

MC Forward Podcast
Season 3, Episode 2
Nik Sushka
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 Nik Sushka, Interim Director of the Achieving the Promise Academy. Nik, thanks for joining me. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy day.

[Nik] Yeah, happy to be here.

[Mike] So, I want to start off...uh, I was doing a little... little background research and I saw a statement on your LinkedIn profile that says that you want to help people ignite their passion to make the world a better place.

[Nik] Yeah.

[Mike] As a leader, how do you make that happen?

[Nik] Oh yeah, that is definitely something that I think is a privilege as an educator so I... I think for me, supporting people and igniting their passions... first is, it takes listening skills, right? Asking powerful questions but also being a powerful listener. And as you hear people share with you, you listen for those things that they're excited to talk about. You listen for those moments where they talk about growth or learning or...um...interest, right? And for me the connection to making the world a better place is that I believe that at every level of every organization, every neighborhood, every school that you might attend or your kids might attend...um...every one of us fundamentally wants a happy, healthy, thriving environment and so, for me it's really about listening. And then as you find those moments to encourage people to take action I think that, um, it's really important as a mentor and educator, supervisor to just ask people have you ever thought about...have you ever thought about presenting on this issue at a conference or have you ever thought about meeting with someone who I know has started a business on this issue and, you know, just beginning to ask that question, where you might really meet someone, where they are again with their passions, their interests, where they define their communities, and then asking those powerful questions, right? What about this? Would you ever consider this? Have you ever thought about... I find that those conversations are often... they really can spark new ideas and at that point it's just about supporting the person as they continue on their journey.

[Mike] I love this idea of being a powerful listener because... you know... we... we hear quite a bit about people hearing but not listening and this idea of being a powerful listener I think has... has a lot of leadership behind it. How do you develop those skills?

[Nik] Oh that's such a good question. I think there's a number of things that you can do. One of them is you can take some professional development or listen to some podcasts, watch some videos that will help you to just develop some conversational patterns so...um...I'll try to model this a few times in our conversation today but what you can do is... is sort of reframe and retell what someone says to you so, if somebody shares something with you, you say - what I'm hearing you say is this or what I'm understanding is this and it both requires you to put it into your own words but also checks your understanding. It gives the other person a chance to clarify or go deeper and so, I think it really helps you to stay present. It helps you to really critically process what someone's sharing with you, uh, so, those conversational patterns can be really helpful right? That's sort of back and forth but what I'm understanding is this. What I'm hearing is this. Or one thing that I love is just an easy question is "can you tell me more about that?" That does require I think, um, having the ability to also pursue your authentic curiosity. When I used to train students to lead reflection discussions, you know, it was a wonderful opportunity for growth, for students who maybe felt like they weren't the greatest public speakers or maybe they were not comfortable yet facilitating conversations with peers. I would always tell them, you know, at the end of the day, just be authentically curious. When someone says something that you want to know about, ask them to share more about that and that is going to match your curiosity with something another person wants to talk about.

[Mike] Oh that's... that's wonderful. My background is as a journalist so, my undergrad was in journalism and I have always maintained that the best interviewers, the best questioners, are four or five-year-old children because they want to know everything. Why, dad, the sky's blue... why is it blue? They just... everything is question and it's that authentic self that that is... is really powerful I think. How do you take what you've learned as a powerful listener and move it into your current role as interim director of ATPA?

[Nik] Yeah that is something that I think coming into this role in the middle of the pandemic virtually...uh...was so, important, right? I literally began with listening sessions, I met one-on-one with all of the members of the team. I asked them who should I be talking to? Who should I be hearing from? And I just set up... I must have been 30 or more listening sessions with long-time academic coaches, staff who worked with our program. Staff who had left for other roles. Listening to students. Listening to our partners and I really tried to just develop a thick understanding of different perspectives and then as you listen to these individual pieces you begin to see patterns. you begin to see connections between the things that people love about the program love about their role love about their experiences and those challenge points, uh, one of the things for example that I heard often again no surprise coming in in the middle of the pandemic

was “I feel like we're always in crisis mode. I feel like we're just moving from one urgent need to the next”. And so it became really important for me to give our team...uh... structured time to pause to reflect to, uh, celebrate the wins and also to have a moment to prioritize. And one of the things that I often tell students, friends, fellow civic activists, there's always more to do than can be done. That's something we have to accept and so then it becomes really important to prioritize where you can move things forward and again, kind of circling back to what we began the conversation with, what are you passionate about? What do you want to learn and where do you want to grow? Because then you can match that, you know, personal motivation with what maybe the organization needs or what our program needs...um...so that was definitely a crucial part of transitioning into this role. I'm also lucky, academic coaching is fundamentally a listening strategy and as so I've been able to learn a lot from other academic coaching programs across the country and to bring some great speakers and trainers to MC who also helped me to begin to foster that skill at a deeper level.

