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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 Ramon De La Cruz, building coordinator for Facilities at the Central Services building and chair of Staff Council. Ramon, thanks for joining me.

**RAMON:** Thanks for inviting me, Mike. I appreciate this, uh, it's a great opportunity I think it's a great program...great idea.

**MIKE:** So let's...let's talk a little bit about leadership as it relates to Montgomery College and bringing people back to campus and the enormity of...of that task. And your role from a governance standpoint and...and leadership. Tell me a little bit about what you're having to do or the challenges that you might be facing.

**RAMON:** Well I think the number one thing is to relay information and communicate. And I think communication is the big, um, the elephant in the room so to speak. Communication and communication leads to collaboration so you have to have this proper foundation of communication. First to navigate that journey of collaboration that...that we do so well at MC. I mean we have a lot of departments that work together we have a lot of collaboration, um, in governance, um, right now we're setting our goals and...and we see a lot of cross council collaboration. So, those things are the themes for us in governance this year and you know that that communication and...um, and...and through communication you get inclusion, so I think that's...that's a byproduct of good communication.

**MIKE:** What challenges are you facing?

**RAMON:** Uh, well, you know, uh, crucial conversations I think is the best answer for this one because it doesn't matter what the topic is there's always some...a crucial conversation that's happening. Right now, it's return to campus, right? Um, in six months it may be something totally different from those uh but right now it's that...that burning conversation about returned to campus, um, and trying to get people to come around to the fact that, um, you know we evolved one way for a reason and now we're evolving back the other way for the opposite reason. So, I think it's just seeing if logic took us one way then we shouldn't argue against the logic when it takes us the other way, um, in terms of returning and returning to services. I think that's the number one thing is returning your services is the, uh, is the key to bring it home.

**MIKE:** I...I think you know what I find intriguing about this and it's certainly not just Montgomery College, but it is higher ed across the country. When we first made the decision as institutions across the country did in March of 2020 to go remote there was a lot of concern expressed: Oh, my gosh, we...we're going remote. We don't want to go remote. We want to be on campus. And now we've had a taste of what it's like to be

remote and we're saying, oh but maybe we don't want to come back right now, we did so well in in remote. It's a...a totally different mindset.

**RAMON:** It's a flip. We flipped it one way and now we have to flip it back the other way. Uh when the mentalities and the reality haven't matched that flip, I think for you know everyone's kind of adjusting at different... different speeds and I think that's the... uh that's the sensitive point. So, I think um I think being a...being a leader is uh being sensitive to the situations. I mean they're...everyone's going through a different situation right now. Everyone has gone through a different situation although we have gone through the same pandemic, everyone has gone through it differently and just being cognizant of that I think it's important um this...this...this pandemic has changed everything. And I want to say something off the record. This is not a governance, this is not sponsored by governance, this is just Ramon de la Cruz statement. [ Laughs ] So, I want to say that disclaimer before I do this because I think we did evolve one way to adapt to the pandemic and I think in...in...in our return in some ways we're not having that same level of adaptation, um, and I'm speaking specifically to our, uh, um, number one constituent concerning governance...that I can say is, uh, is return to campus and to telework and how that's affecting return to work and navigating people's lifestyles that were shifted. Um, and...and...and...shifting back to Ramon De La Cruz just an employee saying this, uh, governance cap off...I think it would behoove us in many different ways to... uh have a little bit more of a sensitively phased in approach. That's what I'll say, and you know about telework I think you know we can find ways to work with that. I think... um blanket kind of statements are tough because then it kind of absolves the manager or supervisor, SVP, whoever making a decision that works for their operations. So, I think I think it works differently. I think HR kind of has set standards of which positions are approved for this so, um, I also think they should maybe review some of those things so I think just evolving just in keeping with the evolution and saying hey this may happen again. It may not, but it may happen again. It already happened once, we never thought it would happen.

**MIKE:** Well you're right we...we never thought it would happen and...and so many businesses around the country just were...were taken back by...by all of it right?

**RAMON:** Had to pivot.

**MIKE:** Well, and you know pivot is to me...has become so overused at this point, right? It's become that...that cliché that you know we...we have to pivot. I...I'm not even sure what that means at this point.

**RAMON:** I'm guilty of it because I'm an athletic aficionado so that's...a that's a basketball term.

**MIKE:** It's a basketball term, right, uh, and you know we...we use it all the time in...in basketball, um, but if you pivot enough in basketball as you well know, you come around full circle and you're back to where you started.

**RAMON:** That's a good point.

**MIKE:** And I'd like to hope that...that we as...as an institution...we as...as an industry pivot enough to evolve and to transform but not necessarily make a 360, a pivot because I...I think the easy part for all of us and you know I think from a leader's standpoint it's...it's easy to do, hard to undo, is to get back to...to where you started, um, I don't think we want to get back to where we started in many cases.

**RAMON:** And...and that's you know right back to the evolution. That we need to keep having...we need to keep having the evolution. We at least need to keep having the conversation, keeping the dialogue open, um, expectations have changed, norms were changed, and now in returning to norms that work before maybe, uh, maybe a tougher...tougher goal for some folks to, uh, to adjust to.

