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MIKE: Welcome to the final episode of season one 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. Wrapping up season one with me is Jim Oliver, IT Support Specialist at the Germantown Campus. Jim, I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to chat today about leadership.

JIM: Thank you very much. I'm glad to be here.

MIKE: We both are big college basketball fans. I know you're a big Duke basketball fan.

JIM: I apologize for that [Laughs].

MIKE: [Laughs] And as a Maryland fan, you know my thoughts on Duke basketball.

[**JIM:** Ah-huh.] But that being said, I do believe Coach K has done a good job over the years of creating teams that...that play in his system and demonstrating leadership, whether it's for Duke or USA basketball. So, I want to run a couple of quotes by you and just get your thoughts on...on leadership, based on...on these quotes. So, the first one: "Everyone's ideas should be heard. It doesn't matter who gets credit as long as you're working towards the same mission and shared purpose." What are your thoughts?

JIM: I think that's right on especially in a work environment. I mean oftentimes people lead and they think, you know, their leadership, their idea is the best idea, um, but you really have to listen to the people under you, even if it's not necessarily a great idea. I think people need to think they've been heard, um, but I think again some of the best ideas come from people under you. So, man, I agree with him 100 there.

MIKE: If you don't listen to those who are on the ground level or...or in the trenches, what happens to you as a leader? What happens to you as a team?

JIM: I mean I think you...you fall. I mean the further up you go, the further away from the ground you get. And it's, I mean, really, I guess underneath you. I wouldn't call them soldiers per se but the boots on the ground. They're the ones listening to the clients. Everyone's listening to other people. I think they're the ones who are probably going to have a better idea of what's happening now.

MIKE: How important is teamwork?

JIM: I mean teamwork is the most important thing. I mean because all of us are working together whether in our office, we got a group of five or six, but yet we support your office which is, you know, probably 20, 25 people. And so, not only do we have to work together as a team but also as a group. And that's really the only way to get things done is to work together.

MIKE: Well, and you see that certainly as...as you and I have talked about college basketball. You see that play out. If one person decides he or she is not going to work within that team concept, that...their...the team itself doesn't succeed.

JIM: Right. I mean there's a lot of teams who have the best player in the whole country and they don't always win the national championship. Rarely do they do. I mean something I know, some of Duke's best title runs have been with some basically untalented teams, but they were as a whole a great team. Everyone knew their role. Everyone knew what they had to do to keep going.

MIKE: Another quote: "Effective teamwork begins and ends with communication."

JIM: I...I mean communication is definitely the most important thing, especially, um, when, with Duke Basketball, especially. They're talking constantly their, uh, their offensive style, their defensive style of switch-switching up on defense. It requires constant communication. And so, like if your man gets past you, you've got to be able to call out to the guy behind you what's happening. And so, that's really, you can't play blind. And so that's, why the communicating is the most important thing, when you're trying to succeed as a team.

MIKE: And...and you see that play out in your everyday work, right? If you're...if you're not communicating with people you work with, something's gonna fall short.

JIM: I think it's kind of a couple of things. I mean as a manager, you may be communicating with someone, but you're not necessarily communicating with everyone in your team, I think a lot of people are going to get jealous, a little upset. They're going to feel left out and not when you...when you don't feel part of the team. I don't...you don't try as hard. And I think that's one element of that.

MIKE: Why do leaders have a hard time with communication? Seems pretty basic stuff.

JIM: I think there's just so much going on. It's...I mean especially at the College, it's 24/7. New idea, new idea, new idea. And it seems like we never have time to complete one idea before we move on to the next. And so you're communicating. I mean you get...I mean you probably get 40 emails a day, and, you know, how can you—

MIKE: Oh, I wish I had 40 emails a day [Jim laughs] I...I get 40 emails before lunch.

JIM: Wow. How can you successfully communicate all those different ideas that come from different places out to your team? It's almost impossible.

MIKE: Well, it is...it's hard, right? And I...I think the pandemic made it harder [**JIM:** Uh-huh.] because at least now that we're back in...in person leaders can...can walk down

the hall, can see someone in close proximity and not have to worry about sending an email or setting up a Zoom [**JIM**: Right.]