[Mike] You mentioned that you came into this role in the middle of the pandemic. What did you learn about yourself as a leader?

[Nik] Oh yeah, a lot, a lot...um...I learned that I am more comfortable taking calculated risks than I might have thought of myself five or ten years ago, um, I was in a role that I loved that I had been in for a really long time, that I felt was making a tremendous difference in students' lives and community members lives, and yet I knew because I was reflecting on my own values and my own goals and my own sort of sense of where I wanted to be in five or ten years and I had a good sense that for me the timeline would run out at some point. That I wanted to transition into a new challenge and I wanted to have that opportunity to...um...really grow in a focused mission. A focused goal and so...um...taking that risk and moving from, you know, a very comfortable role where I really knew my team and I knew our mission and I had done years of investing in partnerships and programs into a place that I knew was I was going to have to go into rooms and say I'm learning. Tell me what I need to know. But that's been...honestly, it's been such a joy for me because it has reignited again, we're educators, we work in higher ed, we like to learn but it's honestly reignited my desire to learn and challenge myself. And I've been doing more research and reading studies and just really kind of diving into what don't I know who can I learn from what do I need to develop in my understanding so that's been a fantastic place to be as a leader I think. Because you don't come into a room thinking you have all the answers. and it really helps me to pull together teams to ask thoughtful questions and to work alongside my team to try to tackle those questions. And so that's been for me a really...um...it's been a really rewarding experience to move into that place at this part in my career.

[Mike] It's important I think for people, especially leaders, to get outside of their comfort zone.

[Nik] I agree. I agree and I think that there's so many ways to do that, you know, it can be starting a new role like I did, but it can also be taking that moment to do a deep assessment of are we still aligned with our mission? Are we still achieving our goals? And where have we fallen short? Where are we making assumptions? Who aren't we hearing from...um, I have a couple of...um, academic coaches that I work with on our program who are champions of equity and they're often asking us who isn't served by this decision? Who's left out? Who's not being considered? And I love that challenge because even in that space it really pushes you outside your comfort zone to think about, you know, are we on the right path? Are there places where we need to grow? Are there things we need to stop doing because we have moved beyond their usefulness and it's time to be creative and to be willing to try something different?

[Mike] What are the barriers to... to that in...in this sense that you... you want to be creative, but there may be people within an organization that don't want to go down that path. So how do you as a leader manage your own expectations but also those of your team?

[Nik] Yeah I find that this is something I actually have to challenge myself to do. I have a pretty consistent...uh, personality trait where I often want to undertake change if I have a clear understanding of why. So I'm not a natural experimenter, right. I'm someone who wants to sort of identify the goal and then think about the possibilities and at times that can mean that I'm slower to embrace change or I'm not necessarily the first to suggest why don't we try it this way? Um...so one of the things that I think is helpful is for me to articulate that and to share that with...with my team, with students to say, you know, I'm not always willing to step out but I do believe that experimentation and learning from failure is crucial to really understanding whether or not something's working. And so, it's a challenge for me to say and to ask that question sort of openly and with others to say, you know, why do we still do it this way and what might be fun or interesting or engaging for us to try? The other thing that I do and I believe this all the way going back to my days in student life is that you need different people on your team. You cannot have six people who are all, you know, type A traditionalists who want to follow the policy as laid out. They're so important for certain situations and certain needs but then you have to have that other person who's just saying can't we do it differently this time? We've been doing it this way and I want to try something different, or someone who can say this is urgent and it's not working and we're not necessarily going to know if it's going to work but we know it won't work if we do what we did before, so we have to try something. We need to take that risk. So I'm a big believer in, um, intentionally assembling different experiences, perspectives, strengths, and really having that conversation transparently and having thick productive debate, um, and then just putting a time limit on it right? Just saying okay we're gonna... we're gonna think about this for three weeks and then we're gonna make a plan and we're gonna make a plan B and we're gonna move forward because if it's 70% there we've got enough to get started and then we'll measure, then we'll assess, we'll change course if we need to.

