

MC Forward Podcast
Season 3, Episode 6
Akima Rogers
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 Akima Rogers, Director of Academic Initiatives. Akima, thanks for joining me.

[Akima] I appreciate it. Thanks for inviting me, Mike.

[Mike] So, I was doing a little background research and came across an article connected with Syracuse University that talks about how you've started this DC alumni barbecue for... for Syracuse alumni and it just struck me as a great example of... of leadership and... and initiating leadership. Can you talk a little bit about it and if it's still going on?

[Akima] Well thanks Mike. Yes the barbecue is still going on and... and getting stronger and bigger each year... uh... it just got started years ago because a group of Syracuse alum from my era happened to get together and we were talking about all the different alum that we knew that were in the DC area and then no one ever connected and we said well it would be great if we could just get everyone together and... uh... decided upon having this barbecue and because it was the first year we didn't know how many people would show up or what was going on... and so my wife and I, also a Syracuse alum, we volunteered our house to host the event... um... and we had probably about 100 people show up... and so we knew immediately that we needed to move to a larger venue. And so we've really grown the event, it is actually the largest alumni event for Syracuse University in the DC area now... um.

[Mike] How many people do you have attending at this point?

[Akima] Uh... we have somewhere between 150 to 200 alum and then along with families anywhere between four and 500 people.

[Mike] Wow. Incredible. So, tell me what type of leadership that has entailed from you?

[Akima] Well one of the... the ways in which it has... um... helped to improve my leadership... uh... is really trying to... um... assess what people are interested in, what draws people... uh... and you know one of our focuses is on family and friendship and not on... on... kind of the aesthetics of things and so we really wanted we... we... we didn't

want to out-price things... um... I am by default the... the president or the organizer of it ...um... however I've said from the onset that we don't want to... to be an organizational structure, we just want to be a group of alum that wants to put on this event, but I have a propensity to... to talk and provide ideas so... um... I... I have... I... I tend to... um... steer the group in the way in which I think it needs to... to go to be successful.

[Mike] And how is that all translated into your work as Director of Academic Initiatives? Those types of leadership skills.

[Akima] It's very similar because it's about... um again gauging what... what interests people... what... what ...um motivates... uh people and so I, you know, our... our group translated... so our group of alum that put on the event, everyone has different skills and strengths... um and availability and... and that's very similar either with working with staff or working with students... um not to... um to put them in situations in which they they're not going to be their best and setting and working towards an end game you know for...for... for us with the... with the... um... the barbecue for example it all culminates to... to one day or one weekend but at the same time almost literally we're starting the planning for the following year, reserving the park and doing those things and as it relates to the... to the job you know. We're bringing in new cohorts of students at the same time that we're supporting and managing the current students and so everything is cyclical and you can't wait for one thing to end to start planning and working on the next thing and helping the people to understand that... and so...

[Mike] What are the challenges that... that you face as a leader?

[Akima] Um...well and I was talking to my supervisor about this recently. That a leader lives in the gray, because you know the black and the white, the...um... the staff, the students... if things are going as they're supposed to be then they really don't need much guidance or leadership, but the leader is the one that helps to manage students or issues that are in the grade to move them to where they need to be... um you know if.. if a lot of what we do as hiring professionals could be automated in some way, could be um... you know managed without ...um having to have meetings and those things but... um it's... it's the... the... the leader's job to kind of work with the difficult or the uncertain areas and... so I... I... that that to me... um... can sometimes be tough and... and you've gotta... you've gotta plan out your schedule for that... as many meetings as I'm in... I... I try not to book the entire day because I know that they're gonna be ... um things that I... new things that I'm not even aware ... is about to come across my plate and so... um and then... also... um understanding that one of my main roles is to ensure that my staff have everything they need to do their job and so I've gotta... I've gotta map out mental space and space... literal space of my calendar to be able to... um address some of the issues and things that that they're working and dealing.

[Mike] For me that issue of time management is so important and... and providing time on your schedule... on your own calendar to do the work that you're entrusted to do. And

one of the things that I started doing...oh gosh maybe six seven years ago now at the suggestion of another colleague was just to put on my calendar "no meetings" so that assistants don't book that time and it allows me the opportunity to get the work done.

[Akima] Yeah that... that... that is a... a really great suggestion... um and you know particularly the analogy is if... if we're actually in a meeting, then your priority is that meeting and so similarly if you've got something to do, you know and... and you allow interruptions to happen all the time, you're not actually being productive in that way. So I have done that in the past. I need to be more consistent with that but that is great.

[Mike] If someone were to ask you, Akima, what kind of leader are you? Describe your leadership.

[Akima] Leadership I think starts first with self-awareness... um what are my own limitations? What... what am... what are... what are... um the things that... they motivate me intrinsically... um because... um you know you don't want to... you don't um... you don't get assigned or get ...um get to keep the leadership title. I... I'm always going to be the supervisor but leadership really requires kind of adjustment and assessment as you go... go along... so um you know first it's internal awareness trying to... um... you know, knowing what my limitations are and then I try to be as... as direct and clear as possible and that's not always easy again living in that that gray area. ...Um but um... I... I want to um.. to move... the move... move the issue or the... or the move the ball along as forward as possible... um in whatever way I can... um and sometimes that... that may be empowering or assigning someone... to someone else... one of the... the... the... um my shortcomings earlier on in my career was not being able to delegate and I thought that as a supervisor when someone came to me I had to solve all the problems ...um and... and sometimes it's... it's a little bit more of a tennis match where you know you get served the issue and then you're able... you... you've got to hit it back to them and allow them to... to not only resolve the issue but grow professionally as well.

