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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 Colleen Dolak, Annual Fund Manager in the Office of Advancement for Community Engagement. Colleen, thanks for taking time out of your day to join me. I appreciate it.

COLLEEN: Thanks for having me.

MIKE: So, um, I came across a quote that you shared through your work with the Montgomery College Rising Professionals Association. They asked you what your favorite quote was and, do you remember what it was?

COLLEEN: Oh, gosh. I guess it depends on when I was [Laughs] when it was. I think it was reading some Brene Brown at the time maybe.

MIKE: Well, in the interview, you talk about Brene Brown but this quote is from the Dalai Lama.

COLLEEN: Uh.

MIKE: And it's...it's this: "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion. So, as a leader, how valuable is compassion?"

COLLEEN: Well, that's, I mean, I think that's a great, great question to start with. Um, I think, you know, from my perspective, I think, um, and that I think the Dalai Lama is a great example but, um, you know, fro--...when...one of the things that I think is the most important about life in general, I mean it works in every context but it's the fact, it's finding commonality, you know. And I think that's something that we do so much at community colleges is finding our commonality. What...what makes us human? What...how we relate to other people? I think relationships are integral to, um, you know, the work that we do. But every single aspect of life, we are interdependent on one another and, um, you know, recognizing that you have...there's something to be learned from every single individual that you encounter in your life in...in every day. It could be the person serving you coffee. It could be the person, um, that, you know, you're working for or you're working, you know, or your direct report. I mean, there is something to be learned in every, um, aspect. And I think that compassion is, you know, is...is one of those, um, it's like a powerful aspect of the relationships is understanding where people are coming from and, um, you know, just recognizing our humanity.

MIKE: Why is it hard for some leaders to demonstrate compassion?

COLLEEN: Oh, such a good question. Alright, well, I'll talk about myself because you know I'm...I'm a parent and, um, I know that that for me is a really really difficult...it...you know, of course, we love our children and we care for other people even in our...in our offices. You know,

whether, um, whether it's the students or, you know, um, the, um, you know, your direct reports or whomever it is, I think it's really for...for me, it's very challenging to, um, be in that moment and manage your expectations, right? Like that's the piece I think that we all struggle with as humans, as is, um, we expect, you know, we...there are, you know, in your job, there are clear expectations laid out, you know. In...in my...my family life, with my children, I have clear expectations. You pick up after yourselves, you, you know, you reply to emails, you know. I send you a text, you respond back, with my children, I'm sending them a text, I expect them to text me back. And when that doesn't happen, you know, you really have to...you struggle to manage your disappointment, you know. And I think...I think the biggest lesson that I've learned in the past, you know, year, two years,, three years, I'll say, um, including, you know, this really challenging time of the pandemic, has been, um, that we are...we are human and we are emotional people. Uh, I think the whole like mental health, um, I would say...I would say mental health crisis that we're experiencing is, um, is sort of indicative of the need to, you know, work, do the work of being a human every day. You know, managing your emotions, managing your expectations, um, and just, and communicating, right. It's hard to communicate all of those things, you know, in a single email. And, um, you know, so it's...I mean that...that's really, I mean I guess that's why we call it work, right. [Laughs] We have to do all of these things, kind of in tandem with, you know, filing...filing paperwork and, you know, um, and...and supporting our students, you know. So, um, there's just a lot of aspects to it.

MIKE: You mentioned the pandemic and the mental health issues that number of people have faced during the pandemic. Have you seen leadership change during the pandemic? Has your view of leadership changed? Or your style of leadership, has it changed?

