EPISODE 03

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:05] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders; leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[EPISODE]

[00:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. Welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders Podcast, where we explore people who've made some decisions in their lives about leading in gnarly and complicated messy worlds to have impact.

Today's a special day for me, because I get to have a conversation with a friend that I met, Kate, I'm going to say probably 10, 11 years ago now, it seems like, at Oxford University. Kate Cooper is my friend, who's joining us. She walked into a alumni gathering that we were having to educate us. She held us spellbound. She made us work. We did some scenario planning work at the heel of Raphael Ramirez. She's been an influential voice in my head ever since.

The first thing I learned from her is how easy it was to publish a book, because all she did was send out an email to 80 people and they wrote the book for, but she changed the world around with it. The book is called *The New Optimist: Science View of Tomorrow*. That book's been out for a little while, Kate. You're probably due for another book here.

Kate comes from Birmingham. She works on the board for the Birmingham Food Council. The Food Council's mission is we aim for the people of Birmingham to enjoy safe, tasty, healthy meals and eat them in good company. I want to talk about the good company part here before we get done, Kate. I find her a remarkable woman. She tells me she's not a leader. We'll dig into that a little bit. She's got her own version of what she does, but let's let Kate tell the stories. Kate, welcome to The Swamp. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:47] KC: Nice to be here.

[00:01:49] RT: I want you to begin where you want to begin on your journey. Why don't you start by telling us a little bit of your story, your background, wherever you want to begin, and we will go wherever you want to go, and we'll also probably chase down some loose ends that you don't think are important, but may be actually, the reason people are joining this call. Where do you want to begin? What's your story?

[00:02:10] KC: Well, it's a long one, because I'm an old woman. I'm a lippie grandmother. I have said, I actually told you that I'm a lippie grandmother. I suppose, you mentioned the New Optimist. I think that changed my life. It was in 2008 when I started that, in the end of 2008. I had been ill with viral encephalitis before then. I've spent about 15 months sitting in an armchair, not reading a newspaper.

I knew that I needed to – I couldn't do the previous job I had, which was a consultant, darting everywhere. It was my 60th birthday at the end of 2008. I decided to take – we have a state pension here in the UK and university pension, because I'd spent some time in the university. That gave me enough to live off. It didn't give me enough to buy a house, or a car, or that, but it gave me enough just to pay all the bills and feed myself and that stuff.

That was enormously liberating. I thought, "Well, what do I really want to do?" I decided that I wanted to put science and scientists on the map here in my home city of Birmingham, which is almost literally, in the middle of the United Kingdom, or in the middle of England. I thought, "Well, one of the ways I can do that is asking the simple question, what are you optimistic about?" Publish whatever it is they reply.

To be honest with you, I didn't think it would be much for success. As you say, I emailed a few scientists around. I just didn't realize how many would respond. Actually, over 90 responded. Two-thirds of them were professors and one even the Vice Chancellor. I have a success on my hands. The problem with the success, you actually got to do something. Have it not been a success, I could have just thought, "Oh, I'll go on to something else."

I published the book, and I had set out to publish it at the British Science Festival, which was coming to Birmingham, UK for the first time in 2010. We sold about three and a half thousand

copies. You can buy it on remainder if you want it, on Amazon. We sold about three, three and a half thousand copies, which is respectable. Reasonably respectable. Yeah, brave even on it.

Then I realized when I'd done that, I also published a Kindle, which was a much smaller thing, about challenging cancer, because some of the scientists were involved with cancer. It really did make a difference in the city in the sense that it did put science and scientists on the map in the city. Suddenly, people realize that we have this enormous wealth of experience in science and particularly, medicine. That, I do think made a difference to the city. Then, what happened is that I realized that I actually didn't want to be a publisher, because being a publisher is actually quite boring.

When you're recovering from encephalitis, it's actually quite good, because it's very repetitive, boring administrative work. It was very good for my brain, but it was less good for my imagination. Then I thought, well, how can I use this brain power that I've unleashed? Because most people who work in a university, they do their research, and they don't – Of course, they know it can be applied, but they don't really know how. That was when I decided to do a scenarios program. That was in 2011.

[00:05:43] RT: Hang on, Kate. You raise a question, how do I use this stuff? How do I use my imagination? How did you get from there to scenarios?

