

A Conversation with Dr. Kevin McDonald Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT Professional Development Podcast Series. I'm your host, Luke Auburn. Our guest today is Dr. Kevin McDonald, RIT's Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion. He joined the university in 2010 after serving as Vice President for Equity and Inclusion at Virginia Polytechnic Institute State University in Plattsburg Virginia. We'll discuss the Office for Diversity and Inclusion's professional development efforts and his advice for faculty and staff. Dr. McDonald, thank you for having me.

Dr. McDonald: Oh, sure. It's my pleasure.

Luke Auburn: RIT's strategic plan states that RIT will become a model of inclusive excellence for all faculty and staff in the areas of professional development and promotion. How can RIT accomplish this in your eyes, and what do you expect from managers to foster such an environment?

Dr. McDonald: Well, I think it's going to be important for RIT to focus on career pathing for our faculty and staff. For staff who, you know, want to and maybe have the...have the ability to see the forest from the trees, if you will, and really want to hone in on their own career aspirations, but need some help in identifying the various career paths that may be available to them at the university. I think that's going to be important. For faculty, both through the academic ranks and also for those who might be interested in administration, I think it's valuable to have an idea of what opportunities are out there. And I think it's going to be important for managers to really foster supportive environments that encourage people to explore their career aspirations. So I think that's going to be important.

The other thing that's going to be important is to create opportunities for bench strength, succession planning, and also with the focus on increasing the compositional diversity within our managers and our leaders. So, I think RIT has a wonderful opportunity ahead of it, but if we can accomplish that we will ultimately be a national model.

Luke Auburn: What programs has the Office for Diversity and Inclusion created to help faculty and staff at RIT develop themselves professionally?

Dr. McDonald: Well, I think first and foremost Michael D'Arcangelo, who is our Director of Diversity in Education, has done a wonderful job in creating a certificate--diversity certificate program through our Center for Professional Development and I--I applaud him for those efforts. He has also worked with our faculty on search and selection, educational opportunities for search committees that I think has been helpful, at least in kind of edifying search committees on the importance of diversity in the link that places in our search and selection processes.

But by and large I think we operate as a collaborative kind of supportive partner for those units that are also engaged in work so there is an AALANA faculty advisory committee, really focused on mentoring for our junior faculty. So we play a role with that. We do provide what we call our inclusive excellence grants, which support faculty engaged in research with diversity implications. So--so we have some our own programmatic offerings, but by and large we--we try to serve as a supportive partner for those that are interested any way that we can.

Luke Auburn: So you're known as a leader who highly values professional development. Can you talk about why it's important personally to you and how you supported your team?

Dr. McDonald: I think I was fortunate to have supportive leaders who provided me with opportunities and the latitude to seek out professional development opportunities or to create some within structures that existed wherever I worked, and so I kind of have had this kind of pay it forward mentality and I think it's important to invest in your team. And invest your team members. I think gone are the days when you are trying to expect the level of loyalty no matter

what type of environment you put out there for them. I think it's important to really create the opportunity for people to grow, and spread their wings, and potentially fly.

But by and large what I have found is that people are...kind of become entrenched in their commitment to the organization because of the amount of investment that you've put into them. So--so I think it--I just think it's important and--and even if the employees grow and go, I--I had a mentor that told me one time that, you know, one of the biggest compliments that he thinks that we could of given him was to have a little piece of him all over the nation. Right? So--so I've kind of taken it to heart and--and if we can invest in employees that stay and enhance our environment, while they're here, great. But if they ultimately utilize investment to grow and go somewhere else, then kudos to RIT for what it's been able to do.

Luke Auburn: Looking back on your career, you talked about this briefly. What helped you and what advice can you provide to those who are looking to advance professionally?

Dr. McDonald: Yeah, I had the wonderful opportunity of presenting at a young professionals conference on Friday, and it was great because it allowed me to kind of reflect again on my own career, and one I think it's important to be methodical about your career. You can be able to connect the dots so that when you're talking about where you've been, you can talk about why you've been there and--and how each move may be connected to the next. I think that's important. Understanding the value of relationships, so I've--I've shared that, you know, your certifications, your degrees, any pedigree from past institutions or organizations that you've worked for, that's great, and that ultimately will get you looked at and potentially get you in the door, but your ability to develop and forge, maintain strong relationships with community members at all levels is what really keeps you there. So I think that's important.

I think understanding the importance of interpersonal communication skills. I think is--is...paramount. And so a lot of things can be taught, but the interpersonal communication skills, you kind of know if people have that or they often don't. And so just being able to invest and understand the importance of that. I just think gone are the days where people only look at your productivity and--and don't care about the number of bodies you may leave in the wake,

right, to accomplish your task. I think people are important and you have to value them. And so understanding...that would be two more things. With this second to last thing is that I think particularly for young professionals, they have--they're just brimming with so much drive, determination, excitement, to make a difference that sometimes they will cut their time short at an organization and will move onto the next one. And so I would say, you know, just to be methodical about that. You know, I think they should definitely, and I live by the old--my own motto of sometimes you have to go to grow, but I have also lived by this motto of I want to stay at each institution at least one day longer than I stayed at the last one. Right? And so, to just build a career path that not only makes sense, but has some semblance of--of stick-to-itiveness, if that makes any sense. And--and I think that will build the longevity.

And then lastly I would say to chase the opportunity and not to chase, necessarily the money. And I think often times the money may come, but if you can just chase really what--a really good opportunity that speaks to your passions and your visions with regard to your areas of responsibility or expertise, I think oftentimes you will be much more satiated than if you chased a payday.

Luke Auburn: And looking ahead to the future, what skills do you see becoming increasingly important to higher education professionals as the field transforms?

Dr. McDonald: I think...I do think relationship building...skills will be one that will stand the test of time. I just think that you need those in this day and age, and I think any career ascension that I've benefitted from has been directly attributed to my ability to get along with people. I--I think I also said this at this conference, that, you know, I'm a consensus builder, not a hell raiser. And I think, again, gone are the days when you could do it in the reverse. So I think someone who really has the ability to bring people together, but still in no way, shape, or form lessens their ability to have a transformational impact, I think that's going to be key. And then lastly, I would say that someone who is driven to kind of try to stay on the cutting edge of stuff. You know, and--and to continue to be creative and innovative and just because you've reached new heights in your career, not to become complacent and satiated enough that it doesn't drive you to look for new opportunities to have a transformational impact wherever you are.

Luke Auburn: Dr. McDonald, it's been a pleasure. Thank you very much for your time. That concludes another edition of the RIT Professional Development Podcast Series. For more information on how you can develop your career, visit rit.edu/cpd.