

MC Forward Podcast
Season 3, Episode 11
Erik Swanson
Transcript

[Music]

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 Eric Swanson, the Interim Director of The Institute for Part-Time Faculty Engagement and Support. Eric, thanks for taking out time from your day. I appreciate you joining me.

Erik

Oh, thank you very much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Mike

So, I want to jump into this idea of leadership, and your idea of leadership, starting with your creative side. I know you come from a digital arts background. You, painter... Talk a little bit about that and how that led to your perceptions of leadership? Keeping in mind that my perception of what you do is incredibly impressive because I cannot draw stick people.

Erik

[Laughs] Well, I've had many critiques on my work and not everybody would say [Laughs] it's impressive but that is the purpose of a critique. But I think it's a great question because the more I think about it, I suppose, it's intrinsic to me. And then, in my style of leadership, so as far as the creative side goes, I think what you... the nice thing about being on the artsy side of life is that it sort of chooses you. Um, it's a... sometimes it's beyond a passion. It's a little bit of an obsession and compulsion, but I think the training teaches you to control that. Um, but, uh, to me, the big benefit from working in that realm is the training and the skill and the focus on observation. Um, even if you want to do very subjective, um, sort of, uh, opinionated work, the training, the discipline is always on the observational. It's not about... it doesn't matter how you feel about that apple that's on the table in front of you. It's... can you render... can you bring all the skills to bear to render that, so I think the discipline taught me early on to be aware of when I'm being opinionated and when I sort of need to filter my opinions and just deal with the "facts" that are in front of me. And then, so, I would say there's that side that feeds into my leadership. It's very important to me just manage by walking around to really speak to people and try to drill into what they're saying and really at times emphasize what I feel is their top priority. They may say a few things just because they're the right things to say, but then as the conversation goes longer and longer, it's like, oh, okay, this is the real nugget. I thought it was, which is always what drawing and

painting was always about. You think it's going to be about this one thing. You think it's about a self-portrait, and you think it's about the face in front of you, but,, no as you get in there and you observe and you work and work and work on that, it becomes, um, about something else. So, I think just the ability to observe factors into my leadership. And then, I'd say the second phase of leadership is, again, it comes from drawing and painting, is the ability to then backfill on the skills that I feel I'm lacking. Uh, you know, you have to have, well, even, I guess people would say you have to have the courage to sort of look at yourself and judge yourself, but I don't know. In our world, it's just inherent critiques, and because the critique, done correctly, I've been in a million critiques not done correctly, but a critique done correctly, is, we're all trying to do the same thing. You hang your painting on the wall. All I'm doing is I'm trying to make the best painting I can, and I can't see everything so that when you get feedback and information from your instructor and your peers, oh, I see you're trying to make a good painting, it's maybe 80 percent of the way there. I don't think you... I hear what you're saying, you're trying to do, but your colors... your colors are maybe a little juvenile and you're, oh my god, I don't understand color very well. So, then you go, and at least for me, you know, then you go and backfill on the skill that instead of trying to sit there and argue with everybody, no, no, no, no, you don't understand, my colors are the best. You know? You sort of have to hear that information and say, okay, maybe I need to learn something here.

Mike

Well, and I want to touch on that because if your colors are what your colors are, that they're what you wanted them to be, your leadership is what you want it to be, your observation is what you see. How do you manage that? That seems kind of harsh to me.

Erik

You know, it's a really stupendous question because those are the moments that, you know, when you're driving home or w when you're in school, you're just on the metro or it's those quiet moments where you have to think about and filter out the critiques at times because sometimes your colors really are that nice and they're sort of missing the point. So, then you have to think, okay, well, what am I not doing to bring folks around to sort of seeing my vision? So, that's one of the self-editing conversations that you have to have, is... where is the critique legitimate and I'm really just kind of messing up and my colors are a little bit juvenile? And where am I, maybe, trying to achieve something that the rest of the room isn't quite picking up on? But then, I would still have to say the responsibility is mine. I didn't give them the right foray into understanding the work. So, in sort of contemporary artsy work, and I was training... undergrad, I was trained very sort of artsy-fartsy. Um, you know, the super conceptual, super abstract, or at least that's what the push was. But there's little things like, uh, when you really go to show some work, even the name of your piece should, um, help give the viewer some insight into what it is you're trying to say or communicate. But I think, well, I'd say in contemporary times, but even this started in the 70s, and even before, sometimes the creator will just say Untitled. So, they don't want to give you any entry point into

