the leadership capability of our team members with the much younger army and marine... platoons that were working with us. And ultimately in the warehouses which were huge and filled with untold um good and really interesting donations um the... the eventual leader ended up being a very unassuming and humble person from North Carolina who had spent years doing logistics in a Food Lion, and that skill trumped those of lieutenant colonels and majors when um trying to organize and be efficient in um fulfilling the needs of our guests. So, um ultimately experience and knowledge um trump's rank. And so, by the end of the week we were all a very seamless team of people who were literally just trying to get things done. So, rank became, I wouldn't say meaningless, but rank became a lot less important than an intense desire to accomplish a mission as well as um an inability to feel um pain or fatigue. Um and just a desire... everyone had the same desire to make a difference and so ultimately that wins and so that's how our week ended. So...

[Mike] How do you... well... I think what you're... what I'm hearing anyway is... is this concept that title doesn't matter. You can lead from wherever you are and in your case that's what would happen with this one person who ended up using experience over... over rank. How do we get people who have or don't have the title to understand that they can lead no matter what their position title is?

[Kim] So I think that um sometimes people feel intimidated when they're in a group of supervisors or people with advanced degrees or ranks or however one determines a hierarchy. But we are all smarter than any one of us, and if we remember that in any meeting everyone is in a meeting because they have an ability to contribute. And sometimes people who are leaders, who have had a similar project um look at things one way, because that's how it works and sometimes someone outside of that...that project can come at it from a different point of view. So, everyone's opinion has value whether it's acted upon or not. Sometimes just saying have we thought about doing it this way regardless of where you fit into the food chain, helps everyone to start thinking outside of the box, to come up with creative um new answers to challenges and problems. And we... the... the leader of the mission down at Fort Pickett had been there for over a month and she said at the end that the beginning of each week started similarly with a group of high functioning, well-meaning professionals trying to figure out how to get along. But the end of each week ended up developing better systems to accomplish the mission, so that three weeks from now they will be so far ahead of where we were this week. Um so I... I and... and I also

think that um all leaders in the room to give grace to everyone in the room and to make space for people to feel comfortable in sharing their opinions, or if you know of someone who has... a... in the meeting who has a great planning mind or is OCD enough to track specifics, but they are not comfortable in speaking up. You setting them up for success by giving them the opportunity to share their thoughts with the group is sometimes helpful and I think if... if any leader or... um or person in a room who's not afraid of... um speaking out, um is mindful of those around them and giving them the space to feel comfortable enough to contribute, we all benefit.

[Mike] What's your leadership style?

[Kim] My leadership style is 90% collaborative, um but I will share with you that my students um call me an emotional terrorist for good. So, I am not above using pathos um if... if the ultimate goal is good. Whether that is um in sharing with a donor uh a student story so that they understand um the... the totality of our mission with students. Um... or... um... or in... um doing something that is part of our overall mission, um I'm not above wheedling to get my way but 90% I am collaborative. I am... I'm a middle child so I don't think I have an authoritative bone in my body. Um and if I did, um Catholic school probably knocked it out of there. So, I like to have a very big table without a head at it and um like I said before, I think we're all smarter than any one of us. So I may have good ideas but my ideas are never the only ideas. So...

[Mike] Is that what you look for in a leader as well?

[Kim] So I think that being collaborative and being a servant leader is critically important as far as buy-in. I have never on a team asked anyone to do anything that I would not do myself and that I don't model doing myself. Um I have seen that work exceptionally well at Montgomery College. I remember when Dr. Stewart first came to the college from Wisconsin, he was shocked and awed by our lack of ability to deal with snow, and so the students, faculty, and staff saw him out with our building service workers shoveling the sidewalks and showing them how to properly um clear them to keep our students safe. He never walks by a piece of trash without picking it up and so that is so contagious. If the vice president does these things, who am I to put myself above doing those things? And so, everyone starts to function as a servant leader and empowering people to lead where they are and just makes for a very vibrant and collaborative community. So, servant leadership I think is one of the most important things. Um and collaboration and cooperation rather than a dictatorial style, I think is critically important.

[Mike] But we've all had those leaders who once they get that title, they become very dictatorial. It's not that servant leadership. Once a person goes down that path is there a way to help turn them around or turn the organization around?

[Kim] I think so. I think ultimately Machiavelli was right when he said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. However, if a leader is persuaded that his style of leadership, which is neither collaborative nor inclusive, is damaging the mission and therefore his reputation and his ability to lead, he or she is far more open to, at least considering, other styles of leadership. Because ultimately if you can get things done faster, better, cheaper, and with buy-in from all of the stakeholders, it's a win for you as a leader and makes you look better. So, I think that there are some people who are pretty far down the path and it's harder to bring them back to

a level of collaboration, but I refuse to believe that um any leader, at least in higher education, is not capable of being... um... of learning new skills.

[Mike] Well and the pandemic has taught us, if nothing, that if you don't learn those new skills your institution is going to be left behind.

[Kim] Well but that's in everything. So, I think the pandemic was an eye opener for us but um stagnation just breeds mold and nobody likes that. So, we all have to keep learning and evolving and as soon as we feel comfortable that we have everything figured out that's probably the point at which we should realize that we really need to learn some new skills. Um because there is no... there is no end to the um to the educational journey for any of us and um I think one of the critical definitions of leadership is that... that it is ever evolving. And it should always be striving to be better and more inclusive so um there's... there's no nirvana for leadership um because you can always get better.

[Mike] Has your leadership changed, or your leadership style changed, because of the pandemic?

[Kim] I think my leadership style changed in that... and I'm very grateful because I do have a tendency to take a lot of things on myself... just because I can do things quickly and I know how they're done. But I wasn't able to do that during the pandemic and so my... I became more empowering... which not only helped those on my team to either learn new skills or become more confident that they had the skills initially and now they were able to practice them, but also taught me as a leader that we could do a lot more if the... um... if... if our... our duties and challenges were spread out amongst the team. So that we could all accomplish more, as opposed to saying, oh don't worry I'll take care of that. Sometimes you do that because it's quicker, but that may not be the best leadership strategy, because others aren't learning and developing those skills. And if you're not helping your team to develop the leadership... leadership skills that they need, then you... first... you totally ruin succession planning and we've seen where when people retire and they haven't shared their skills, it leaves a hole in the institution. So, it's a smart thing from a succession planning point of view, but it also strengthens your team tenfold, giving people the opportunity to learn and practice new skills.

[Mike] Kim, this has been very enlightening. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy day. Any future plans with the Afghan guests that you talked about?

[Kim] Well I have... I still have a month and a half of use or lose, and I have already made plans. There are critical supply needs that they don't have. So, I'm hoping to round up men's belts, maternity clothing, and baby formula and lead a caravan back down to Fort Pickett so that I can help some more.

[Mike] Well, congratulations on that work and thanks for joining me.

[Kim] My pleasure. Thank you for having 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](mailto:michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu). Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward.

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