

MC Forward Podcast
Vincent Briley
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 Vincent Briley, an Academic Coach with the Achieving the Promise Academy. Vincent, Happy New Year, thanks for joining me.

VINCENT

Happy New Year. Thank you again for having me as well.

MIKE

You've been at MC for seven, eight months now. Uh, you've been in the community college space for a little more than a decade. A lot has changed in the time that you've been in that space, certainly has changed in the 25 years or so that I've been in this space. But what leadership skills have you noticed evolving or changing since you joined the community college world?

VINCENT

Well, the one that really comes to mind is this ethic of community, really watching how leaders listen more intently to the communities where the colleges are located. And whether that be with workforce and gathering, what we're looking for, you know. A community college can be a convener for a lot of different things. It doesn't have to be the leader, and I think that comes from this ethic of care for the community. And so, really watching that, you know, even in our current pandemic. How are we helping the community? Who are we connecting to, whether it's mass or PPE programs or new initiatives. And so, over the past, you know, 12-13 years, I've been in community college. I've seen that really not just evolve but really blossom in these times of crises as well as opportunities for innovation. So, that ethic of community has been front and center.

MIKE

Is that type of leadership essential to the survival of community colleges, you think>

VINCENT

Oh, absolutely. Again, and not to, you know, do too much name dropping. Um, Dr. Jerry Sue Thorton made it very clear she wanted to keep community in the College's name at Cuyahoga Community College, uh, you know, because community [Laughs] was central to all that we did. You know, we teach the generations, having, uh, various age groups,

positions, and leadership, et cetera, et cetera, that comes through the community college. And so, having an ethic of care about that community was really really important. And so, I know that in the history of community colleges and getting more detailed about that, there's nothing else like it in the world. Right? [Laughs] This very unique innovative and forward-thinking, a community that we belong to. Uh, so, yes, community as part of that that evolution and really looking closer and paying more attention and really seeing the community as our partners and not just, you know, stakeholders or people that are consumers.

MIKE

I love this idea of the ethic of community, the ethic of care. When you look at it from a leadership standpoint, what specific types of skills does a leader need to really engage in that ethic of care?

VINCENT

Well, of course, we'll talk about listening, uh, right? I think sometimes we get caught up in trying to problem solve too much, [Laughs] you know, as leaders as we always face with various problems or puzzles. But sometimes just really taking that off and just to be there in a moment to listen and to hear some of those nuanced conversations and not always be ready to jump in feet first the program. So, again, listening and patience, you know, to kind of let things evolve. And I say that, again, I want to be gentle about that as well, uh, VP Mills. Sometimes we have to do it now. There's an urgency of now. [Laughs] And that's how we can sometimes approach our work, but when we're talking with the community and we're talking with new partners, we really need to take the time to develop that relationship, uh, with listening and patience because what we are tasked to do sometimes is to solve problems. And I think we have a natural ability to do that, but the listening sometimes not just hearing. I think listening takes some intimacy, you know, we're spending some time really working through problems and really listening to what some of our potential outcomes could be. And so, I think that as a leader, those are the two things I would put up: listening and having patience.

MIKE

So, let's talk about this idea of patience because, you know, we we've talked a lot over the past year in community colleges in higher education about the crisis we're in because of the pandemic. And generally, during a crisis you want to react quickly swiftly, and yet, you're talking about this need for patience. So, how do you marry the two?

VINCENT

Um, I see, how do we marry it? Like you may have heard this before too, you know, people talk about community colleges can turn on a dime. Right? [Laughs] And so, being nimble, and those things are very important, but there also needs to be some supervision. Right? We don't want to make a turn-- some supervision, right? Not just, you know, overlooking things but what's ahead because we could think to ourselves if we