[00:05:55] KC: Well, because to me, the really big problems that the world are facing, and I realized this in 2011, the climate change, the resource depletion, there are population pressures. Now the problem with getting engaged with any of those things is that they are very, very big. Human beings don't really – We can manage the weather, but we can't manage climate. They're big in terms of geography and time. Resource depletion, I mean, you don't actually see that. It's not something you can latch hold on, but it matters. Think of water. Think of nutrients in the soil. Think of land.

That was what I really wanted to do is to contribute to the thinking, using the brain power in the city and surrounding areas to deal with these huge problems. The reason I chose food as a –Basically, you run the scenarios, you've got to have a timeframe, you've got to have a geography, you've got to have a topic. To me, the timeframe, usually in scenario planning is

about 20 years. I didn't think that was quite long enough, because you would get scientists thinking about peer pressure and things like that.

I took it out to 2050, and I just thought, well, scientists aren't really going to – if they make assertions about what happened in 2050, they're not going to be held up for ridicule by their peers. I wanted their expert perspective on what was going to be happening by 2050. I chose Birmingham, because it has a local council. It has a decision-making forum. It's local government, so I knew that I could influence decision-making. I didn't choose the United Kingdom. There's no way even a lippie grandmother can influence national government, and that she lives in London, and is more important than I am.

I chose food as the topic, because if you look at food, you are also looking at climate change, resource depletion and population pressures. That's the reason why I set up scenarios program. What you should really do if you run the scenarios program is take a group of people through a process. Well, there was absolutely no way I could take a group of people through that process, because they wouldn't give me the time. All I could do was to take different groups of people for a short time. Basically, to suck out information in their heads, kind of thing. Think an awful lot about it and reiterate it back to different groups.

I've got all sorts of ideas about their ideas would be synthesized in a relationship with lots of other ideas. That's how I managed that. Then I found it quite hard to – and that one of the things I realized – No, no. Let me go back a bit. Then what happened after I did the scenario is in effect, you need to do a – you should really do a fictional version of the future. I wondered how to do that. What I did in effect was that I decided I would commission a play. I know. It sounds a bit bizarre, but I did.

Then, I got the Arts Council England to fund it. They were so surprised to get an application for an art project from an organization called Science Forward Limited, which was the limited company I was working on to get through this. Even more surprised was the theatre director, when I said to him, “Look, you can do what you like. You've just got to do this scenario. Don't get it wrong. God will vet it in terms of content, but I won't vetted in terms of what you want to do.” He said, “Well, what? You mean, I can do anything?” I said, “Well, yes. We've got this

money. The base case that I have is that I stand up in front of an audience, and I read out the report I've written. You must be able to do something more imaginative than that."

[00:09:55] RT: I'm thinking, you might be the only person on the face of the earth who's actually turned scenarios into a play, a musical.

[00:10:02] KC: This wasn't a musical, but we did have a musician. As a result of the scenarios, then bizarrely, we had what was called the horse meat scandal here, which is when a lot of horse meat entered into the human food chain, and everyone got terribly worried about it, and quite right, too. They should have done. That was when I commissioned a musical about food crime, because I just thought, no one's going to read the government report. We were involved on the government report, because the guy, Professor Chris Elliott, from Queen's University, Belfast was put in charge of this government report.

I'm not quite sure why he talked to me, but he did talk to me. I think, he thought – I met him down in London for the first time. I asked him. The first question I asked him is, how much time have you got? He said, "Oh, a couple of hours," which astonished me, given the fact that he was terribly important. Then I thought, "Oh, hang on a minute. He's wasting time with me, before his flight back to Belfast. Well, fair enough." After about, I don't know, 10 minutes conversation, I said to him, "You can talk to scientists as easily as I can. More easily than I can. You're a professor after all. You can ring up anybody, and they'll listen to you. I have to persuade them to listen to me."

Then he turned to me and he said, "Do you know the decision makers in Birmingham?" Birmingham, my home city. I said, "Well, of course, I do. It's quite a small city. It's only 1.2 million of us, I think, there are now. There was about 1.1 million then. "Of course, I do. If I don't know them, I'll know somebody who knows them." Then he said to me, "What we want is a scenario, a best-case scenario of how a city can tackle food crime. Would you be able to organize that?" I said, "Oh, yes. Of course, I could," thinking furiously, how the heck do I do that?