understanding the work other than just what the work is. For me, uh, that seems a little... because, what's the point? I mean, you're making a piece to communicate an idea, so why are you trying to obfuscate? And then, I think we get into the realm of you're making work just for sort of snobbery to say, ha ha, I'm smarter than you and you don't get it what that... that's not, you know, helpful, I don't think. But I think your question is great is because you have to the artist has to really sit with the group, and it doesn't happen instantaneously. I think it's... I have to listen to those voices, but that's the compulsion. That's the... where you're always replaying it in your mind and... Am I messing up, or are they messing up? Not that they're messing up, but, uh,, you know I really think this is what I want to say, but maybe I need a little more of a preamble. Maybe I need to make the work a little bit more accessible. So, it's only ever been an iterative process to me. You only get there by doing it again, doing it again, doing it again. I think one of the most impactful things that was taught to me early on in undergrad, somebody, I don't remember who said it, but they said you've got ten thousand bad paintings inside of you and we're just trying to get it out, just trying to get them all out of you. And I'm of course, I remember thinking, oh my god, I've got 10,000 bad paintings. That's horrible, but it speaks to like it's just labor, like we're just gonna bet like whether you're motivated to work on the painting. Doesn't matter, you're gonna work on it. So, jut you just do it every day. It's iterative, and then, that's the nice thing is the work demonstrates that you can even when you feel so lost, but if you look at painting 80 compared to painting number 20. Even if it's not a great painting, yeah, painting 80 is better than painting 20. And that just showed me it's all about the labor. It's all about the work.

Mike

So, how do you take that idea of showing people what your painting is about into the leadership? Because it seems to me that you then have to have people who are around you, following you to share in that collective vision it doesn't seem to be much different to me.

Erik

No, I think it's wonderful, and these are the questions are really helping me organize my personality, which is, and it's another, again, it's funny, it all goes back to art and sort of creativity in that. So, I like the... manage by walking around. I just like talking to everybody on the streets. I think it's what folks respect and respond to the most, if you're really just out there. And we are all part of the same team, you know, why am I gonna try to hide from anybody? So, it's... I have my ideas. I have my visions, which I feel like I lay out in meetings and check-ins and all of that. So, I would call that sort of the structure. Um, this is almost... So, in drawing and painting... So, an interesting idea to give a little more context, so one of the ways I guess when you're young, at least for me, it was always about drawing from comic books, you know. Drawing the Incredible Hulk or Spider-Man or Wolverine or whatever it was, but then you become mature and you graduate to copying, you know, Da Vinci and Raphael and seeing, oh, you know, Raphael. Um, he sort of combined the best of Michelangelo and Da Vinci into sort of one style. So, then, you start to copy the masters, and the reason you do that is to see through