plot a course, we might have made that turn too fast. It may have been more advantageous for us to kind of stay in the turn a little longer, drift a little longer before we actually make something make a decision that puts us in, or positions us, in a better situation. So, here's a good example. We were in a budget class about community colleges and they were talking about the importance of buying real estate when there's an economic recession. [Laughs] You see people buy land and don't do anything with it for years or decades, but down the line we want to build there. We want to build at that part to bring in this new community or to be able to bring new people to our college. It's not something that happens overnight versus you and I were buying a house. We want to move into it immediately. [Laughs] But here's this crisis. Are we using some long-term vision, some supervision? And that really helps with patience as well too, like this is going to pay off. Another example, and again, I can't remember her name specifically, but she inherited a college, and this goes way back, but the former president had made sure the college had all the data connections, wasn't connected, but had made sure the data cables were buried and ready to go. And so, she came in and was able to connect it, right? So, even though the former president wasn't there to actually see it connected but knew they were building towards something of important. And I think what's the story is sometimes we plant trees that will never get shade from. It's the planning of trees that's the part of the patience of it all. But yes, you have to respond to the crisis but also be being patient with what that outcome could potentially be, the benefit of our entire community.

MIKE

When we talk about leadership specifically, Vincent Briley, what kind of leader do you see yourself as>

VINCENT

Oh, wow, that's a...it's a wild question for me. Um, I really am a... I think I've told some of my four team members like I'm not your, I'm not your boss. Uh, you decide every day what you're going to do, what you're not going to do, you make a decision about how you want to perform. I can coach some things. I can you know help with some things, but I really do roll up my sleeves and say, hey, how can we make this better? Right? And better could be just to get it done [Laughs], or better could be something incredibly elegant, but at the end of the day, I want to make sure that everyone feels like they're making a contribution of both value and has impact in the work that we do. And so, I think as a leader, I see myself very collaborative, but at the same time, I know when it's time just to get it done [Laughs] so we can move on to the next, uh, to our next task.

MIKE

You and I had talked before. You're a big sports fan.

VINCENT

Yes, yes.

MIKE

Where do you see commonalities between leadership and sports and leadership in community colleges? And where do you see differences?

VINCENT

Alright, so let's put this on the table. I can tell you about patients. I'm a long time Cleveland Browns fan. We're still waiting on the Super Bowl. We're still waiting on a championship, but we know we are a championship organization. We have proof of that. I'm also a proud member of the largest fan base of NFL teams, right? So, there's a community, and I've traveled the world, and believe it or not, I have found Browns, Cleveland Browns fans from all over the world. Um, and I think about that with community colleges that there are people who envy that type of innovation that America has brought forth in this in the shape of community colleges and how could they replicate that? I also think about the, um, I was, order before...between sports, understanding your branding, right? Uh, currently here in DMV, we have teams changing names. Uh, we got a team change its name in Cleveland. I think, from my understanding, there was the, uh, Monty was not always the mascot at Montgomery College. They had to go through some changing, what's going to make some resonate, what's going to resonate with our community or how can we present ourselves to different audiences. And so, those two things match up. Right? The image and branding of your institution. When I did a Fulbright in Germany in 2012, that's something that they had never considered in their higher education. Yes, there are terrapins and buckeyes and wolverines in America, but they don't have that same type of identity in their higher education and said well, how did you guys do that and still trying to figure out that part of American education whereas it's something very important us to have brand imaging and some deep affiliation with whatever that organization, whatever the institution is promoting. Right? So, those would be, that'll be the other sport and community college comparison.

MIKE

That's interesting too when because I'm also a big sports fan and big Ravens fan. So, you know, took the Cleveland franchise after Indianapolis took our franchise. So, it's tit-for-tat. [Vincent laughs] But this idea of leadership in general, I think sometimes is missing in the sports community, and I think they could learn a lot from the education community on how to pivot quickly and how to attract and maintain and retain a fan base or a, you know, in our case a group of alumni that I think we do really well. So, there are some similarities. I think there are certainly a lot of differences, but as you look at your evolution, where do you see your growth from a leadership standpoint moving forward?

VINCENT

Again, that's such a loaded question for me. Where do I see myself? Again, I've said this in a variety of places, I'm happiest in places where I can learn and serve. Um, that has not been, um, that hasn't ever drifted for me, if I'm in a place where I can serve and I can