You do it, of course, by putting people together in a room, and working through some scenarios. The trick is to choose the right people. By that, it's not the individuals. It's that you

need somebody who understands food safety. You need somebody who understands environmental health. You need somebody from the police force. You need victims of food crime, so you need poor people who are disproportionately affected. We got people in from a place for homeless young people and got them to talk.

Of course, the professor was far more interested in talking to a homeless child. Well, homeless, 16 18-year-old, than he was talking to, shall we say, the head of food quality in a large company. Because he can speak to the head of food quality in a large company any day, but he can't talk to a kid who was suffering this.

We had probably 50 people in the room. I had two facilitators. I have somebody else doing video interviews. We've recorded everything with permission, obviously, and got people to transcribe them. Then three of us sat down and thought an awful lot about what we'd heard, and came up with the best-case scenario. Indeed, what was interesting about that is when the government report appeared, the Elliot review, it's called, we didn't get the last word. We got the last two and a half pages of the report, which I thought was pretty neat.

As a result of doing those food scenarios, then I was asked – No, actually, I was asked before the food crime, before Chris Elliot from the food crime. I was asked by the city's then, consultant dietitian, if I would set up the Birmingham Food Council as an independent voice. To which I said, yes. I think, the advantage of me being in charge of it, and setting it up, I mean, obviously, I brought people in to do it. I've got a legal framework and all that stuff, is that I'm not a foodie. I have a huge appetite, as you may remember, but I'm not a foodie. If somebody will cook a meal for me, thank you very much. I'll eat it. I'd far rather they cooked it than I cooked it. I don't have any isms.

I just have a very healthy appetite, and I have a very healthy diet. I don't care very much about food. I think, people who care very much about something aren't necessarily the right people to run it, because they can't see the wood for the trees, kind of thing. Well, the Birmingham Food Council, because I don't have any isms. I don't have any ideas about – I don't have awesome should about the food system, or what you and I should eat. Well, I've got a few now, I'll have to say.

[00:14:44] RT: Let me ask you though, because you started this piece by saying it changed your life. What changed? When you look at it, what changed?

[00:14:57] KC: I have an income. What changed in 2008, I have an income. I could do what I liked.

[00:15:02] RT: Right. You said, the book, doing the book also changed something.

[00:15:08] KC: Yes. I don't know. I've constantly reinvented myself. It was no big deal that it changed me. I expect to be changed by the things I do. I don't know. I mean, there's plenty of other things in my life before I've changed me. Everybody is the product of lots of different things. I think, what's liberated me since December 2008, to my 60th birthday, is that suddenly, I no longer had to earn a living. I no longer had dependents to look after. That's an expense that and time – it's a lot of time you have to spend. I felt enormously liberated then. Enormously liberated. I could do whatever I liked. Nothing. I could do nothing if I want to. I can't imagine that happening.

[00:16:05] RT: You've thrown this out a couple times, and you certainly passed it on to me in our email exchange in advance of setting this up that me telling you what 10,000 Swap Leaders was the title, to which you've reminded me several times, that you don't think yourself as a leader, so we'll come back to that. What you do call yourself is, is a lippie grandmother. Let's start with lippie grandmother as a capacity that people might want to emulate, because it's serving you well. When you say that, that means something to you as a way of action. What is that all about for you?

[00:16:42] KC: I think, it's speaking my mind and speaking truth to power. I think, that's the two things. I think, it's very difficult in today's world to speak truth to power, because people, it comes back to, they don't feel they can. Indeed, there's a price to pay for it. There's a price to pay for it. I mean, you can get sacked, or you can get marginalized, or you can – In some ways, it's quite a lonely furrow, if you speak truth to power. It sometimes needs to happen.

[00:17:18] RT: Would you mind? Have you been hurt?

[00:17:20] KC: I've been hurt?

[00:17:23] RT: Speaking truth hurts. You can get hurt speaking truth to power. Have you had experiences of being marginalized, or hurt?

[00:17:29] KC: Yes, of course. I've certainly lost. When I was earning money, I've lost money, because of speaking truth to power. As a consultant, I was sacked to corporates, I was sacked three times, reinstated twice. The third one was corrupt, and I just assumed that they would be pleased, "Oh, thank goodness. We've heard about that." No, no, no. This is the mandate commissioner was corrupt, too. Yes, I think you can lose out.