**MIKE:** What kind of leader is Ramon De La Cruz?

**RAMON:** Um, well I'll tell you a story about my leadership. My leadership started in boy scout so that's...that's where I learned leadership, that's why I learned all the foundations of leadership, um I became an eagle scout, um senior patrol leader and... and uh you know, participated in elections and democratic processes early, and understanding how they work and understanding that relationships were the...were the ...the uh nurture of that nature, I guess. Uh, you know that's...that's what feeds it, um, there it evolved and it's not something that I kind of jump into, uh, contrary to popular belief. [ Laughs ] I am more of, uh, things that come to me and I see and I can participate and... and be productive in some kind of way towards the end goal and then I'll be part of it, so, um, I'm a leader who's adaptive, um, I'm a leader who doesn't have to lead all the time. I think that's an important part of being a leader is, uh, sometimes...first of all the most important part of being a leader is making more leaders and identifying more leaders. And the way you do that is not pushing all the time and sitting back and kind of seeing what other people say first. Well, let's see what everybody has to say and let's take other opinions first. Um, I struggle with that sometimes because I...I am a creative person so I...I do have a lot of ideas and I want to share them right away, um, so I have to kind of you know, hold them back now. That's what I'm learning, um, in this phase of leadership that I'm in right now. Is that...is that, uh, looking for leaders creating more leaders and nurturing that in people.

**MIKE:** I like the... uh the boy scout piece. I... two of my three sons are eagle scouts. My, uh, one son, who is not an Eagle Scout, made it to life scout and it is at...at least from a father standpoint, probably the best experience that I could have provided for...for

my...my boys, because you learn skills there that help...help you identify career paths, relationships um I...I...I would encourage every, um--

**RAMON:** Everything I mean confidence...I mean learning, uh, the amount you know it's a lot of reading. As a kid I was a comic book collector, so my collection is quite large. I still have my scout book but--

**MIKE:** Uh, well, and I think you also learn failure.

**RAMON:** Absolutely! You learn the lessons from it. You go take a test, you fail it you know you get cheered up by your troop, and all right, you know, take it again pass it again next time, it's a camaraderie that builds confidence in...in that arena.

**MIKE:** I...I absolutely love the program...that you know I...I was a leader for a number of years and... and not only did it help my boys become leaders, it helped me in...in my leadership journey, because you're dealing with people from all walks of life, different personalities, different stages, and you have to learn to adapt.

**RAMON:** Yeah so and adapting is interesting because through a lot of different phases you learn different ways to adapt. For example, sometimes you have to be a really...really vocal and brave leader like, you know...if you're playing basketball sport that's what you want... you want somebody that's gonna be vocal. Let's hear and let's kind of get everybody pumped up. In some in some areas you don't want to be that kind of leader, in some areas you want to be a more reserved leader, you want to nurture, you want to be more productive in terms of growing people and nurturing people and finding out what drives them and getting them to chase that and pursue that. So, I think that's a passion for me now. It made me write a book. So, I wrote a book this year that was exciting. And going back to your note about being a father and this is what struck me in the heart, um, I...I tried to, um, get my kids in...in Boy Scouts and you know, express to them what it meant to me, but this is where I learned a different form of leadership because they're on a path of their own, they want to do different things, so my sons were more athletic than me so they wanted to play basketball so I coached them on their teams instead of pushing them to what I want you know what I thought this is the way, and I still believe it in my heart but you have to...you have to take other people into consideration in a different way and that...and that's that adaptive way right and I know I want this and I know this way will get you to this point, but your way may get you to this point too. In your way so that's, uh, uh, and as a...as a dad I went through, uh, Boy Scouts by myself. I didn't have my dad; I had a single mom but thank god mom was there. My mom helped me out and I had a lot of male figures help me. Obviously, my scout masters and all that so...so you stuck a little hardcore with me on that one [ Laughs ].

**MIKE:** Well you know it...you mentioned sports because my boys played sports, did scouts, um you can do both right, you can...you can have both and learn leadership skills

in both. Um, I...I think competitive sports is another great opportunity for people to learn leadership skills.

**RAMON:** And develop themselves. I think, um, let's see what is, uh, uh, uh, an energy thing is very important for leaders. I think, uh, there's a saying, you can't water a garden from an empty well and I think a good leader knows how to take care of themselves because he knows that taking care of themselves is going to be in effect taking care of other people gives you that energy and ability. And a leader is being, um, positive above all. You've got to find the silver lining in things and I think tying this all together with governance and advising you know our folks on returning to campuses. Here's the...here's the good part, we come back for three weeks then we're out on thanksgiving break. We come back for another three weeks, we're on a holiday break. So, looking for a silver lining...I think that's a good, uh [ Laughs ].

**MIKE:** Well I...and I think it it's also important for people to know that there are individuals at the college and there are individuals in businesses who never went out.