JIM: Right, especially—[**MIKE**: ...that has been hard.] especially in a short notice. Someone's probably not going to read.

MIKE: Exactly. Um, that, you know, and...and we're all overloaded with communication. So, how does a leader know the right type of communication?

JIM: I think as a leader and you're communicating with your team, I think it's just a non-stop conversation. I don't think you necessarily have to set aside time in a meeting. I think you're just always talking, always talking. Again, you've got different people work different shifts. I mean as a leader, it's your job just to be there, be present, be consistent, and also be in a situation where your staff will communicate. They don't mind coming to you because they know you're open to what they say. And say, if they feel left out, they feel comfortable coming to you. That, maybe you aren't communicating as well as you could be to them because everyone has a different style of receiving communication. So, I think as a...as a manager that's kind of, or a leader, it's your job to figure out kind of everyone's special personality.

MIKE: How do you do it? [Jim laughs] I'd agree if you have 10-12 people. How do you figure that out?

JIM: I think a degree in Psychology would help. Um, but I don't know. I mean I think part of being a leader is just being perceptive. You just have to, again, when you're always having a conversation with people, I think it's good to have it as a team, have it individually. And when you do it individually, you sort of learn who someone is in private, and then, if you pull them into a team conversation, you can, sometimes you see it's a different person. They may be much less communicative in a team environment. So, it's like, as I said earlier, it's a constant communication, constant talking to your staff. And again, especially in a group setting but also individually.

MIKE: Coach K once said: "I don't look at myself as a basketball coach. I look at myself as a leader who happens to coach basketball."

JIM: I would agree. That's 100 correct, and I would say he's not the best coach. I mean, um, I would say there's so many times I feel his coaching style is not that good, but year after year after year, as a leader, he brings together different kids from different backgrounds, puts them together, and consistently has them as one of the best teams in the country.

MIKE: And...and so we could substitute coach basketball and say: "I look at myself as a leader who happens to run IT, run Distance Education, run Professional Development, run Business Services. Right?"

JIM: Yeah, I mean I think it's very difficult, especially the longer you're in management, to be an expert. And the longer in, the further you get away from that. And I think from my experience, the staff would prefer someone who willingly admits they aren't an expert at everything. And so, that's where you know they are, again, going about communicating with their staff. Keep me up to date on what I need to be up to date on. But again, I think over the years, with different managers, we've respected the ones who have basically humbled themselves saying: "I'm not an expert, but I'm going to lead you the best I can."

MIKE: I...I've often shared with my team and...and with friends that the...the work that I do on a daily basis, I'm not necessarily an expert in...in all of those, right? There...there are software programs that we're teaching faculty to use that I...I just know from the periphery. I don't use them on a regular basis. And I was once asked: "Well, how can you oversee a team that does that?" And I said: "Well, it's not my role to know all that software. [**JIM:** Right.] My role is to identify the best people who can teach faculty, staff how to use that software. I think that's what leadership is."

JIM: Yeah, I mean it's finding the right pieces, bringing them together to again, you know, what your goal is. Hopefully, as they call it. You're...you should have a defined goal of what you're trying to accomplish, and you're bringing in the best people, or if you don't have the best people necessarily, you find the skills within the staff that you have to help achieve the goal that you...that you have for your unit.

MIKE: And you have to provide people with the autonomy, with the freedom to do their work. Right?

JIM: Yeah, I mean just with basketball, I mean, let's said you're a head coach, you've got a point guard. I mean his, you know, the point guard's job is to lead the team on the floor. So, I mean that's typically the role. Um, yes, they practice as a team, but at, many times you take that point guard out, he practices on the side, practicing dribbling, you know, practicing, you know, whatever decision...decision-making. Um, so, that's why, I mean, it is important to find those talented people and, again, if they need time to develop, you have to work with them, maybe one-on-one, or again, you have assistant coaches to help further develop talent. I mean, it's really no different in the workplace as well. It's just you find talented people and then, if they need to develop more skills, you try to, multiple ways, there's multiple ways of doing that. With a video, with working with other staff. I mean that's, it's always making sure your...your staff is staying, basically, continuing to develop their skills, especially—

MIKE: It's about building relationships

JIM: Yeah, and again, and then, with basketball skill, you know, the game changes, you know, what— The style of basketball 30 years ago is not the same style today. And so,

it's important to continue, when you bring in players, to evolve to the game. And that—um...