learn, I really kind of do not realize my best work. And I think that's kind of my story around leadership. I mean I always, what's the word I'm looking for, I mean I always get to have the best idea or may not always get on board, you know, with the first group [Laughs] because I process things a little differently, but at the same time I know and what's important to me is my model is has to make an impact for people who are coming behind me. I've said this in my, in other positions, you know, students have to see their faculty successful. Students have to see the people with their institutions successful because that's what we've all-- we went all in on education, [Laughs] and if we're not doing well, how are we convincing them to keep it up? Or how do we convince them? And that modeling and that representation is so critical. And so, again, if I can learn, that means I can tell someone else, hey, this is important, why don't you come try this out? Uh, if I can serve, I can show someone else this is important, why don't you come give this a try as well? And so, those would be the two things I would really put forth. And then, the third one just because of, again, my personality, I want to have fun. [Laughs] At some point, I want to be able to laugh about it. I don't care how ridiculous it is or how, what am I looking for? Obnoxious. Something maybe, I want to be able to sit back and laugh because that's another way that I process things as well, like, you know, what, this could have went a lot of ways, but it turned out for our good, so let's kind of have some high optimism and joy behind it.

MIKE

So, this idea of fun seems to be not at the forefront of leadership, right? We think oftentimes that as a leader, we can't have fun. Um, I totally disavow that that idea. I think laughter, and laughter at yourself, is helpful. And I think from a leadership standpoint, it goes a long way in bringing community together.

VINCENT

Again, let's look at the sports again, right? Uh, it's one of those moments we remember, you know, uh, how about them Cowboys? There's some people who never, who have never seen that, but he walked into the locker room happy and, okay, the locker room just goes crazy. That's like embedded in our head. That here's the head coach saying, hey, how about them Cowboys and they all just fell in and had this this joyous moment because that year prior, they were a 1-15 team. There was that pain and patience of trying to get somewhere then finally make this breakthrough and it was a time to celebrate. And again, I think America celebrated with them, some begrudgingly. It's more joyously, they have a pretty severe, very dedicated fan base too. But we, I remember that moment, him coming into the locker room saying how about them, how about the Cowboys? And this place disrupted. And so, that's what having that kind of fun is always important.

MIKE

When you think of leadership, there are two ways to lead. We often hear lead from the front. You can also lead from behind. What's your preference?

VINCENT

Oh, man. Let me tell you what I admired. I do like the, that inverted model. I saw the workforce, I'm gonna give a shout out to the workforce division. I saw the org chart, and they talked about how their leadership supports the folks who are working frontline with our community. So, they had that organizational chart turned on its head, and I just really really appreciate that. So, shout out to not just this institution, but people who are thinking that way. The work I do supports my team. Uh, again, some of...something I've heard in other places, the president, not just the president, the president has to support all of these folks to do the jobs to do the...handle the task and handle the responsibilities that she can't do by herself, or he or she can't do by themselves. And I think that's so incredibly important and so legitimately to see that at this College, at least in workforce like that was the only org chart I looked at so far, but it was turned on its head. No, the people at the top were the folks who were interfacing with our students, interfacing with our community the most. And then, how they support it at each and every level. So, that's my style. And on top of that, I want to give a shout out to the senior administrators that's on display at this challenge.

MIKE

But there are times you would lead from the front.

VINCENT

Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. Indeed, of course. Places like, uh, you know, not just fundraising, uh, speaking to our governmental and other elected leadership. Uh, there's a particular style and culture to that as well with you have to kind of lead, you have to be the leader up front. But organizationally and looking where I've sat because I've never really had to be at that point, I've always appreciated the folks that know I work for you. The work I do has to have some, uh, has to have an impact and the people who look to me for support in my position of leadership.

MIKE

Vincent, this has been enlightening for me. Uh, it's always a pleasure to not only talk with you but to laugh with you because I think that just demonstrates this looseness that is important as a leader. You know, I think we often in a leadership role see ourselves as having to be stuffy at times. So, it's always a pleasure for me to talk with you and laugh with you.

VINCENT

Oh, well, well thank you. And if I can end on a musical note, um, it really is about, it's like jazz. We all understand the notes, right? And we kind of have an idea about where, I mean, it can probably take us if we understand what the baseline is. Then, we can start to improvise no matter what. It's not just, you know, by chance, but no, we know what these notes are, we know what this music can do for us because we've all agreed on the basics. Now, let's see where we can go. And so, to take more of a to your point of mind to being loose, we understand the format, but how what else can we do with these 12

keys? What else could we do with this instrument and being able to be innovative? And again, not take ourselves too seriously whether we fail or succeed but to be able to have fun with 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.