

MC Forward Podcast 14  
Vedham Karapakakunjaram  
Transcript

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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 Vedham Karapakakunjaram, a professor in the Biology Department on the Rockville Campus. Vedham, thanks for joining me today. I appreciate it.

**[ VEDHAM ]** Thanks, Mike. Thanks for having me. Thanks for inviting me to be part of this podcast.

**[ MIKE ]** So, we're recording this a week after College Football ended, um, regular season ended, and we see all these coaches moving, players moving, and you and I were talking in a discussion before the podcast about loyalty and...and leadership. Talk to me a little bit about what you see in this landscape of college football and how it pertains to leadership. What are your thoughts on that?

**[ VEDHAM ]** Sure, I'm talking about loyalty, decision-making. As faculty, I think, um, we...we play multiple roles. Sometimes, intentionally, sometimes, unintentionally with our students in the classroom. Um, we...we are coaching them to be successful not just as a student in your class, in a course, but also on developing skills, refining what the skill sets they already have in order to be successful in whatever career they are going to be in the future. Um, most of the students, uh, typically do not have a well-set defined, uh, career goal, and...and for all good reasons. It's not a bad thing. It's...it's, I think we all have been in that place as students ourselves, and giving them a...being there as a facilitator, as a mentor, um, to show them what's out there and how their skills how the school skills they develop here in the class in a course, in higher education, how that will transfer, those skills will transfer into what they want to do in their career, how they can transform them themselves to be successful in their career. I think those are the places, as faculty, we play a critical role, uh, beyond, um, beyond helping, um, with mastering course content. In that way, we are a coach. We are a team player with them at some points. We guide them. We also learn from them. Um, we also have to go with an open mind on what we can learn, uh, and I'm speaking for myself. Um, seeing myself as a faculty in a classroom, uh, how I see myself there, uh, is more than just one defined role. We play multiple roles at different points of time with our students.

**[ MIKE ]** I...I've heard a number of football, basketball, baseball coaches, when they're asked about the type of coach they are, they...they turn it around and say that they don't view themselves necessarily as a coach. They see themselves as a teacher who just

happens to be teaching basketball or teaching football. Do students in the classroom view the faculty members as...as the leaders? And...and if...if so, how...how do they view them as leaders? Or do they just view them as these founts of knowledge who are pouring content into them?

**[ VEDHAM ]** Yes, I...I think that's, uh that question has [ Laughs ] multiple different parts to it that need to be addressed. It's exactly a complex question. Uh, the biggest struggle I personally have is to break down the image in a student on how they see a teacher in the classroom. Um, the...the classic pattern you see with...within a student-, and I think we have all done that as students to our teachers, um, we see our teachers as someone who can answer all the questions, who have answers to all the problems. Um, breaking that down and easing them into realizing that we are also humans with our own positives, our own flaws, our own gaps in knowledge, uh, in the subjects we teach. And the gaps in knowledge is not because we are ignorant, but it's because there are there's so much information that new information that comes out that no single person, uh, even a subject matter expert can know everything and will be able to solve all the problems we'll be able to answer all the questions in a class. So, it's a constant demonstration through my own actions, my own, um, my own way of teaching, and, uh, my own way of actions in the class to show that, okay, I can answer questions, some questions, but not all questions. And to openly admitting to them instead of just making up things to avoid telling them, I don't know to tell them, actually, I don't know the answer to the question. I don't know how to solve the problem, but let's try to figure out together. Uh, or pointing towards a resource where they can actually go find answers. Um, those are the places we can show them that we are able to lead, we are able to facilitate their learning experiences, at the same time, demonstrating that we are, at some level, we are partners with them in this learning experience. Um, so, again, going back to the same, uh, idea that I was sharing with the previous question. We play multiple roles there as a teacher, as an instructor in a class. There are times I can demonstrate that I...I have, I am a subject matter expert. And there are other times I have to tell them, I should be able to explain to them why I don't know the answer to your question, not just say I don't know, but also say why I don't know, and how possibly we can answer this together or solve the problem together. I think that's where the message can be really powerful to them. And, yeah.

**[ MIKE ]** Let's talk about this problem. I see it as a problem where some leaders are hesitant or afraid to say I don't know, whether it's in the classroom or outside the classroom. I think you and I have both been in situations where the...the person leading the meeting or leading some seminar is afraid to say I don't know. Why are some leaders hesitant to say; I don't know the answer, but we'll work together to find it.

**[ VEDHAM ]** Um, why they...why some leaders find it hard? Um, there can be many reasons. My own, um, so, I...I want to say it is really hard to say I don't know. Uh, and...and it comes, I think, through practice and putting myself in that vulnerable position of saying I don't know, um, is very hard. Uh, for me, it's merely through practice.

I had to get over that fear that students are not going to respect me if they say I don't know. Um, I had to, just through practice, I had to get used to that. And why some may find it harder, probably, they, themselves, feel that as subject matter experts, they should know everything, which is an unrealistic expectation that they are imposing on themselves. And telling students that I don't know, but let's try to figure out if there is a way to respond or to a question or if there is an answer to the question or if there is a solution to your problem, I think going that one step forward and not just stop with saying I don't know will be actually more...will be received much more better by the students. And we also can feel eventually that, okay, I actually empowered myself and the students by admitting to myself and to the student that I didn't know the answer. But at the same time, I was able to bring them into the...into the work or into the activity of solving the problem or finding the answer. So, I think there is some power to that way of approaching it and...but it's harder to actually practice it. And probably, that's where some leaders may find it hard to actually make the transition, um, to be in that other, other side.

[ **MIKE** ] Are you more comfortable telling your students you don't know or your peers?