With the Food Council, I find that quite difficult at the moment, because I think, it's quite hard to, if you challenge the status quo, which is what we do, is that it's quite – If we were saying nice things, like we wanted to run cookery classes, or something like that, we would get lots of money. To me, that's why do that? Lots of other people do that. I think, one of the things that I do and I always have done, and sometimes a tremendous cost, is to try and do stuff that other people aren't doing.

Because, well, if you look at the food system, we don't do anything on nutrition. Well, we do a bit on nutrition. I'd tell a lie – That's not entirely true. We do challenge corporates who produce what we call the drug foods, because we think foods that contain – That's a long story, but there's a thing in the UK tax system, which identifies companies that make products that are very low, have very low nutritional value, but high in sugar, caffeine, chocolate, or alcohol, or are made to be deliberately Moorish, like savory snacks.

If you challenge the people who make and promote them, in the same way that people who challenge the tobacco companies in the 1950s, had enormous problems. Challenging the status quo is a lonely furrow. Often, you feel as though, you're not getting anywhere. I think, tenacity is a good idea and understanding, too, that sometimes, not often, you have no idea of the effect you're going to have, I think in terms of food safety and food assurance of integrity. I do think we have shifted the focus within the UK. Although, those elements are not as robust as they were, nonetheless, people are more aware of them. That's in part, because of the work

of people like me and Chris Elliott, and some other people as well. Yeah, I think it can be a lonely furrow.

[00:20:26] RT: Can be back to this idea that you're not a leader? The viewpoint that I bring to this conversation with the people I work with is the sharpie new distinction between what it means to be an authority in an organizational structure, and what it means to lead. They're not the same. The org chart is more a map of authority, than it is leading. We've all been in some hierarchy, where some leadership moment came up when you looked up, and the person in that position didn't really meet the moment. Meaning, leading is more of an activity and a choice. Authorities are role in a position.

Ideally, it would be great if somebody who had a lot of authority also had good capacity to lead, but not always the case. You can look at lots of embryonic moments of the beginnings of social change movements that often comes from the margins. With people who have chosen without enough authority to raise their hand and say, “I'm going to be lippy on this,” if I could use your technical term. “I'm going to cause a little bit of a disturbance and see if I can get some attention for this conversation, and see if I can foster a movement of people who are needing to be mobilized, but they want to have somebody to guide them.”

For me, that's the distinction that I'm playing with here. You may not even buy that distinction, so that's fine. I think, in my motivation to have a conversation with you, is that you are somebody who may even be agnostic to a certain amount of authority, and there's more freedom and liberty in being able to be lippy and get into action. When you look at it from that perspective, and this is a conversation about leading fundamentally, as you sit here now, and people who may be further behind you on this road, when you think about them, and what's ahead, what do you wish you'd known about all this stuff before you got started, that would have served you well, but you had to learn in a harder way?

[00:22:35] KC: That's a good question. I've never had much respect for authority, so that's not good. Gets you into trouble. That's right from when I was a small child. I don't know. It flummoxes me I'm asked questions like that, because I don't think – I'm better able, I think to be able to say what I'm not good at, than I am, what I'm good at. One of the things that I'm not

good at, I'm not good at managing people at all. If you're in an organization, one of the things you have to do is manage people.

If you compare it to a game of soccer, for example, football. We just say football here, but of course, soccer. I mean, years ago, I remember a friend of mine who worked in industry, and he was one of the world's best project managers. He was also a very good amateur footballer, but he was somebody who was always, if you're captain of the team, and the captain enables other people to do well and recruit people, a really good project manager recruits people who are in many ways, better than he or she is.

When things go right, they get the praise. When things go wrong, the project manager takes the flack. I've always had great admiration for that approach. I think, that's absolutely right. When you're in a large corporation, you also have to do that in a political setup. I mean, political with a small p. Those kinds of setups, I am really bad at managing. I just don't like them. I just think, they're – I just can't handle it, basically. I just don't like being – I don't like being told what to do. There's me spending my time telling people what to do, but I don't.