[Mike] I...I like the idea of teams not all being similar. I... I don't want a team of all Mikes, you know, I can hardly at times deal with my own self much less a team of me. And I... I just think it's important as you said to assemble a group of... of like-minded people from a mission standpoint but who are going to attack it from a different vantage point, uh, I've... I've often said that I would love to do some sort of survey as part of the hiring process, you know, some sort of disk inventory or some other type of inventory to determine what type of individual is coming to the team because I don't want as... as I mentioned all of the same type of individuals, um, you need that variety but that scares a lot of... of leaders too, to have that variety.

[Nik] Yeah, yeah. I think that it does take a certain degree of confidence in the fact that you do have strengths and you're also bringing something to the team and it's not up to you to fill every gap or overcome every challenge simply by individually getting better at everything, right? Particularly in an environment like ours, we do have to work together to achieve our mission. It's a huge mission and I like what you said about, um, you bring people together who are like-minded about the mission, right? They're like-minded about where we're trying to go and that is something that I do a lot with...with our team I bring us back to our core mission and one of the early projects I undertook was helping us to reflect on the origins of our program and how we were still connected to our fundamental mission to provide student success strategies particularly for students who are underrepresented and historically marginalized within higher education and one of the great outcomes of leading those conversations those mission... mission-driven reflections was that people were able to both articulate, um, their different perspectives, but then we found this common connection, right? I look at my work this way, this is what I bring to the table and this is how I believe I'm supporting the mission of the Achieving the Promise Academy and Montgomery College. And I think that that's a wonderful way to help people also to...um, develop a lot of professional empathy for people who don't see things the same way as them. Who don't move at the same pace as them. Who ask different questions and have different even and sometimes values right some of us are more focused on the one-to-one individual student in front of us some of us are more systems thinkers and we're looking across an entire program and there's value in having both of those perspectives in almost any conversation. But I think that the core needs to be that we come together around that mission and if you're not behind the mission yet, doing that work to understand why don't you feel on board with who we are as Montgomery College and who our students are now, and can you get on board. How can I help you get on board? How can we help you connect again to this mission, um, or if this isn't the right place for you finding the right place for you.

[Mike] So true...so true. As we wrap up...uh...when you look at your own leadership journey and... and growth, what are the growth points for you moving forward as a leader?

[Nik] Yeah they've come in a lot of different places. I've had a few supervisors who have really challenged me. Who have reflected back on me questions about what I want to

do. Where I want to go. I'm deeply grateful for them for being willing to ask that question even if it meant my answer was I don't know if I want to stay here. That's the scary thing, we...right, we don't want to lose staff, you go through the hiring process, um, but I'm deeply grateful to those people who said okay, so how can I help you get to where you want to go next? And that's been a huge growth moment for me. Another has been...um, some students. Sometimes students will just...I love that you mentioned four and five-year-olds who can ask these questions that just totally shift your worldview in a minute...um, and I've had students asking those questions. They've just asked me why do we do it this way? Why does that have to be done or couldn't you do it this way? Or this doesn't help me...um, we recently had a student who told us that a part of our tuition assistance application process was stressing him out. He said this is so stressful for me and I've been meditating on that for the past week. Because here's this thing that we think of as a great support gap assistance that helps you to pay your tuition and this student has just cut right to like but the way you ask me to do this is really stressful for me. and so it's got me thinking about hmm I wonder where that comes from and I wonder what our role is in that so those... those moments of growth for me have come from the... the people who support me as a supervisor and the people I'm serving, um, and then the last thing I'll say is that honestly from... from people in different parts of the college, um, I have just been so thankful that my roles have taken me outside of my department and I've gotten to collaborate with different disciplines and different units like ELITE and you have so many tremendous professionals that work to support professional development and training at the college. I'm constantly learning. I'm constantly challenged by how other people do our work. In a good way. In a way that makes me question my assumptions and look for ways to grow. So that's been honestly a wonderful part about being an employee at Montgomery College.

[Mike] Nik this has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you, I've learned a lot.

[Nik] Thanks Dr. Mills. I always appreciate it and thanks for all you do to support folks here at MC.

[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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