**RAMON:** Right, exactly.

**MIKE:** Right...they...they didn't have that luxury. Their jobs didn't allow for....for that.

**RAMON:** Exactly.

**MIKE:** Uh, I...I have a son who's...that the pandemic didn't change anything for him.

**RAMON:** If anything, it made him more essential. Everybody understood how essential he was.

**MIKE:** So, you know I think that is part of this leadership too...is conveying that message, um, what do you find hard about leadership?

**RAMON:** Conveying hard messages I think right back...right back on this note...I mean having... having to have difficult conversations, and I think that the way I've navigated them is being a better listener. I think we rush to judgment, we're humans and that's just the way especially when we gather more information, and we gather more understanding, we become more analytical we start to think faster, and we start to get a little ahead of ourselves. So, I think, um, slowing down all that getting ahead of myself and just being present with the person telling me what the issue is so we can get to the bottom of the issue, figure out what it is we're listening and...get...come to a real resolution. So, I think, um, those difficult conversations come when things happen like this. Where everybody has to do a certain thing and some people can't do a certain thing some people don't want to do a certain thing. So that's why I'm finding those... those challenges and the way I'm navigating those challenges is just being a better listener. I mean we're listening and seeing how I can help. How can we help. How can we actually

do something? Is there something we can do? Is there something that's in our scope to do? Is it another... uh you know area scope to do? Um and just trying to be responsive, I guess. You know the one thing a leader has is a responsibility and that's both to themselves and to other people. I think you have to control your responses; you have to be aware of how you come off, and your energy and things like that. And it's something that I'm guilty of as a dad you know I've definitely yelled at my kids every now and then I've definitely yelled at a teammate every now and then and I got to tell you I play in a band every weekend and all we do is yell at each other because we're playing live instruments.

**MIKE:** Is it easier or harder to have those hard conversations remotely?

**RAMON:** That's interesting. I guess that depends on the kind of person... um and for me that depends on the kind of day I...I'm having. Some days I feel introverted, some days I feel extroverted, and I'm really ready to go and some days, I just really just want to kind of do my job, bear down and knock down some of this to-do list and get back in that...in that positive mode, you know sometimes tasks build up and they just, you know overwhelm us sometimes, so.

**MIKE:** As you look forward to your leadership journey, your leadership progress, where do you end up a year, or two years from now? What do you see being different from you?

**RAMON:** Well I...um returned to entrepreneurship during the pandemic. So, I wrote a book. I started a company. I have a website up. It's... uh 3DLC.com. Right now, I have my eBook available and hardcover will be available by the end of next week and as soon as copyrights come back I'll be releasing my album which is called "*love the album*" so when I think about how I'm going to evolve as a leader, I think the last thing I want to say about a leader has to be exemplary. You have to walk the talk. It's very easy to... to you know any cliché like you know, we talked about pivoting. You know, it's very easy to spit out a cliché, but when you when you walk the talk, people see the results. People see the outcomes; they see productivity and productivity is really what it's about. Doesn't matter if you're taking a step or running a mile. And I think we kind of get caught up into that judgment of ourselves, of our performance, instead of just being happy with any performance. You're happy with performance some days, you're up to 100%, some days you're going to run the whole race, some days you're going to need help, some days you're not going to be able to run at all.

**MIKE:** That's interesting because I...I am a runner and I...I ran competitively in high school and college.

**RAMON:** Awesome. Runners have long lives.

**MIKE:** Well you know sometimes I wonder. Um, and you know at my peak I...I could run a mile about 4:25 or 4:30 [ **RAMON:** That's a good mile. ] and that was a long time ago, but in my mind, I'm still running that right? And... and my body said whoa Mike, you're not even close to that, uh, and there are days when... when I go out, I run several miles and I'm happy just to have simply finished [ **RAMON:** Right. ] the...the miles. And then there are other days I look at my watch I think, really? This...this is what you've become? You know as a runner this is where you've regressed to?

**RAMON:** That's the coaching, you...that's the competitor...that's the competitor.

**MIKE:** Well I... I will tell you a story and I am competitive. Um and when I am running down the road, if I see a car coming toward me, I will pick a stationary object [ **RAMON:** Right. ] and convince myself that I'm going to get to that telephone pole or streetlight before that car comes. In the end it really doesn't matter right? I mean I'm going to get to my end destination, right?

**RAMON:** But it's the little competitions.

**MIKE:** It's the goal and I think [ **RAMON:** Many challenges. ] and that's what leadership is right? You know, I think facing those challenges and having those goals to not only improve yourself but in...in a team sport, or...or a band, it's to make everyone around you better.

**RAMON:** And...and...and it takes tough conversations back to go in there. It takes those conversations to get there because those conversations are represent...representative of a lot of walls that are not allowing us to have our energy flow. You know on a more spiritual note, but you know energy flow is very important to me at work and when somebody is holding something back that energy flow is not...is not coming out, it's very it's difficult to be honest but it's easier in the long run to do so.

**MIKE:** Ramon, this has been fun.

**RAMON:** Absolutely. I... I appreciate it, Dr. Mills.

**MIKE:** Thank you. Take care.

**RAMON:** All right. Montgomery College. Endless possibilities. Make your move. Let's go.

**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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