

MC Forward Podcast
Emma Wilson
Transcript

[♪ ♪ ♪]

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 Emma Wilson, Program Administrator, for the Adult ESOL and Literacy Grant program in WDCE. Emma, thank you for joining me.

EMMA

Thank you for having me, Michael. My pleasure.

MIKE

Tell me a little bit about your program as we delve into that and how it relates to the concepts of leadership? So tell me a little bit about the AELG program.

EMMA

Thank you. So the ALG program is funded by the Maryland Department of Labor and the county contribution from the college report to provide Adult Literacy and English Literacy to Montgomery County residents, actually to the state residents, now that we are in the remote environment. We serve around 5,000 students, individual students enrollments a year. We are a team of 13 to 15 individuals here in Westfield. We are going to be relocated to Mannakee. We're looking forward to being part of being closer to the action on campus.

MIKE

You had told me earlier that many of your staff members are immigrants themselves and truly believe in what they do because they've been there.

EMMA

Yes. So I am very fortunate to work with a very diverse group of individuals. And I will say that we have folks that, here, that are working with us that were part of the ALG program. I can see from Sonia Duenas who I met one day going to visit the site, and she said I want to work in your program. And I said, well, apply. And she applied, and with her little English, she was able to actually get the Data Entry job. I can think of Galina Lewinskaya and Qi Wan that were part of the refugee program and then they became part involved in our ESOL classes, in the English classes. They came, and they have done a phenomenal work with the data entry, and they bring their experience as with the finance background into the program to support us with the finance reporting. I can think of Antonio Vidal who is our Data Manager Engineer by training, and it just uses his

skills to do the analytics in the program. Rabia Wan, our program coordinator for ABE program has that sense of working with the difficult population. I mean this is just a few of these two, of the folks here in ALG that are immigrants and that have come in and brought up so much freshness to the program. We strongly believe in serving and working with the population that we're serving, and...and I think that that shows in the work that they are doing.

MIKE

You mentioned earlier that you're very much a family. And it... I can hear the passion in your voice, but as we know, family dynamics often take place within that space. How do you lead a family?

EMMA

Uh, yeah, you know, kind of funny. Yes, sometimes, I think like, uh, I am... [Laughs] I get home and my husband says, so, how are the kids today? And I'm like, they did fine. But yes, sometimes there are things that happen and we have to mediate, we have to find the middle ground, we have to identify where we are common... we have the common ground and recognize that we're all working for the same goal. We are working to support each other here at the end of the day. And... and we are working to make sure that we are doing our job and that we're doing it doing it efficiently. So you just have to find the middle ground and try to negotiate with them and try to come up to an understanding, and yes, sometimes we have had very interesting, and I will say heated or conversations, but those help us grow. And at the end of the day, we always come back and say, oh, yes, you know what I know I kind of went over the limit with my comments on here, but please accept my apologies. And, here, you're my friend, and I cannot do my work without you. And it has happened, and I know it will continue to happen. Here, we have been... we have staff that has been with the program for 16 years, 14 years. And if they have not quit, that means that they really enjoy being here.

MIKE

What kind of traits do you need to have as a leader of such a dynamic group?

EMMA

I think, um, a lot of flexibility. The ability to deal with ambiguity... ambiguity many times. Um, I think that, um, a strong sense of believing in the individuals because that's.... that's one of the things that I do. I believe on... on the work that they are doing. I believe on each one of them as individuals, as persons. And I recognize the work that they do even when sometimes it's like, oh, yes, I know. But, um, I don't recognize them officially or publicly, but I do know that they are so essential to what we're doing.

MIKE

You'd mention that you're in the process of moving from Westfield to Mannakee. By the time this airs, you will have been in in Mannakee, I believe. What kind of leadership is

necessary when you're working away from the main campuses, uh, to try to... to make individuals feel connected to the College?

EMMA

I think that having or giving them or encouraging them to participate as much impossible and professional development is one thing. Keeping them engaged with the communications that are coming from the College. Making sure that they are participating or attending all the staff meetings because that's when we review things that are happening at the College and what we're doing internally. Just trying to make sure that the resources of Montgomery College are brought up on to Westfield like reaching out to the professional development folks to say, hey, guys, we're here in Westfield. Do you want to come? We're here. We're 17. We will benefit from... from your conversation here in Westfield. Um, that is going to stop now that we're going to be in Rockville, but it will be more easy. It will be easier for all of us to be more... more engaged, more readily engaged with activities over there on campus. We're looking forward to the move. We're also fearful of the move because we have been in a way shelter over here in Westfield, and it's going to be... it's going to present a new different set of challenges being on campus for us.

MIKE

As a result of the pandemic, the... how's the leadership that you've had to... to use changed in dealing with the programs and the population that you deal with?