their eyes and see the... we're all trying to solve the same problems. These are folks who are smarter than you, who've been doing it longer, to see what their solutions are. But if we're taking a look at the figure, one of the best organizational approaches to use is to break the figure down into simplified geometric forms. Simplified implies easy, and it's not, but if you can look at the figure and break down the geometry that underlines everything, so sort of like your chest muscles, your pecs. Why do they sort of round? They sort of like originate and sternum, and they kind of round out and insert in your deltoid or your clavicle. Why is that? Oh, it's because of the underlying geometry of the rib cage, which is basically an egg. So, having the understanding of the structure is monumentally important. So, I feel like my visions that I lay out to my team or even just my colleagues who I talk to, my structure should remain relatively sound and not all that... you are going to move some things around, but once that structure has been established, then you invest the time into the detail on top, you know. Then, you sort of erase all that geometry and then you start to knock in the detail of the anatomy on top and then layered on top of that. You knock in like the shadows that fall on the arm. So, it's sort of like more surface detail. So, for me, in my mind, I try to get my structure correct and fairly immovable. Um, you know, something's not working, then you got to tear up the page and start again. But my conversations, by managing by walking around really helps me adjust the nuance that's sort of on top of the surface like, okay, I know we want to maybe get, just for an example, and I'm just sort of throwing it out there, but maybe the Part-Time Faculty Institute wants to get more involved in say like recruiting or a stronger connection with chairs or something like that. But then my conversations with part-time faculty, my conversations with chairs, my conversations with HR will help me to nuance it more appropriately, but the structure should remain relatively the same. If I'm, I guess to bring it back to an art example, if I go into the process saying this is going to be a figure painting, and then I show up with a painting of an apple that's too radical of a change, the structure changed way too much. But the way Michelangelo thought about the figure fairly relatively realistic, very hyper dynamic. He was always twisting and turning joints. Sometimes he would even, to move the body in ways that anatomically you can't, but the way he thought about the figure if we compare him to say like Van Gogh who was more about kind of his internal struggles and the mark making of the paint, you know. Although they, Van Gogh not a trash artist when it comes to the figure, but his concerns about the figure were much more different than Michelangelo's. So, yeah, I think as long as the structure doesn't change too dramatically, it allows you a lot of freedom to play with the nuance and details on top. So, both are figure, and I would say structurally they're similar, but that surface is vastly different. So, yeah, I have to have some structure to always come back to.

Mike

You're blowing my mind. You're blowing my mind and I'll tell you why. I think the perception of creative people, of artsy people, of those who engage in that realm is this lack of structure. You sit down, you start drawing, and like I said I can't draw to save my life, but what you're telling me is that it's quite the opposite. There's a huge structure to

what the art side does, the creative side does, that leads into this idea of leadership outside of that art focus.

Erik

Yeah and I think and again to bring it back to art. One thing I should say is we do have our cuckoo birds in the art fields. So some of those perceptions are well-earned, you know. And as an artist, you can tell when another one is kind of faking the funk like no you can say it about these deep meanings but we really know it was just you wanting to either you're being self-indulgent or you just wanted to create something sensational and not necessarily important. Um, but the... I think the, yeah, the idea of structure, and I would also, and I'm not a musician, but the little... well, two things: One thing, when it comes to art, and one reason, I... my sort of investigation of the art field sort of ended with... well, not ended, but I saw I saw 3D modeling and 3D animation as sort of the final stop on that metro stop. And one thing that really, because no matter how awesome a painting is or a drawing is, it doesn't move, and there's some tricks you can do to get a sense of movement in your painting, but it doesn't move like moving pictures or film does, but what I loved about, you know, 3D modeling was the same thing I really loved about painting, which is you have to bring everything, and I would say this is true of leadership, you have to bring everything to bear of who you are to do it well because even if we just talked about painting and color mixing, there's a lot of physics and light, the way that light moves around and bounces around. And if you train, when it comes to drawing and realistically like... although I felt like I needed a backfill on my skills and ad I got very involved in what we would call academic drawing where there's quote-unquote rules for how you handle light and shadow. Um, single source light. It does get a little dry after a while, but you have to understand, yeah, you have to understand physics, you have to understand anatomy. Honest, and I love, I probably love nothing more than anatomy. I just love drawing the figure. I love... the body is a puzzle that fits together and is always surprising me. And anybody out there who draws, we know that some of the places we try to avoid. You don't want to draw forearms. You don't love drawing the upper back and calves to a certain extent. The muscles are just so intricate and small and crazy, and, you know, your forearms leading to your hands, which tons of small little intricate muscles. But it's a puzzle that never stops being intriguing. But to bring it back to your question, I think leadership, it is similar note to me in that I have to bring everything to bear in order for this to be as successful, and it may fail at times, and that's okay. It's iterative. We just try again, no big deal. No harm, no foul. Um, but you have to bring everything to bear. You're sort of, you know, you try to be as smart as you can. You try to be as sensitive as you can. At times, you have to be as tough as you can be. Um, not so much, that doesn't imply being mean to people, that just means sometimes it's just a hard road to hoe but it's got to get done. So, you do it. So, I...I... leadership in the creative process is very, uh, sort of synchronous. I guess to me.