COLLEEN: Um, so, that's...it feels like there's a couple of layers there. Um, so, during the pandemic, I became the Annual Fund Manager. I moved from Alumni Relations to Annual Fund Manager. I would say, so...so, my...my personal office work experience definitely changed a lot, um, you know. I went from working in Alumni Relations which was, which is adjacent...it's under the umbrella of development but the work is more, um, you know, it's...it's also very relationship based. But it is more about volunteers than it is about fundraising dollars. Um, so, I think...so, that shifted. Um, I would say that my...I've had to lean in more to my, what...what I, you know, what I like to think of is like area of genius is, um, you know, my strength is building relationships with others. And so, um, I think that my...my style has not changed, but a lot of my assumptions and my expectations have been challenged. Um, you know, I started working for a new boss, and I had to, you know, kind of stretch myself to develop a completely brand new relationship. Um, when I couldn't speak to a person face to face, you know, I, uh, we had to speak either through a computer or through the phone or whatever. And so, I think, um, you know, some of the aspects have really changed a bit. Um, I would say institutionally, yeah, I mean I think everybody has had to, you know, I...I said [Laughs] I said at a meeting yesterday. Pivot and shift, like those are the words that we've been talking about for the past 18 months, you know. You have to keep moving and...and changing and adapting and, um, so I do think a lot of things have changed, but I do think also that the core of, um, how we lead, it's still...it's still the same principles. They're just sort of, um, morphing into a different...into a different way of...of showing up.

MIKE: During the...the height of the pandemic, you and I had a conversation on Facebook about work-life balance. I don't know if you recall, um, but we were talking about how work-life balance is, you know, out of balance for...for so many people. And I want to explore this from a leadership standpoint. How important is it as a leader to focus on work-life balance with your team?

COLLEEN: Wow, such a good question. When, um, and I...I don't recall [Laughs] the details of that conversation, but I do know that when I first started full-time work at Montgomery College, I was working for one of our senior vice presidents, Dave Sears, and I remember specifically in the interview one of the things that he brought up was work-life balance and the importance of that. And I have seen you know from...from continuing on in full-time work within his division, I have seen and heard that happen. And I will say that for me personally, when I hear that from, um, and...and I've seen it and heard it from all of the leaders in our division and a lot of, and I, you know, I don't work in another division, but I've heard it from lots of other leaders. Um, I...I think it's...I think it's paramount, right? Because it recognizes, it's...it goes back to that really developing relationships aspect you...you recognize that a person, that the people that you're working with are whole people. They have...they have entire lives that you're likely not privy to, right? They have families, they have other obligations, they have pets, [Laughs] you know. We've...we've definitely been exposed more during the pandemic to who are the pets [Laughs] in your life. Um, but I think recognizing that they are a whole person, I think it helps you to embrace compassion as a quality. But I also think that, um, you know, the most important aspect as a leader is to...is to model that, right? Is to say I'm turning off my phone and I'm not sending you an email. I'm not, you know, I...I'm not, you know, or I'm not turning off my phone but I will not be sending emails after 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., you know, within a reasonable, you know, window of what our...our, you know, regular office hours are. I think the challenge therein is that, you know, we also can't, sometimes can't be available from 8:30 to 5 p.m., right? And I think that recognizing that that is important and, um, you know and reinforcing the, you...you know, the use of your leave and, you know. And...and then, you know, communicating those things out. I...I think, um, you know, I know that like anecdotally I've had challenges. I...I don't hear from someone. I don't know what's happening, what's going on, and there isn't an out of office message set or their calendar doesn't reflect that they're, you know. And, so, you know, and then go at leaning back into the compassion and saying, listen I...I...I noticed this, you know. Saying...saying the things and noticing that this happened and...and, um, you know. Um, but, you know, living with grace and...and showing people, um, how you, you know, how you want to be in the world.

MIKE: Has it been hard for you as a leader not to have that...that instant response from individuals because we're working remotely for so much of the time? I...I had a situation this morning where I sent an email about 8:30 and I'm wondering why am I not getting a response back. Um, there was as you said no out of office. I hadn't heard from the person. And I'm thinking, why is this person not responding? Has that been hard for you as a leader?