EMMA

So, we have here at the ALG a very well... a very structured program. We have a strong foundation. We have policies and procedures that have been established for many years. We did have to revise them, our intake processes had to be revised to meet the needs of the students where they were at the same time as we met the requirements of our grant. Because we're a grant, we have to comply. So, we had to adjust our intake processes, and the staff is very smart. And we were able to come out with alternatives to provide the services remotely to schedule and manage a crazy testing schedule for the students, so the students could be there in person or remotely, and they could participate in classes. We have adjusted our instructional practices. We train our teachers. Many of them had the same reaction as the students as, I'm going what? And what is remote? And... and what is soon? And, uh, how do I share screens? So, we have a fantastic group of trainers, [inaudible] and Annie Welch that put together training that had open sessions with the teachers that came in and put in brilliant speakers and people and identify faculty that were strong enough to share with others and train others. So, um, we were able to successfully navigate in two weeks the remote environment and have most of our teachers train. And... and I will say the teachers have done remarkably. I mean even they're putting together a professional development conference in the spring, they did it remotely, and they were amazing. I was, wow, blown away by how well they had adjusted to working and presenting via Zoom. And it

certainly set up a very high bar for the staff here in the office so we can do better for all of them.

MIKE

Do you see yourself ever as an organization, as a unit sliding back to where we were pre-pandemic because it sounds like you've modified your practices, put in some efficiencies that have bettered your unit?

EMMA

10:27

Yeah, I don't see us going back a hundred percent in person. We do have a group of students that we have not been able to serve during the pandemic. The ones that have a hard time with the access to computers, literacy skills are very low. Their English skills are very low. So, it's very difficult for them to participate, to sign up for the... for the classes online. So, we will go back and serve those students and the lower level learners, but we certainly have a very strong, now, I think it's a very strong online offering. And we'll be expanding on that as we... as we go on. We're looking at having just a remote or... or a distance learning person that can help those teachers and those students just function and create a more robust online classroom environment for the literacy learners. We will continue... we will strengthen our in-person classes as we are able to go back into the classroom, but I think that having the remote and having the per-- in person, and maybe a kind of blended, also flipped classroom instructional will also benefit our population and certainly would allow the program to expand and our teachers to grow because they need those additional skills to function in those classrooms.

MIKE

As you look at your own leadership traits, one of the things that jumps out at me is innovation. Do you see yourself as an innovative leader?

EMMA

I see myself as a listener of a very innovative team. The team that I work with is just amazing. They are very creative. They are very educated, and they go in and they find ways to do things. So, when we have challenges, when we face problems, there is somebody always in the team that says, oh, I know this. Oh, I've heard of this. I'm gonna find more about this. Oh, what about if we do this because I was in this presentation and they were doing this? So, I don't see myself as the innovator. I see myself as the enabler. The one that says, okay, I like that. How can we do it? What do we need? And I think my role as the administrator of the grant has been to make sure that I secure the resources so the team members can do their job regardless if it is the technology, if it is additional training opportunities, if it is time for them to go and... and grow and dig into the resources that they need, whatever they need. That's my role to enable them to do better of what they're doing.

MIKE

So, a leader doesn't have to know everything about all the details, right? A leader can't know all those details.

EMMA

No, no. And I don't know everything. I... I... I just have very smart people and that's what I know, that I have a team that is phenomenal, that is smart, that can do a lot of things. And my role is to help them do what they need to do.

MIKE

Have you always viewed yourself as a leader in that format? Someone who... who listens to the team. Or has that been an evolution for you?

EMMA

No, I think that has been an evolution. Um, I have... I think that my background is in education, and then I grew up in Mexico. I trained in Mexico, and when I came to the United States, I had this concept of very structured classroom, very, um, methodical. A lot of it has transfer... been methodical is something that I have kept in, but I think that being flexible is something that I have learned, being more an enabler is something that I have learned through the years, and through just learning to adjust, um, to a new society, to a new culture, to in your working environment. If you don't adjust, if you don't grow with, if you don't modify your behaviors in the environment, you are... you cannot help... you cannot do what you need to do to help others, which is what I want to do. So, um, no, I never seen myself as a leader. Um, I see myself almost a learner, as a listener, as somebody that grows with... with the rest of the team. And I like to participate. I like to go in and do the testing myself. I like to do a professional developments. I like to be behind the fence, if you want to call it. I want to be with the team. I don't want to be in the leadership pieces. I don't want to be doing teleporting. I had to do it because it's my job, but I enjoy more being with the team.

MIKE

That growth that you talked about. That... that listening. Is that something you continue to work on?