MIKE: So, how do you do that within the...the workplace? How do you...how do you, as a leader, how do you keep up with those evolutions?

JIM: Right, that's tough, because I mean I, working in IT, is continually evolving. And of course as the older I get, the... [Laughs] it's kind of more difficult to keep up with all the new stuff. But I mean, at least, traditionally for me, it's always finding someone smarter than me and learning from them, you know. Working with, you know, if I'm not comfortable with one particular area, who is good at that? And I'm going to go work with them, talk with them, email them, so I can keep up with what I need to know.

MIKE: But that cr--that forces you and creates this atmosphere of humility, right? [**JIM:** Yeah.] You have to humble yourself to...to do that, right?

JIM: I don't want to be the smartest man in the room, Mike. I do not, trust me. [Laughs] That's not a good road.

MIKE: Well, good leaders though humble [**JIM:** Yes.] themselves that way, right? [**JIM:** Yeah.] I think we've seen bad leadership and...and certainly I've seen it in in my career who won't unders-- or doesn't understand that humility and...and will gather people and come, whatever circumstance, they're going to say: "I'm...I'm the smartest person in the room [**JIM:** Yeah.] and I'm going to make the decision based on what I think is...is right...right.

JIM: Right. And I mean we work at the same place, we know it happens quite a lot. And I mean oftentimes, it's...there's not much you can do about it, sadly. But, um, but that's... With leadership, what's interesting, like, I've learned leadership more, so from how not to be a leader probably than how to be a leader. Like, you know, you had a football coach who was very successful but his style of leadership would not work today. I mean very, very, very, [Laughs] rough. And, so, but you learn, and that's not necessarily the right way to do that. Um, but I just I don't...I don't know how that explains in our environment, how do you get past that? I mean, I know-- [Laughs] as a unit, even with bad ideas, we try to make the best of it. We try to stay positive, uh, regardless of how, you know, maybe forceful the personality is, who's, let's say, dictating their concepts, but I mean that's where you have to, even when you're, I guess in my role, if it's a bad idea, you still have to communicate above. This is not a good idea, this is why this is not a good idea. You can't just say it. You still, I think, you started to plan it out, explain it, put it on paper. Why this is not necessarily the best idea, we shouldn't go forward like that.

MIKE: What traits do you look at when you're looking at a good leader?

JIM: I think you mentioned it earlier, uh, humility. I think, I mean obviously communication, the communitive. I think I was thinking about this earlier, maybe the most important thing is just a consistent leader. You know, someone who's consist-, like consistently talking, consistently encouraging, you know, consistently, you know, looking out for their staff, consistently trying to work with other groups to build better relationships. I mean no one wants a boss a leader who's, you know, hot and cold. Is this-- Can we...can we talk to him today? No, he's in a bad mood, let's not do that. So, I think at the end of the day, consistency, I think, is the most important, uh, quality for a leader.

MIKE: One of the things that I look for in in leadership is [Pauses] mutual respect. Right? And...and I...I think, in my experiences, the people who I have lost respect for have-- I...I've also seen their role with leadership, in leadership diminish. Um, at least in my own eyes because I...I've lost that respect for...for an individual. Uh, what kind of leader is Jim Oliver?