I think, my skill if I have one, is to get people who – I mean, I think that the food crime musical is a classic example of my behavior, is that I recruited a musician and a lyricist, and told them what I wanted it to be. I told them what I wanted it not to be, but what I wanted it – the effect I wanted to have, and then trusted them to be able to deliver that. The editorial control I had was you got to get it actually right, so that if somebody who is an environmental health officer, or somebody who worked in the food lab, they wouldn't think it was nonsense. I did have some editorial control.

As far as the storyline was concerned, on the training of the community choir, and the lyrics were concerned, and the director who put it on and the producer who made this, or put in and all that stuff, all I did was to put forward this idea and recruited people who I knew were extremely competent at doing what I was going to ask them to do, but not in the context in which I was putting them. They had a bit of apprehension. We've never done this before. Just be yourself, I said. Be yourself. Do what you normally do. I'm in charge of the context in which you're operating. It'll work. Lo and behold, it did.

It wasn't rocket science. It was just a matter of going ahead and doing stuff. What I'm not good at doing is doing that stuff in an organization, where you have to ask for permission. I'm just not good at asking permission for things.

[00:26:05] RT: Well, let's dig into a little bit about the thing you're good at, though, because I think that – I suspect, there's some craft in there that's worth exploring here. Meaning, so you're, you're doing the musical and you got to bring these musicians in. There's some specific things that they need to cover in order for it to be complementary to the larger project. It's your job to define those ground rules, right? Then give them the freedom and permission to use their creative craft inside that, to dance with that component that you've given them, along with their abilities as musicians to bring something cool to the table that you couldn't imagine, but you you're banking on it.

Creating that space for people to be adults and free to use your gifts and talents is not common, I'm going to put forward. In a setting where you're trying to get work done in a collaborative way and you don't have authority, it strikes me, that's about the only move you got, but not most people understand that.

I'm wondering, what does Kate Cooper – what have you learned about how you create the space, so that the people can be themselves and do the great thing they're doing in collaboration, so that you get this better outcome than had you not? What do you know about that?

[00:27:25] KC: Interestingly enough, I view the whole thing as theatre. In 2003, there was a school reunion. I mean, I left school in 1966. A long time ago. What I wanted to do when I left school, I actually wanted to go into directional stage production. I wasn't quite sure the difference in the terms. I just wanted to be able to – I mean, I put on plays at school. I organized that stuff. I never wanted to be a star in them. I never wanted to participate. I don't mind standing up on my hind legs and talking in front of an audience. That's fine. I can do that. That's not a problem.

I spent the 1970s as a school teacher, a secondary school teacher in a rough part of town. I can do that. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to go into basically, the theatre. Good job I

didn't, because I'm hopeless at staying awake at night. I wouldn't have done well there. Years later, in 2003, this woman came up to me, who was about three or four years younger than I was. She was a little kid when I left school. She said, “Oh, Kate.” She said, “It's wonderful to see you here. You're such a brilliant musician.” I went, “No.” I was good enough to play the organ, or the piano, or something like that in school assemblies, but I wasn't a good musician by any stretch of the imagination.

What I was good at doing was getting other people to train choirs, to do this, do that and the other. I think, that what I’m good at is putting – I mean, with the Birmingham Food Council moment, we're looking at various scenarios about how the UK could be better prepared for future foods shortages and scarcities, because they're coming our way. We've already gotten, of course, in this country. At the moment, we've got empty supermarket shelves and things like that.

How can we be better prepared for what's down the line? The answer is to put people in scenarios in the future and let them play out that game. We've indeed devise something, which we call the game. With a deep voice, because it's obviously, they're going to have to deal with all sorts of dreadful things, like prospect of famine and all that stuff. It's interesting, because when you when you ask people to design that, it's easy for the – getting the players in, in some ways is the easy bit. The difficult bit is organizing stories that can run through it, and getting those into a way in which somebody can actually play it, like you can play a game of chess. I think, I'm quite good at getting a team of people to work out how to do that. It involves a lot of scratching of heads and wandering around the room all at the same time. Quite a bit of swearing quite often as well.

[00:30:28] RT: You're doing it in the context of the framework of scenario planning, creating scenarios.

[00:30:36] KC: That is. Yeah, I've chosen scenarios there. Because I think, the difference between the 20th century and the 21st century, the 20th century, we could see the future. The 21st century, we can't. Therefore, we got to make it up.