EMMA

Definitely, because I'm not a very good listener. I don't think I'm a very good listener, and sometimes I listen or... or I will say I will... I hear and... and I still need the time to go back and say, okay, so what is this person really trying to tell me? I don't get it. Because it is more than just the person telling me... telling me this is what we need to do, is more... I need this so this work can be done. And sometimes we miss that piece. Um, having the ability to listen, it is something that we continue to grow. And... and I think that we all need to continue to develop that skill. We hear it and yeah, yeah, that's fine, but listen and listen carefully. Listen with intent to what the person really needs, that's... that's a little bit more deep, more complicated. And it takes time and—

MIKE

How do leaders develop their skills to... to listen with intent?

EMMA

Uh, to tell the truth, I don't know Michael. I think it's just trial and error trying to literally try an error and coming back and asking and coming back. And I think that just coming back and asking the person, okay, so I'm missing this. Tell me, I'm not understanding. Let's just explain to me again and just continue... continuing to ask questions. Um, if we really truly care for what the person is doing, if we truly care for the individual that is working with us, we come back and ask the questions. And, um, I think that listening is part of that skill, that never stops developing, that you continue have to... continue to do it every time. And we're not perfect, and we will continue to not listen, but we are listening. We are here, and we're trying our best to... to support each other, to support that team member that needs... that is telling me something. Um.

MIKE

When we ask a lot of questions or go back to an individual and say, look, I... I'm not following what you're saying, you know. I need time to process. That requires us to show our vulnerabilities. That's hard for a lot of leaders.

EMMA

Well, yes, and I think that I am fortunate that I work with folks that, um, understand that that's who we are. We're very comfortable here in Westfield, and I think that we have developed that sense of camaraderie, that sense of family, if you want to call it. Well, we'd be calling a family. But, um, yes, I'm not afraid of saying, I don't get it. I don't understand. I don't know. I'm not afraid of saying, oh, I need time to think about this. Well, let me think about this. Or, I'm not afraid of saying, I just don't get you, because that's part of accepting that we are still growing. And that gives me the ability to come back and say, okay, explain that to me again. Um, you told me that you're planning on doing this, but how is that going to impact you? How is that going to impact me? How it's going to impact the other folks in the team? I... I'm missing a piece. I need you to think of that. And it also enables the rest of the team to see the different pieces of the activity that we are doing. So, if I have a plan and I think it's going to work well, and I have a deadline to complete it, there's... Something is going to go wrong all the time and we need... need to think and have a plan a, b, and c, because something is going to happen.

MIKE

Emma, this concept of vulnerable leadership is... is intriguing. Now, I'm sure your team members appreciate your saying to them, look, I'm vulnerable. I don't know. You help... help enlighten me and—

EMMA

I don't tell them, I don't tell them, Michael. [Laughs]

MIKE

But they see it.

EMMA

Yeah, you know. I think that I try to present this front of I'm strong, but I'm not and, um, Simon Lea, I remember. He had a group of students that were working, doing... they were doing their social service up in the Resource Center, and they were doing work, and he told them, you better get that done and stop talking because Ms. Wilson is going to come and she's going to see they're not doing the work and she's going to get mad. And I didn't know this because... Oh, and I found out about this because one of the kids came over to deliver something that Simon was sending me. He said, Mr. Lea said and he said that I better get this to you or you're gonna get mad. And I'm like, oh, my god. [Laughs] What do they think of me? [Laughs] That I'm some kind of sergeant, some kind of... Okay, so I just look at the kid and I said, okay, just put it on my desk. I'll care of it later. And then, I called Simon says, what are you scaring the kids for? And he goes, well... [Laughs]. Um, I think that the team sees me as sometimes strong, sometimes with unrealistic expectations, sometimes very strong-headed, sometimes very, um, unflexible. But on the same time, they know that, um, they can come and talk to me and say, okay, listen to this. And I will listen. Um, I can think of Alex Scaling, that he will come, and he's our Coordinator for ESL, and he will come and he will tell me something and I'll just say, Alex, no, that's not going to work. So, he comes back later on and he said, okay, listen to this. What about this? What about this? And when I'm listening to him, I'm thinking, oh, he had really... really has thought this through. He knows why he needs this, and he has identified how it's gonna work, so I better back him up on this one. And that's my job, and say, okay, yes, I see what you're doing. I see where you're going. Let's do this. Um, it's going to impact... this is going to impact these people, these people, these people. How you're going to do that? How we're gonna handle that? And I think that that's part of the role of the leader to say, okay, yes, that's a great idea, but let's solve these situations before they come to us and how it is gonna impact the rest of the team.

MIKE

Emma, this has been a fascinating conversation. I... i've absolutely enjoyed the time we've been able to spend together. You guys do great work at Westfield, soon to be Mannakee, with the AELG Program. Thanks for joining me.

EMMA

No, thank you for inviting me and i will look forward to seeing you over there in Mannakee one of these days.

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.