JIM: [Laughs] Um, reluctant. Like, I mean, traditional. I'm not a leader, um, but at the same time, I'm not a follower. Uh, but, you know, you know, I had great parents, and they always, you know, taught me to you lead by example, you know. I'm...I'm an introvert. I'm not overly social. Um, it's...I'm not assertive, um, but at the same time, I hate when things fail. If I'm...if I'm on a team, I don't want to be on a losing team, and if I'm on a losing team, I don't want to be on a losing team that doesn't try. And so, I...that's...I guess if I was leader, I'm the one who was...is going to always give my best effort to make sure we are the best position to succeed. Um sometimes leaders are built when there's a power vacuum. And so, if there's, you know, at least in...at least in the IT world, if something's not working, you know, it's my job to just to make sure that that area gets filled. And hopefully, others see me, you know, putting in my part, my effort, working hard, they will try to follow suit. And that doesn't always work [Laughs]. Some people are more than happy to let you do all the work. Uh, but, you know, we all run our own race. We all kind of do our own thing, but at the end of the day, you know, the integrity aspect is important.

MIKE: Well, and not all leaders have to be rah-rah leaders. [**JIM:** Yeah.] Right?

JIM: I mean. Yeah. When I...I was...I played football in high school. I was not good. [Laughs] Um, so, you know, I wasn't a team captain, but, um, my goal, I mean I...I...my ceiling was very low. I knew I wasn't, even as a senior, I didn't play much. Um, but I took that on as a challenge to work with the, you know, the underclassmen, the sophomores, the juniors, some of the freshmen, even, um, to build them up, to work with them, to talk with them, almost being a coach on the field or at least in practice, you know. And so, I mean that I enjoyed that quite a bit even though I wasn't...the leader wasn't the best. Um, I had to respect my peers because of that.

MIKE: I want to start to wrap up with this final quote. "In leadership, there are no words more important than trust. In any organization, trust must be developed among every member of the team if success is going to be achieved." How important is trust for you as a leader and when you look at leaders.

JIM: I...I like trust. I mean, in my situation, I like that I am trusted. And so, being trusted allows me to be free to do a lot of different things. I know with my boss in particular gives me a lot of freedom because he trusts me. And so, I make decisions sometimes that allows him to do his job well. I can still make decisions that may affect our entire team, but he trusts me enough to make those decisions. And so, I think if I like being trusted, you know, then, kind of the feeling is mutual. I want people to trust me, co-workers, the same way. And so, as a leader, I think trust, I mean it's hard to...it's hard to really put into words if your team trusts you and you trust your team, how much you can get done. I mean it kind of frees everyone up to really work through their strengths.

MIKE: And what happens when that trust is broken?

JIM: It's hard to get repaired. I don't think you can really repair broken trust. I mean. I'm just thinking of example, I mean, luckily, my team, for the most part, we all trust each other but once you...but once...once you lose a trust in that one person, it kind of, I think others, it's usually...it kind of tends, everyone loses trust in that one person. And that's kind of the whole, you know, bad apple ruins the whole bunch concept. And so, then you get jealousy, you get bitterness, and kind of the team concept erodes, when you lose trust.

MIKE: Well, and we've seen that play out on the basketball court so many times where you...you have teammates who don't trust one or two players, and this very talented team ends up struggling through an entire season because there's just this lack of cohesion.

JIM: Right. Yeah, I mean it...it breathes jealousy. And again, your team is split, you know, you have one, I mean some guys are with this guy, the other guys are with this guy, and it's a various, and basketball is not a selfish game. I mean, he has to be, well, maybe the NBA. But with college basketball, it really requires all five guys to...to trust each other, to make their game plan work. And say, and once that, like I said, once it breaks down, it's...you're just looking at... I mean a good example is sort of, I wouldn't say, I don't know...I don't, I'm not sure if it's the issue of trust, but like USA basketball, uh, before Coach K took over. Super talented players but they had never really worked enough together to trust each other. And so, they went out best...best players but best 12 players in the...in the world, and they lose to teams that are inferior to them because they didn't have that trust necessarily.

MIKE: Jim this has been fascinating. I appreciate you taking time out, um, I look forward to continuing the conversation.

JIM: Alright, but thanks for having me. This is definitely, uh not something I would look forward to do too often, but since you asked me I...I couldn't say no.

MIKE: I appreciate it, thanks.

JIM: Alright.

MIKE: We will be taking a break for the holidays and return with season two of MC Forward in February. 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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