[00:30:50] RT: You clean me up here, because while I studied scenarios with Raphael Ramirez at Oxford, but it was just for two days. I know, you spent a lot more time with him than I have. My memory of scenario planning is that you stand in the future and look back to the present as your viewpoint. Is that a fair characterization of how you go about what you're doing with the people you work with on that topic?

[00:31:14] KC: No. We dump them in the future.

[00:31:16] RT: Yeah. It's what I mean. You stand in the future and work from there. Not in the present and work forward.

[00:31:21] KC: No. Yeah, yeah. You're in the future. Yes. When I get back to the idea of it being the work I do, a lot of it seems to me to be – I do actually say, theatres. Even in the company, when you're trying to get people to do things, you haven't got a hold of them. You've only got part of them, and you're putting them on the stage to play a role. Every so often, you find somebody who comes out of the road and is a fully-fledged member of the human race in that moment. That's when you get some breakthrough, I think, is because, then it becomes very real.

I don't know. Maybe I'm talking rubbish at the moment. I don't know. I think, I'd probably do more than that. I mean, it's not just make believe. The qualities that I admire in other people are things like, integrity, the ability to change their minds. One of the words I loath is passion. If someone tells me that I'm passionate, I crawl under a log. You can be passionate and you can be passionate and wrong. It isn't a justification for behavior. I think, we've got to have this mixture of dispassion, where we look at the world as it really is, because it's not in a good place.

I do fully understand that people won't act, unless they're emotionally engaged. I absolutely understand that. Being emotionally engaged in a way that's productive, as opposed to be in a way that's floundering, or negative, or whatever. I think, that somehow or other, we've got it wrong at the moment.

[00:33:06] RT: At this point in your professional life and in your whole life, what's your coaching to people who are younger, who are trying to – Because most people, I agree with you, bring an overdose of passion, and lack either craft, or discipline, or some separation, or some mixture of those to actually get good work done, to make progress on these these crazy problems they're working on. What's your advice, counsel to people about what they need as some resources that they would pull from, if they're to be the next generation of the Birmingham Food Council, or some other initiatives related to climate change, or social justice, or those kinds of things that are top of mind, and we need more people who can actually actively make progress? What advice and counsel, because you've earned the right to be a voice of perspective and experience on that?

[00:34:02] KC: Become very good at failing, I think.

[00:34:05] RT: Please say more about that. We're not good at failing. Failing is not regarded in our society.

[00:34:11] KC: Well, worse than that, we've trained our children and trained people – I know, even, I think, people in their 40s and 50s. It's very, very hard for people to be able to stand up and say, "I got that wrong." Actually, most of the things you do is wrong. When somebody says, "Well, I've changed my mind." This is considered to be a natural scientist. This is considered to be well, you know. You've changed your mind. Well, of course, you've changed your mind. The evidence change. The world has changed.

One of the things I find quite hard on vacations, when I do – I mean the food council is a small organization, so I don't often. Bringing youngsters in, I always have to tell them and I know it's difficult, and I tell them I know it's difficult. When they get it wrong, they need to tell me sooner rather than later. I think, that is really hard for a youngster to say to me, as an older woman, as lippy as I am, as confident I sound to say, "Look, actually, Kate. I haven't done that." I'll know they haven't done it sooner or later.

If they tell me that they haven't done it, or they can't do it, or it's going to be delayed, then we're into – If there's been a breakdown, declare it, because the moment you declare it, we're into a world where we can sort things out. The trouble is, with our school system, kids have got

to pass everything. What? That's not the world. You've heard the idea that somehow, you got to get high grades. That's not how the world works. The world is much more muddled than that. For what it's worth, I was pretty crappy in terms of schooling. There we go.

[00:36:07] RT: It hasn't hurt you at all.

[00:36:10] KC: I don't know about that. I do think, being able to fail, to be tenacious through failure is a very, very good quality. I think, tenacity matters. I think, changing your mind matters. I think, integrity matters. Having integrity means acknowledging that you often get it wrong. Even if all you do is acknowledge it to yourself, and some think, well, I won't do that again. Of course, you do. Then, forgive yourself when you do.

[00:36:42] RT: Right. Would you speak a little bit then about what's required, when you get a brilliant idea that you think the world would be better served if it were implemented? That may not be how your process works, but when you know it's something bigger than what you can do by yourself, what's the skill, or the craft that you draw on? Where you start to bring people together and mobilize them, get them in motion around the work that you see as critical here? Then once in motion, what do you know about keeping that movement in motion?