Mike

Have you ever failed as an artist?

Erik

Oh, I mean, I think so. There's a lot of different types. There's the types that no matter what they do, they hate, oh, that's me. [Laughs] And then, there's a type that no matter, even the tornado garbage, they love it because I did it, you know. But yeah, the only... I guess that's why leadership roles were acceptable because I... it's something I think about. Why do some people sort of resist the call? Now, I would say Joseph Campbell and his mono myth, Hero With A Thousand Faces. And they sort of look at Star Wars, um, Harry Potter. These are all the same. It's all the same story the humans have been telling each other, just with different characters on top. One part of the mono myth is the refusal of the call. Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Luke Skywalker, hey, you know, you're gonna be Jedi like your father. No, no, I'm not. Staying here. I'm a farm boy. So, there's... or, you know, Pinocchio. All of these. They're all the same story. Uh, Wizard of Oz. They have to leave your... the comfort of your Lord of the Rings. It's all the same mono... same story, but the refusal of the call, but it's one thing that I've been thinking about. Why, you know, in those stories and those dramatic retelling of the stories, the hero, you, the viewer. There's that first the refusal but then there's the acceptance. But in the real world, that's not always the case. Sometimes the refusal of the call happens and then it stays there. It's like, no, I'm taking a pass, and I'm always gonna take a pass. And I found that to be an interesting decision, but I feel like the failure in art, I mean really, I know it sounds corny, and you'll hear it in sports metaphors all the time, but, you know, you only fail if you quit, if you stop. And I guess just with painting and drawing, and I remember actually, to really get specific in your question, I remember there was a summer I think I was still an undergrad and I just, I mean, I was just hating the work I was doing, which is just me. That's how I do it, but my roommate, um, very good friend of mine and he now draws comics for, uh, he's on Batman right now for DC Comics, but this dude was just a monster. And we're very good friends. We were roommates and so even my best work next to his was in my mind the straight garbage. It's just straight trash, so I had to like study harder, work more. But I remember one summer thinking like gee I'm just not getting this. And I remember saying like, you know what Eric, I'm gonna give you, as I talk to myself, I'm gonna give myself permission to quit, which I wouldn't have really done, but I was kind of like I'm gonna give you if you can. So, I just bought a ton of sketchbooks and I said if I forget, I think I was over exaggerating, but if I fill sketchbooks from... if I stack them up and they'll be as tall as me, which I'm about a little over six foot, but if I still, all these sketchbooks, if I can fill every page stack, those sketchbooks up to six feet tall. If I think my work is worse because at that time I was a little cuckoo for Coco Puffs. I felt like my drawings were like getting worse and worse, which really wasn't the case. They were getting tighter and tighter. I was getting probably smarter and better, and I was able to notice mistakes that I wasn't noticing before, so my game was just getting tighter, but it didn't feel that way to me. It felt like it was nothing but mistakes. And I remember saying, yeah, if I don't see improvement then yeah, you go ahead and quit. But you know, once I filled, I don't know, six sketchbooks or so, and I sort of stacked, I was like, oh, yeah, dumb, dumb. You're getting better, you know, no matter what you say. So, it always feels like there's failure, but you have to be realistic and say, not really. And it's only failure if you quit. I think.

Mike

Eric this was fun. You have taken me into a place where I am not generally comfortable going because I don't have that creative side to me. I, you know, as a journalist, I'm a fact-based person. Uh, so you've taken me into a side that I'm not comfortable with. But it's been so enlightening. I appreciate your taking time out to talk to me today, and you've really opened my eyes. So, thank you.

Erik

I appreciate it. No, I'm really happy to do it, and I always happy to have a follow-up conversation.

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.

[Music]