[Mike] Would you say that that idea of delegation or the struggle you had with delegation has been in the area of the best growth for you as a leader?

[Akima] Absolutely... absolutely not... um... understanding that I can't do it all but... but also understanding that there's a value in... and letting others do some things and to grow and to get to that point as well you know you don't want to have... um... others be solely dependent on you for decisions or actions to occur... um and it's... it's... it's the... the old mantra of teaching someone to fish... um but it's very relevant particularly when you're dealing with... um forming the minds of young adults and... and in education and empowering them but also in working with... with staff and ...and younger professionals um ...in higher education or otherwise... um and this is it was a struggle to me because you know I focused on getting things right but not... not always understanding that you could be 100% right but that may not be the only way to get there or the or the only right

answer so it was it was it was a... um... a... an internal struggle and then awareness for me.

[Mike] One of the things that I struggled with just... just like you with this idea of delegation was that I... I found myself having to trust other people to get the job done and... and I struggled with that... uh early on in my career because I... I knew I was going to be held accountable for the end project and at times just like you it was easier for me to do it because I knew it would be done. That doesn't necessarily mean it would be done the best way or the best product but it would be done and I think this idea of delegation also requires us to look at trust and developing trust with our... our colleagues and teammates.

[Akima] ...Um trust... trust cannot be under understated in any way it is really the... um the... the... the core to a successful team to producing a successful product. The outcome I mean and...and when I talk to my staff I say well yeah I'm the supervisor but that's the role that I play. rveryone plays a different role and so you know as it really...there's a difference between supervising individuals and managing a team and as a team that's my role but that doesn't make my role different or better than yours in order for us to get to the point we need to... to get to. We all have to do our part because no matter what title I have or what... what... um responsibility I have, if you're not doing your part on that and I can't trust you to do that then... um it doesn't even allow me to do my own job because I'm worried about what you're doing.

[Mike] Yeah, that I think that's so true... that is so... so true... uh as you as you move forward in your leadership journey... um what are some other areas that you think you have to tackle... that you have to look inside and say I could do this a little bit better?

[Akima] Yeah... um I think that I am a bit rigid I... I... I am very attuned to policies and procedures and regulations and those things and I... I'd like to be more... inflexible... not the word but probably more fluid... so um understanding what the boundaries are but ...but um... not simply... um adhering to the to the rules just because of the rules and part of what I've been trying to do more is attaching values to policies and procedures and being more motivated to... the... the reason why than just what the policy is. Um... and ...and I think that... um it is... it has helped them... helped a little bit... um and... and then I also have to let go with... um understanding that... um you know getting overruled by a decision or... or those types of things just have to let it go. You have to do the best that you can and then understand, you know the people that are in the positions that they're in let them do the best that they can and you know it doesn't... it doesn't undermine your work you know as long as you're consistent... um and that's... that's a... that's a tough thing... um for me now. I used to work in student discipline at a division one... at Boston College... a division one private... um religious based institution and you know there were a lot of times in which I made decisions and got overruled on them because some donor called in or some... you know... some something or other... um you know some athlete had had to play a sport or something and it used to it used to really bother me

and because here I am thinking again I'm protecting the integrity of the institution and following the rules and things but you know leadership is about judgment, making the best decision and not worrying about some of those other things.

[Mike] I think that is... is such an astute observation because you know one of the things that I have found that if you take this stuff personally, if you take being overall personally, it'll eat you up, it'll keep you up at night, and I think that comes with... with time with maturity... um.

[Akima] Yes.

[Mike] You know I... I have often told people that for me I'm gonna do what I think is in the best interest of the institution, the team, the students. If that's overruled then it's overruled but at least I'll be able to sleep at night because I feel like I've done the best I can do and I think from a leadership standpoint that is... is critical to the growth of any good leader.

[Akima] Absolutely. I do sleep a little better... um and... and separating out my personal feelings from kind of professionally... where do we go from there... um...

[Mike] How do you balance as a leader the work life/personal life? What do you... what do you do to keep that balance?

[Akima] Uh... one of the things I... I try to... to get as much work done in a... in my professional location area you know so I... I set goals on what I'm going to finish by the end of the day and when I leave to leave the job I um I... I leave that to the next to the next day... um and that's tough because I live on my phone and I get emails all the time I get text messages all the time... um things that are the things that are occurring and so balancing out what is what really needs to be responded to right now and what can wait... um and you know allowing for those that personal time... um with family... um and ...um and understanding that it is a career, it is a job, but there ... there are other ... there are other aspects to the human life.

[Mike] As my family often tells me, now once I leave this position someone else will take it over, it's not going to stop you know? So I... I struggle with that as well.

[Akima] Yeah, I... I used to say when I give a presentation thing and talk to folks I say well you know the job is going to be there if heaven forbid I get hit by a bus and um... someone else will take over and... and um I said that you know with talking to students one time and... and um the students were like oh my goodness but there was one or two students in the back they were like oh that doesn't sound like a bad idea, so I... I... I ... switched that to saying you know if I... if I hit the lottery then I'm out of here sorry. I put a positive spin because I... I was afraid that students would grow up to be bus drivers or something.

[Mike] Well let's hope that you don't get hit by a bus. Let's hope you get to win the lottery and that you get to spend more time planning these wonderful barbecues for Syracuse University.

[Akima] Yeah.

[Mike] Akima, thanks for... for taking the time out. This was fun.

[Akima] Thanks, Mike. I really do appreciate you inviting me to do this and... and the self-reflection and talking about leadership.

[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.

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