

MC Forward Podcast  
Lisa Hackley  
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 Lisa Hackley, Director of Student Life, on the Rockville campus. Lisa, thanks for joining me.

**LISA**

Thank you for having me, Dr. Mills. Appreciate the invite.

**MIKE**

So over the past couple of years as we've wrestled with this pandemic, everything has had to go virtual, including Student Life. Tell me about the leadership challenges that have been impacted as a result of that.

**LISA**

Wow. There's quite a few, Dr. Mills. I will... first, they, when... when we, uh, when covid first hit, I was not in this role. Uh, I was the Events Coordinator, uh, in the Office of Student Life. So, I've... I've been able to, uh, learn and... and pivot through this in both positions. So, uh, some of the challenges... I would definitely say, uh, is keeping students engaged, uh, virtually. So, we had to take our, uh, core events, our large-scale events, and even small-scale events, and we had to create those virtually. How do you do that? [Laughs] And I mean everyone was asking, how do you do that? So, um, what I... what I did, um, in both roles actually had to reach out to, uh, some of my networks and, um, some of other, uh, research other schools, and we were all kind of in the same, um, uh, phase of... of wondering, what do we do? How do we do this? How can we move, you know, a Club Rush to... in... virtual? How can we move any of our... our signature programs, um, virtually? So, it was definitely putting our heads together. Um, many meetings. [Laughs] Many meetings, uh, and more meetings and trying to, uh, figure out a way, how do we get students, um, engaged? And how do we keep them engaged? So, um, you know, students were at this point... in the beginning, everybody, you know... it's the unknown, so all of us, we were all like, okay, what's going to happen? What do we do? And students were like, okay, I'm at home. I'm stuck. I don't know what to do, but I still want to do something. And what do you have to offer? So, uh, what we decided to do was to, uh... like I said, did research, uh, other institutions, to find out what they were doing. And we would have, um, meetings set up and just kind of get together. Even some of the, uh, my colleagues here, so, uh, in Student Affairs as well as Academic Affairs, uh, reached out to say, hey, we would like to put on some programs and are you are willing to collaborate because we know there's strength in numbers. Right? So, if we could have someone from the different backgrounds to be able to, um, have their input, give their input, um, we... it was successful for us. So, having to put all of those programs or some of the programs and move it to virtual was definitely a struggle for us. Um, but I—

**MIKE**

Let me... let me touch on that for... for just a second because one of the things that you kept coming back to was this concept of networking and... and reaching out. Would you say that as you... you experienced moving these events online that... that skill of networking was as instrumental in the success of this as anything else?

**LISA**

Absolutely. Absolutely. We could not have been able to just do it on our own. We had to reach out across the different departments and divisions and units as well as outside to see what we could do. So, that was... networking was key to the success of us being able to bring these programs virtually. Yes.

**MIKE**

How does a leader develop that skill of networking? Because it's not intuitive to many people, and it's not innate in us. But, how did you develop that skill as a leader?

**LISA**

It's about relationships. For me, it's about relationships. And I think for most of us who have that skill set, it's about relationships. We definitely, you know, I'm... I believe in, um, you know, I'm not the expert at everything, right? I'm not the expert, probably, some of, you know, many things, but what I am good at, I do know. And then, it's... it's like, how do you build that team? How do you build that network of... of others who have different skill sets other than yours? And you build that group, that network, and you're able to just reach out to those individuals and ask for their expertise, you know. What they're good at. We all have different, you know, we have different skill sets. So, how do we reach.... how do I build my network? It's pulling all of those people into one group and saying, hey, you're good at this, you know. Dr. Mills, you're great with this. And, you know, Lisa, you're great with this Add this person's great with that. Let's put it all together, and how do we come up with the program or events, um, to keep students engaged and informed?

**MIKE**

That requires some introspection. You have to look at yourself. Look inside yourself and figure out what you're good at and what you're not good at. Many of us don't want to look in that mirror and say, I'm not good at x or y.

**LISA**

I'm a realist. And no one is good at everything. So, whether you like to... to look... to do that. Um, I think that we all as leaders that we have to do it at some point in our careers, or often many times in our careers. I'm not the ex--, like I said, I'm not the expert at some things. I have, you know, someone who's great at, um, you know... I was an Events Coordinator, but we, you know, I have a... the Events Coordinator now have some skill sets, um, that she's great at, or, um, some of the other positions that we have. We... students, I think, your skill sets come through, um, with working with students. I like to observe, and when I can see that you've made... someone's made an impact on the student, um, for, uh, for me, it's not about numbers. Right? It's about quality. So, if someone has that skill set where they are making an impact on students, that's all that matters. That's... that's all that matters

**MIKE**

When you look in that mirror and... and Lisa Hackley is staring back at you. What are the strengths that you see in that person?