[00:37:19] KC: I think, the trick is to realize you've got to have a number of things on the go at any one time. Then, very few of them will actually come to fruition. It may quite well not be the pet one you've got. I'm always starting things. Always starting things.

[00:37:35] RT: Can you give us an example of having several things, maybe in your past, where you had several things going and how it turned out?

[00:37:44] KC: You forget what you abandon. I think, it’s quite hard to do that. Certainly, with the Food Council, I mean, I started – We started off with a whole host of things we were looking at, and then winnowed it down. Then, it's a matter of understanding, if something's really important, then I think the controlling some of the corporate powers of the drug food companies, I think are really important confectioners, people who make, sell crisps and fizzy drinks and things like that. All of those people. All of those organizations, I have no problems with their existence.

I do have problems with their existence within the food system. They should be treated like alcohol, or tobacco. That they should be separate from the food system. Fine. If somebody wants to smoke or drink, fine. Somebody wants to eat chocolate, fine. But he's not part of the food system. Finding different ways to get that message over, when as an individual, I have absolutely zero power. I can't. There's no magic wand. Finding different ways to approach the same problem and finding different people to influence, or different ways of talking about it, I'm constantly thinking about that.

At the moment, on my mind a lot is how we can be better prepared for shortages and scarcities. If there are shortages and scarcities, who goes without and who makes those decisions. They're really important decisions and where we're making them now. We're making them by default. It's just done by, have you got enough money to buy a good diet? Well, if you haven't, well, tough. That's not right. Understanding the kinds of thinking that you need to have in order to be able to meet those points.

I mean, in terms of that, for example, we recently recruited to our board, an American woman actually, who's an ethicist and much younger than I am. I'm delighted to say, she will tell me what's what **[inaudible 00:39:52]**. She thinks I'm thinking badly, she tells me I'm thinking badly. That is to find people who will challenge you and disturb your status quo, seems to me to be very important. The older you get, the more important it is to get people who will disrupt your thinking.

[00:40:12] RT: Yeah. To flip the field a little bit here, it's important for you to have somebody like that, who will speak to your power.

[00:40:17] KC: Absolutely, absolutely. When I first set up the Birmingham Food Council, there were three board members, because to set up a company, you would have at least – I can't remember what it is that now. Anyway, we had three board members. Then, we gradually expanded it more. I was chairing it. Then, I was both chair and chief executive. That's cool. That's not called governance. That's cool. They've just rung.

I remember the first board meeting, when it was after about a year, and I suddenly realized, I had people in front of me who were prepared to argue with me. I found it quite shocking. What? Then I thought, hang on a minute. This is how we should be. Absolutely, how it should be. I think, it's really important to recruit people around you who think very differently from you. I don't mean having a different belief system. In some ways, I would be very worried if the Birmingham Food Council had people on board, who felt that it was just fine that lots of people went hungry.

I think, I draw the line there. I'm very careful. We are very careful to recruit people who have been trained to think very differently. For example, one of our founder people was a medical doctor, professor of primary care, who was a brilliant cook. One of the reasons I like him is because he cooks beautifully. Yes. It's always worth being invited to his house for a meal.

Medics think very differently from a lawyer. They've been trained to think very differently. They do differential diagnosis, where lawyers are trained to do very, very different things. I think, it's when he resigned his directorship, because he was doing other stuff, I knew that we had to have somebody on the board who had medical training, because I wanted that type of thinking. I also wanted a lawyer, not because I want to keep us on the straight and narrow that they do, obviously, but because lawyers, again, think very differently from how a medic.

I also wanted somebody who understood risk professionally. Again, people who are involved in risk, or in insurance, they think very differently about how the world works. Getting diverse groups of people in the space where you're discussing what you need to do, seems to me to be really powerful.

You need people who have expertise in terms of content. They know a lot about X, Y, and Z. You also need to have, if they're all agri-food researchers, or medics, or lawyers or all cooks, you will not get good – you will not get the challenges that you need to have in order to be able to have an understanding of how a complex system works. Because complex systems work, if you haven't got at least two conflicting versions of how a complex system works, non-overlapping, but conflicting versions of how a complex system works, you can't succeed. Incidentally, as an example, in the US, this may or may not work, because you're in the US.