[ **VEDHAM** ] Um, actually, I think it's equally hard to say I don't know to both peers and students, but maybe for different reasons. Um, the reason being...the...the kind of pressures you get when a question is being asked or being asked, being expected to solve a problem. That...the nature of pressure is probably different when it comes from a student than from a peer. So, but then, uh, the challenge of saying I don't know, I think, it's more or less comparable to each other. And again, in both cases, it's...it's only for me, the only way it has worked well for me is to come to terms by practicing saying that.

[ **MIKE** ] And in your...in your case, your...your students look at you and you...you have a PhD in Zoology, right? And... [ **VEDHAM**: Yeah ] my gosh, that you know, Dr. K, you...you have this PhD, you should know it all. Uh, you're the leader of this classroom, you should know it all. And it doesn't always play out that way

[ **VEDHAM** ] Yes, in fact, when I...when I tell my students in my first class, first meeting, I...I make fun of myself by saying I go after ants, I go after insects. Uh, so there are at least one or two students in each class who are also very interested in looking at animals, sometimes even insects. They immediately form this idea impression that I will know everything about insects. And they will show me pictures and say, hey, Dr. K, do you know what this insect is? I have to tell them there are millions of species of insects all around this world [ Laughs ]. There's no way [ Laughs ] a single person could know all the million species let alone just looking at a picture and identifying what that insect is. So, we have a good laugh. And, so that actually has been my comfort zone. It's easier for me to actually say I don't know what that insect is because I already set a premise with them saying I work within...I used to work with insects. So, to tell them, I have a very good reason why I don't know what this insect is because there are millions of them. There's no way I can know about all of these. Uh, that...that helps a bit. And, you know,

having kids growing at home, being...being parent, I think practicing with them saying I don't know, it helps a lot too. So, you're just transitioning what you do as a parent with your students in the class. Uh, that...that has been really a good experience to compare what happens at home and at work.

[ **MIKE** ] Outside of the classroom, you're involved in a number of grant opportunities. You and I have worked on...on several different grants. Um, how--what leadership skills do you need when working on these national grants that you've been involved in?

[ **VEDHAM** ] One of the skills that...that has personally helped me in leading grant activities is to...to be able to appreciate the diversity of, uh, not just ideas, uh, the challenges that people come with to the team and being able to address those, not...not necessarily to solve find solutions to those challenges, but even to merely acknowledge these are real challenges, that itself is a very big step forward to work as a team, especially working with community college faculty from around the country. There is so much, there are certain common challenges shared across all community colleges around the country, but there are also some unique, uh, some challenges which are unique to certain community colleges, and when faculty from those community colleges express those unique challenges, one, you learn, you become more aware of other challenges which you don't face here as a faculty in Montgomery College, but it also opens your eyes to okay what are the other challenges other faculty may be facing, being able to have that conversation on how they deal with those, that's a huge learning experience, And...and that has I think helped me to be a better team player. Um, be able to, uh, work with very different set of people, uh, in terms of, you know, the different kind of community colleges, they come from different, uh, they come coming from different, with different challenges from these community colleges. That has been a very big learning experience for me. And to be able to work with them, help them, learn from them, to also in a way to be able to provide support, and when they see that the support is really helping them, that's a very satisfactory, um, experience from where...where I see it from working on these grants.

[ **MIKE** ] What do you look for in a leader? What kind of traits do you look at when determining someone's leadership capabilities?

[ **VEDHAM** ] Um, the list can be really long. Uh, but if you have to, um, narrow down a few of those. My number one, uh, leadership skill should be, uh, being able to bring together different set of people and work as a team. Being able to support, uh, being able to share ideas openly, and acknowledging, um, the, um, contributions made by each member in a team. Um, being able to acknowledge the challenges that are there in teamwork. Being flexible, um, in accommodating for different working styles, different ideas and philosophies, that kind that have to be coming together. Um, these are very important for a leader. Um, instead of telling what to do, if they work with the team members and lead them along, and at sometimes just leaving the team on its own to

work together and, um, be patient for the final product to come out of the team work. I think those are important leadership skills that I will be looking up to in a leader.

[ **MIKE** ] That patience part is hard for a lot of people. Right? I mean, we, as leaders, we put together a team and we want some sort of immediate feedback, but demonstrating that patience as you said is crucial, but it takes a special skill to do that.

[ **VEDHAM** ] Absolutely, yes. And I mean patients, you know, time is a relative scale. Certain things probably need to be done immediately and there...the...the definition of patients can be different from a long-term project where you're not, it's not fair to look for the outcomes or impact of what we do the very next day will be an unfair, uh. And it could be a kind of a...it could have a negative impact in the overall project actually.

[ **MIKE** ] Well, and that...that also plays back into your classroom experience too, right? When...when you're teaching students, your faculty have to have patience that the learning is going to take place, but it may take place over a period of time not immediate.

[ **VEDHAM** ] Yes, yes, and that's where, um, consistent...consistently repeating certain pedagogical, um, patterns not just once but consistently multiple times through the semester will help the students to have those multiple opportunities to develop the...the expected skills over the time. Some may be able to do it the very first time. Some may take a little longer. So...so, the...the...whatever...whatever strategy is being implemented should be able to accommodate for all these different variations that students come with to the class.

[ **MIKE** ] Vedham, the conversation has been wonderful. I absolutely love working on different projects with you. You've taught me a lot about leadership as I've watched you lead the projects that we've been involved in together. So, thanks for joining me today.

[ **VEDHAM** ] Thanks, Mike. It is always a pleasure to have a conversation with you and you have been a very good mentor and supporter for me all these years. Thank you very much.

[ **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.