**LISA**

Strengths. Well, I think as a leader, I... I'm honest. I believe I'm loyal. I'm ethical. That's so important for me. Um, and I like to lead by example. I will not ask anyone, um, and I say my colleagues, I don't say my direct reports or whatever, and there's nothing wrong with that. I just say my colleagues. Um, I will never ask them to do something that I wouldn't do. So, I like to lead by example. So, I definitely would say that is definitely one of my strengths. Um, again, integrity, being ethical, being honest, and own your mess. Own it. So, when you make mistakes... I, trust me, I don't try to cover up anything. I think it takes more, uh... uh, you have to put so much energy into trying to cover up things, and it's just like we're all human. And I think that we have to extend grace to one another. So, you know, when I make a mistake, I'll be the first one to say, oh, I really screwed that up, I'm sorry. How can I fix this? And let's move on. I'm not one of those, you did this, you did this, you did, you know? We... we, like, we all have different skill sets, but I... I... I appreciate, uh, when people are honest, um, and up front and don't try to cover up things.

**MIKE**

Why do you differentiate between direct reports and colleagues?

**LISA**

Because I just think it... it offers a level of, um, there's no real hierarchy there, even though there is, but there's really no hierarchy. I don't want anyone to feel as though I think I'm more important than they are. Um, I think, you know, I often say my colleagues because they are my colleagues. Although they report to me, but they're still my colleagues. So, I think, um, having that... that that type of environment where everyone feels valued is key to a successful team,

**MIKE**

And everyone bringing their different strengths to the table makes that team even more successful.

**LISA**

Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. I... I... I can't say that enough. Um, being able to pull on, uh, people's strengths, um, is definitely key. Because you think... for me, it's about value. And I think it's about, you know, their worth. They understand, you know, I may not be, you know, a great facilitator but I'm an excellent planner. Or I may not, you know, have the strength in doing this, but I can contribute this way. And I think creating that type of environment for, um, colleagues. It's key to their... them feeling value in their positions as well.

**MIKE**

When you've watched other leaders and... and watched the way they... what are some things that you have picked up on?

**LISA**

That depends. Are we talking about good leaders? Are we talking about just leaders in general?  
[Laughs]

**MIKE**

Umm, well, I... I think we can differentiate, right? I mean you've picked up things from good leaders, but I'm sure you've also observed things from individuals who are not necessarily good leaders and said, I'm staying away from that type of leadership.

**LISA**

Right. Uh, I would definitely say... well, for... for me, again, a good leader is... being ethical. Um, leading by example and not just talking the talk but they really do walk the walk. Uh, I... so, for leaders for me, uh, who... I wish, well, I'm not going to say I wish not because I don't, um, I... authoritative type of leadership style was not, it's not beneficial in my opinion. And some people think it's great, but for me, it's not. I don't want to be that type of leader. I want to be able to... I want everyone to have a say. Sometimes we have to make hard decisions, right? And... and... but I do want them to know that their opinions matter, and even if I can't make the decision that... that they would hope that I could make, um, I would make the decision and then explain why I could not, um, you know... I heard them, but I could not... that did not, um, inform... well, it didn't inform my decision, but I was not able to build that route, if that makes sense.

**MIKE**

One of the reasons that I opted for... well, one of many reasons that I opted not to go into the military after high school is because of that authoritarian... authority... leadership style one where I don't respond well to that. Now, that being said, I think there's a place for that type of style in the military, right? And... and people need that and they respond well to that. That just wasn't me, and I to this day, I don't respond well to that dictatorial type of leadership.

**LISA**

Yes, yes. I... I... I agree. I... I... now, here's the thing. I... I will, um, I will always do my job. Um, I will always perform to the best of my ability, but I don't work well with that type of leadership style, and I know that. So, I would not be in a position where my supervisor, um, had that type of leadership style because it's not, you know, it's... it's just not good. It wouldn't... it wouldn't make a good environment. So, I wasn't... yeah.

**MIKE**

The type of leader you are: collaborative, observant, hands-on... Is that the type of person that you want to work for in a leader?