COLLEEN: Um, you know, there...there have been instances where, um, you know, and...and I mean, I think it happens to everyone. Someone's sick. You know, and you don't know what's happening. And I...I had it happen, um, last...last week or two weeks ago where, you know, I have sort of a routine meeting with someone and they had...we hadn't...we hadn't connected, we didn't, you know, we haven't...there hasn't been any email communication and I, you know, I called them and...and they were like, I'm, you know, I've been in and out of the hospital. And I was like, wow. So...so, again, I think it goes back to that building a relationship with someone. Having...having strong communication with them. Um, so...so, I have had moments when I'm like, why...why isn't that happening? But I find that if I talk to someone else and say, hey, I noticed this. They, you know, sometimes I get the information that I need. Oh, they're out there. They're on leave through x day, and I'm like, oh, okay alright. Well, that...that makes sense. Um, it does, I would say that, you know, systemically, sometimes that creates greater challenges, you know. We...we as an institution, um, experience the challenge of, there's the one person that does the thing and nobody else does that unique thing. And, therefore, we cannot move forward with projects because the one person is doing that thing. And, you know, and so, I've...I've made the recommendation. Um, within our unit to offer like cross-training if so-and-so is out, you know. Is there a way that someone else can pick up pieces of that activity so that we don't lose the traction and...and, um, can continue to move forward with our projects.

MIKE: I think if nothing else, during the pandemic, we've seen the need as...as leaders, as managers, this need for cross-training, this need to continue this progress that we're making because as you said, people are going to be out. They're gonna take leave. They...they've earned it. They deserve to take that and projects cannot stop or shouldn't stop simply because of that, right?

COLLEEN: Yeah, absolutely, especially when, you know, we are an institution and it's not just this piece doing this thing. It's...it is very integrated. It is a gigantic web of work that we do. And, so, um, there is a domino effect of, you know, this piece doesn't get done or it's...it's done, you know, differently. I mean, one of the things that I've always marveled at...at Montgomery College is that we have the capacity. There is... [Laughs] there is, you know, um, there is usually a workaround. There's some other way to get to the...the desired result. And, um, you know, if...if it's not your regular job function, sometimes you don't understand how utilizing this workaround, you know, alleviates, um, aspects that are crucial to the 7th or 12th step that...that is completely out of your department you don't know about. So, um, it's...it's really...it's really kind of been fascinating to...to watch and understand. Um, but I do think approaching it with curiosity, um, helps to sort of alleviate that, um, that, you know, potential for frustration and like, it shouldn't be this way. I think, um, I think that has been, um, one thing that I've really had to lean on and, um, you know, it's like a muscle that I've had to exercise this over the past two years like, ah, I wonder why this is like that rather than being like it shouldn't be like that [Laughs]. So...

MIKE: As we begin to wrap up this episode, what does Colleen Dolak have to work on as a leader? Where do you see your...your growth taking you in this journey?

COLLEEN: Um, so, it's interesting. For...for a very long time, I've always thought that consistency was my strength and my, you know, I...I'm...I'm, I can, um, or tenacity or, you know, follow....follow-through. Um, I think I do have, um, I do have vision to see things through to like continue...continue steps. But I...I feel like...I feel like consistency is something, um, that I need to hone. Um, just keeping, you know, um, you know, the daily...the daily minutia that we sometimes don't want to do. I think that is probably where I would...I would want to push and stretch myself.

MIKE: And how are you going to do it?

COLLEEN: [Laughs] Every day. Taking it every day at a time, you know. I think, uh, um, you know, staying organized. Um, I actually, this past year, um, a colleague of ours actually introduced me to bullet journaling. And so, I use that as sort of a...a way to sort of stay mindful, I stay present in the moment. And, you know, kind of review what...what's worked and what hasn't. And, um, and...and so, I....I try to set aside time every day to do that.

MIKE: Well, I think, to bring this full circle, the beauty of a lot of this that we've learned during the pandemic is that when some of that minutia doesn't get done, others have compassion as well. So... [**COLLEEN:** Yeah] you know, it really has become a much more focused aspect of what we're doing.

COLLEEN: Exactly. Yeah. It's so true.

MIKE: Well, Colleen, thank you for your time. I appreciate it.

COLLEEN: It's fun. Yeah. Thank you very much. This has been fun. I appreciate it.

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. Thank you.

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