

MC Forward Podcast
Bridgette Abraham
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 Bridgette Abraham, Operations and Services Specialist, for the board of Trustees. Bridgette, thanks for joining me. I appreciate you taking time out to have a conversation today.

BRIDGETTE

Good morning! Thank you, Dr. Mills, for having me.

MIKE

So, uh, talking about leadership. What kind of leader is Bridgette Abraham?

BRIDGETTE

[Laughs] Wow, um, I would say, you know, that's one of those questions that people ask often and you think you have the right answer, and then every time you think about it again, you want to add something to it. So, I would think--I would say that I am a...I'm a combination of transformation. Um, probably visionary and facilitative. Um, I actually took, um, the facilitative leadership. I was grateful, um, the first couple of months that I've been with the College. Um, going on a little over four years now, and we had a facilitative leadership class, and that was the...the best way that I felt would kind of describe me without putting me in a box as far as a leader is concerned. Um, I wholeheartedly believe in leading from where I am. Um, titles mean they are important and I reference them and recognize and acknowledge them. Um, but what I have learned [Laughs] through my time in higher ed that sometimes it doesn't matter what your title is, you just have to lead. Um, and someone has to take the initiative, um, to make a stand and lead from where they are.

MIKE

You mentioned about leadership being...being in a box, and...and...and I think as leaders, we often get confined to a box. How important is it for...for us as leaders to look outside that...that confined area?

BRIDGETTE

I think it's really important. I think it's probably one of the top three things that you have to do as a leader. Um, and considering the fact that we are still, you know, I don't want to

say coming out of a pandemic because every week or every couple months there is something new and we have to make adjustments again, um, and so I would say that you have to be able to think outside of the box. You know, we were talking earlier about the pandemic and the challenges and the blessings that came along with it, and one of those things was remote work. And so, you know, thinking about, you know, I think it might have been two years ago, the College was talking about the future of work. And, immediately, that was the very first thing I thought about when the conversation started going around about us having to resort to remote work. And so, here we are talking about something and actually having to live it less than two years time. And so, I think it's great. And I think it's very important, and I think it's vital. I think it's probably the heartbeat or the pulse, um, of being a great leader is being flexible, um, and changing and being open, um, to different ideas and different opinions, and knowing that a difference of opinion does not mean, um, a disagreement against a person.

MIKE

Flexibility is hard though, and we've seen that in...in leaders in various organizations. Ah, some are very rigid. Why is flexibility so hard, do you think?

BRIDGETTE

Um, because it's uncomfortable. It means, um, you know, as much as we want to say it's not personal. It is personal because it's about our person, it's about our core, it's about our makeup. Um, and so, I think if it challenges who you are at your core, um, there are gonna be some....there's gonna be some apprehension, and, um, and, it's gonna be uncomfortable. Um, and, you know, there's a there's joy in walking something out and being uncertain and just walking it out until the end result instead of knowing, um, how it's going to turned out. And so, it's scary. Um, but, you know, I'm a believer, a big believer of doing things afraid. Um, and so, I think as a leader you have to. Most times, I'm wondering and believing that some most things that you do, you do it afraid or do it not knowing what the outcome is going to be but hoping for the best.

MIKE

It's funny that you say that because I...I have gone skydiving twice. **[BRIDGETTE: Wow!]** Uh, and...and both times from 15---both times from 15,000 feet. And...and I have...have had conversations with people and they say, well, what if your parachute doesn't open? And I said, well, at that point, it's...it doesn't matter, **[Bridgette Laughs]** right? I mean there's nothing I can do as I am free falling **[BRIDGETTE: Uh-hum]** if my parachute doesn't open. **[Bridgette Laughs]** I just have to trust that what I'm doing is the right thing **[BRIDGETTE: Uh-hum]** and...and put confidence in the person who was skydiving with me that they're going to do the right thing. And I think that's what really the leadership is about. I think that's what you're talking about. **[BRIDGETTE: Yup]** Going out on that limb, **[BRIDGETTE: Uh-hum]** jumping out of that plane, **[BRIDGETTE: Uh-hum]** but realizing that in the end that you have to have trust and faith that the right thing is going to resolve.

BRIDGETTE

Exactly! At 15,000 feet though, [Laughs] you know. That's right and twice at that, so, you know, I don't know that I want to try that anytime soon, but, you know, you're going to have me thinking about it now and that's a great perspective it is literally what are you going to do.

MIKE

And...and, you know, I think so much of what we go through in...in higher ed certainly the last two years has been...been that, this complete uncertainty. And it...it has been this need, um, of flexibility that you...you talked about. **[BRIDGETTE: Uh-hum]** You talk about your leadership style been a combination of transformation, visionary, and facilitating. Have there been leaders in your career that you've modeled these three characteristics? Or you've seen model these three characteristics?