**LISA**

I think so. Again, I think it goes back to knowing your value, being able to contribute. Um, I will say, um, I always go back, uh, Dr. Mills, to just... just being for integrity, just being... having integrity, being honest, being up front, um, and creating an environment where everyone can... can have a say. So, that's... that's good for me. That's helpful, um, for me. And I also want to learn. So, you know, I think we learn every day. We're still learning. So, we're still in this pandemic, right? But we're still learning. Uh, so being able to... I'm... I'm very hands-off. I'm not a micromanager. I don't work well with micromanager [Laughs] either because I feel like that

takes a lot of time and a lot of energy. So, it's... it's almost like if I have to be a micromanager then I might as well do the job, right? Because I'm constantly telling someone else what to do, but that doesn't work well for me either. I will give you free range. You will do whatever. If... if you need to come to me, if you have questions, if you need help, if you need direction, um, if you need to balance something, that's great. But micromanagers, no. That's... that's not a good environment for me either.

**MIKE**

Earlier in the podcast, you mentioned working with students and the energy that you get from working with students. Talk to me about that.

**LISA**

I love students. I love students. Even on the crazy days, I love students. You know, Dr. Mills, I worked at the College for some years. I actually came from private industry, so I worked at the college for some years. And I left the College, got a job offer I couldn't refuse, go back to private industry. I went back for about two years and I was miserable. And I wasn't miserable because of the job. I was miserable because that was like, it's not about the money, it's about your passion, and my passion is with students. So, I left my private job, my private industry, and people thought I was crazy. They were like you're leaving this particular company to go back to higher ed, like, what is wrong with you? And I'm like, I miss the students. I missed the students, and I came back. And I've been back for quite some time since. It's all about—

**MIKE**

What do you like—

**LISA**

I'm sorry?

**MIKE**

What do you like working with the students? What is it about them that makes you so passionate?

**LISA**

It's that aha moment. It's that, uh, you know, when a student says, you know, um, so, we... we have, uh, MC Leads, it's one of the leadership programs, or Student Senate, or any of the club leaders, newspapers... all of that. When someone comes says, you know, before I got involved, you know, I was shy, I didn't like public speaking, you know, but this program helped or this, you know, this program taught me, you know, how to... to, uh, speak or how to communicate better, how to work with others, and just being able to... to hear that, and it's not about me, it's anyone in Student Life, or anyone, you know, that come in contact with students. The reward for me is just hearing a student say they were impacted by a program or an event or workshop or whatever it is that we're doing. Um, that... that it made an impact on their lives. And I... I'm... I have relationships with students from when I was first at the College. I'm still in touch with a lot of students, um, over... over the years and it's just... it's great to hear, um, like I said, them just saying, you know, what... what made... how Student Life made an impact in their lives and how Student Life helped them and taught them leadership skills and transferable skills and how it really did enhance, uh, their college experience because of course we're a commuter

school, right? But how do we enhance, um, the classroom experience for them. So, we know students come here. They're not coming here, oh because I want to join a club. They're coming here because of the academics. But how do we in Student Affairs enhance that experience for them, and that's what... what's... what's more... most... that's what gives me life. It gives me life, those ah-ha moments give me life, yes.

**MIKE**

And that impact that you're talking about may not be obvious to the students when they're here. It may not be obvious to you when they're here. But five years from now, 10 years from now when they come back and say, wow, you did x, and you may not even remember that you did it, but it... it has an impact to them a decade later. [LISA: Yeah] To me that's what leadership is about.

**LISA**

That's... I... I... that's what it's all about. And I... I will say, Dr. Mills, there, you know, over the years, I have, um, some of the stories that I have heard from students in my office, where it has literally brought me to my knees and tears, I mean just some of their experiences. Um, and to be here and to hear that and not to do anything about that, that's not okay. So, for me, it's... I understand everyone's home life is different, but when they come here to this office of Student Life, they need to feel welcome. They need to feel, um, uh... and it's a creating a... an inclusive environment. I don't want any one person to feel that they're, you know, by themselves. How can we create that environment for them? How can we give them um a sense of hope? And how do we just be able to offer a safe environment? Just safe, just somewhere they can come and just be done with the rest of the world for even if it's only for. you know. a club meeting or a senate meeting or whatever it is. Um, just be able to disconnect from the craziness of life and being able to create that environment for them. It's nothing more rewarding than that.

**MIKE**

Lisa, this has been a pleasure for me. Your passion is very evident. Your leadership skills coupled with that passion are huge benefit for our students. I appreciate you taking time out to talk about it today.

**LISA**

Thank you for having me, Dr. Mills, I really 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.