BRIDGETTE

Um, yeah, there have been a couple. So, I'm kind of weird, um, because there are people who mean an absolute lot to me who don't realize they do. And quite a few of them have been previous supervisors. Um, they have been, um, leaders of organizations. Um, and [Laughs] I would say, um, there are a couple, you know, one...one president that I previously worked for, um, he is definitely, um, he is why I am here. Um, ironically, um, I...it's probably too much information, but I'll say it. Um, I have not been one of those people who have utilized my resources [Laughs]. Um, as best as I probably could. Um, and it is because it's just a personal thing for me, um, to not cross the boundaries of relationships in a way, um, and to just, you know, appreciate them for what they are. Glean when I can. I'm huge on gleaning from people, from everyone that's around me. [Laughs] I like being around smart people, um, and thoughtful people, um, and inquisitive people, you know, thinking people. Um, those things are important to me. So, I would say one of my leaders was definitely one of the former presidents that I work for, and I'm just going to go ahead and say his name is Dr. Henry N. Tisdale from Claflin University. He's a retired president now, but he was definitely a visionary leader and a transformative leader or a transformation leader. Um, I think it is, a lot of times when you look at leaders, you don't get all three in one. Um, but it's rare to have especially visionary and transformation, to get both in one person. He definitely had both. Um, there was a lot he didn't say, but he didn't have to say it because that's the kind of learner that I am. Um, it's, you know, perception is everything. And, um, just paying attention without saying much is...is great for me. That works for me. It may not work for someone else, but that's what works for me. Um, definitely, I would have to say, and I'm just thinking of the past maybe five or ten years, um, definitely Dr. Pollard. Um, and I know a lot of times people call her name. Um, and I think it should continue to be called, um, you know. She left her impact here, and I wasn't here for the entire 10 or 11 years that she was here, um, but there is, um, there was a certain grace that she had, um, and charisma that she had that was really unspoken. Um, and I don't know that you can battle that and just try to duplicate that. You just have...you...I had a supervisor that told me who ironically ended up being another college president, um, that either you have it

or you don't. And he would always say, Bridgette, you have it. And I was like, no, I don't. And it was because I was thinking I wasn't...I didn't have his title. Um, and I would always say...he'd come in and say, Abraham, but you got it. You came with it. That's why we hurried you. And I was like, no, I didn't, no, I didn't. And he would tell me that but he kept telling me and finally I got what he was saying. And that is how I feel about Dr. Pollard. Um, and definitely, I would have to say my parents. Um, I, you know [Laughs], um, it's, um, I am who I am because of both of them. I think that I am equal parts, you know, Edna and James, and I love it [Laughs]. Um, I liked the fact that my parents would sit back sometimes and just kind of watch my actions and could pinpoint whose child I was on that particular day. Um, but I think it is what made me who I am. Um, even as a leader, is what made me who I am. And, so, I definitely kudos first of all to them.

MIKE

You mentioned this need to not duplicate or not...not be the same as someone else, and...and I think that is...is so crucial in our leadership journey that we have to...we have to create our own pathway. And while we can pull from other people, and we can pull traits and characteristics from other people, in the end, we have to be true to who we are and model what we believe in and not try to be someone else because we're not going to be theory on Pollard. [BRIDGETTE: Right.] That...that...that's not going to work for...for many people. We're not going to be Edna and James. You're not going to be Edna and James. You have to be yourself, but I think so many leaders try to...to be people they're not. [BRIDGETTE: Uh-huh.] And it...it doesn't take long for that to shine through, and people can see through that.

BRIDGETTE

You know what's interesting about that is, um, I think I have spent a lot of time-- I have never been a person that needed to fit in or wanted to fit in with everyone else, but I think that I allow society to tell me that I needed to. Um, and so, it was uncomfortable for me [Laughs] because I felt like I was doing, and I don't want to say that I wasn't being myself. I was being myself, but it was to a point where I wasn't being myself in a sense that I just didn't let my authentic self shine through. Um, [Laughs] and at this point, you know, in life, I think I'm kind of getting to that place. And I wouldn't even say kind of, I think that it is something that I'm currently walking in, um, and have it embraced. Um, I think for the past 10 years, um, there's just been this internal transformation happening, and so I've had to embrace it. Um, and in particular the last two years, I've had to embrace it. Um, and be okay with the fact that whatever I have and whoever I am it is just enough, and it is gonna get me through whatever doors I'm gonna need to get through. However, I need to get there and just be okay with that, and I am okay with that. I can tell you flat-footed that I'm okay with that.

MIKE

We were talking earlier before we...we started the podcast about you're being an aunt to three and...and soon to be four [BRIDGETTE: Uh-um.]. That's a great message to...to give

to them, right? [**BRIDGETTE:** Uh-um.] As just be yourself and...and leadership will develop as a result of who you are.

BRIDGETTE

You know, it's funny, because I just had a conversation with my niece. So, she's in a similar situation as me. She is going to be the only girl [Laughs] and she hates it with a passion. And I remember when I was younger, um, I hated it. I remember when my last brother Nicholas came, um, I, for a couple weeks straight, just cried. I boo-hoo cried, and there was an 11-year age difference between us. And I had to tell my niece during the thanksgiving break that it would be, she would find out, you know, to embrace it and she'd find out, would be the best thing in the world that could have ever happened to her being an only girl because at this point that's exactly how I feel. I would not trade it for the world, um, even though I wanted a sister so bad because I didn't want to be the only girl. But it turned out to be the best thing for me, and I believe it is a part, again, of why I am the way that I am, and I am who I am because of that.

MIKE

From a leadership standpoint, I think that that's a great transition into this area. Sometimes as leaders, we have to be on an island by ourselves. We...we're out there and people may say, no Mills, what you're doing is...is wrong. But if you have that conviction that you're doing the right thing or you're leading in the right way, in the end, you're rewarded for it. You're comfortable with who you are, but it's...it's uncomfortable just like you were as...as an only girl in your family.

BRIDGETTE

It is. It's really uncomfortable, but, you know, again, when you think about, it...it's one of those things that, um, you know, it allows you to operate in circles that may be uncomfortable for other people, you know. It's things that you will not realize until you become an adult, um, and become a working professional. All of this, it's all a part of the process and all part of the plan to get you to where you need to be. Uh, and so, you have to embrace it, and it is it's uncomfortable. Um, I remember, um, one time I had I was talking to someone and I asked her how did she do what she did, and she said to me, um, Bridget, you have to be friends with none and friendly with all. And I understood what she said at that moment and embraced it. Uh, 10-20 years later, I'm kind of looking at it a little bit different, um, because I think it was one of those things that helped me to be able to function in her leadership role without having a title but understanding that that's where I function and that's the level that I function on and I have to be okay with that. Um, I will tell you that working in this it can be extremely lonely, but you have to be okay with the quiet. Unfortunately, for me, my personality is such, um, while I'm extremely outgoing I'm also very introvert. I'm more introvert probably than extrovert. And so it shocks people most of the time [Laughs] because I'm friendly. Um, but it is, I'm a Southern girl, and I believe that's where a lot of that comes from. You know, we talk to everybody, um, but the other part of that is I have to pull away sometimes. And, you know, go back, and so, it's lonely, um, serving in these roles, in leadership roles to me.

Ad so, I can't imagine being a president, you know, and having to just understand that you can't always, um, people and things that you would want to reach out to, you can. Um, I remember being feeling so confined because I felt like I couldn't go certain places and it was just because I work with people in leadership. So, it wasn't just about me. It's about how it reflected on them, so [Laughs] it's—

MIKE

As...as you continue your leadership journey, what do you see as the next step in traits that you have to work on?

BRIDGETTE

I love the fact that this [Laughs], you have to be transparent in this, so you can't do this podcast and not be transparent. Um, [Pause] I think. Um, I think there's always room for growth. I believe that, um, one of the things is I have to just continue on the path that I'm on. Um, and I will say that I have gotten on the path quite a bit a few times before, but I've always shied away and turned back around. And this time I feel like I have no choice, I have to keep going forward. Um, you know, just as the institution is going forward, I have to do the same. So, it's personal and it's professional for me, and I think for me as a leader that is probably the best thing at this point that I can do is not to turn back, to keep going forward. Um, I think—

MIKE

It was—Go ahead.

BRIDGETTE

Well, I was going to say and I think the other thing is I used to be an Academic Advisor and Director of Student Services, and it's funny because, um, when the students would come in, and I work with teacher education students, and the students would come in because they couldn't pass the test...the practice test, so they could get certified to teach. Um, and they would ask me all these questions about what to do because they wanted me to tell them specifically what to do and I'd always say to them I'm here to empower you not to enable you. Um, and so I think that as a leader, as a growing leader, that is another thing that I will have to do is to continue not to just to take somebody with me and not wait until I get the title or the role, whatever that may be and whatever lies ahead, um, to do that. It's just to make sure that I embrace other people and take them with me and help as much as possible as long as they're open to it.

MIKE

Bridget, good luck on that leadership journey. It's been a pleasure to talk to you, and, um, I wish you well.

BRIDGETTE

Thank you so much, Mike. Thanks for having me, 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.