What's different between the English and the American is of course, language. If you've lost something at a railway station, or an airport, or in a hotel, do you have a lost property office?

[00:43:57] RT: At those facilities, like at the airport?

[00:43:59] KC: Yeah, what do you call them?

[00:44:00] RT: Yeah, lost and found.

[00:44:02] KC: Oh, lost and found. Ah. Because in the UK, they're known as lost property. Whereas, in France, it's known as *objet trouve*, which means found objects.

[00:44:18] RT: We hybrid it. We brought them together.

[00:44:21] KC: Yeah. It's interesting, isn't it? Because you think of loss property and you think of *objet trouve*, there's a completely different substructure to the two of them.

[00:44:28] RT: Very different. Very different.

[00:44:30] KC: Yeah. In America, damn. The analogy doesn't work, but you get the gist.

[00:44:35] RT: I get the gist. It strikes me in building your board and having these different mindsets, lawyers, physicians, risk managers, yourself, and probably a few other people eventually found a way in, that the organization minimizes to some degree, blind spots, as opposed to having people with the same discipline all there, because they could likely be all blind to the same thing.

Therefore, it's also strikes me that you add a certain dose of higher performance and efficiency and effectiveness, because it's hard for the collective to get tripped up around a particular thing, because somebody's discipline may catch it out a little bit. Seems plausible that that would be the case.

[00:45:20] KC: It's interesting you should say that, because last year during the pandemic, I thought that the game, in this scenario's game about the future was dead, because COVID had happened, and here we were. I had people who played the game. When you reacting and saying, "Kate, we're in the game, aren't we?" I said, "Yeah, we are." Then I realized that we could actually do another version of the game, looking at how – if you're going to deal with shortages and scarcities of food, or indeed of anything, you have to have some buffer stops. Basically, human beings, humans well, but commercial systems don't have buffer stops, because it's not economic.

How do you prepare for a pandemic? For example. Ho you make lots and lots of vaccines? **[Inaudible 00:46:08]**. We were very unprepared for the pandemic, and we've been unprepared for food shortages and scarcities. What happened in the UK, is that overnight on March the 23rd, 2020, is literally half our food supply was literally locked up, because we have lockdown, half our food by calories, and by value roughly half, goes into hospitality, goes into catering services, and not into retail. Suddenly, we had half our food literally locked up overnight.

Inevitably, the work, there were problems getting enough food to people. How do you manage? Let's imagine, this is caused by something other than the pandemic. We could quite easily have food shocks. How do we have buffer stocks to mitigate against those scenarios? What I found remarkable is that that was the scenario we put in front of little workshops, which we did via Zoom, we did virtually. Each workshop, I made a 100% certain that I had somebody from the food system. I had somebody else from somewhere else. I had somebody else from somewhere else. I had a mixture of people discussing, and not doing that. We put them in the future, where we said to them, "Look, the UK has got a new government, predict into the future. The new government has asked for a review of the buffer stock system that you put in place 10 years ago."

We've had another pandemic, it worked. Tell me, what was that success and what was a failure with your system? Then we just went silent. Then, when I had the facilitator and somebody else and we'll call as well, there was just silence. Then suddenly, somebody went, "Well, what we managed to have, of course, was X. Then we went into the future." We had people talking about it, about the future, as though it was in the past. One or two people couldn't handle this, but most of them could. That was a very – the only reason why that worked was partly,

because the way we – between us beforehand, we decided what we were going to do and how we were going to prepare them, which was not a lot. It's choosing people who we knew would have very different perspectives on how that could be. They surprised themselves. They surprised me, frankly.

With that, I now know how the UK could have a rotating, distributed buffer stock system that would work in times of food shortages and scarcities. It does require the government to do something. The chances of it happening anytime soon are remote. We may need another disaster before it can happen, but it wouldn't cost that much, and they could do it. Not only that, it would radically transform the food supply system, which everybody from the United Nations downwards, says we've got to do. It would not be by telling people to behave differently.

It would be because, to me, telling anything that tells people they've got to behave differently, the awesome shirts, that's a societal failure. That's a societal failure. We can redress it. Anyway, but I'm not a politician. I'd last 20 minutes in power.

[00:49:34] RT: All right, so we're coming to the end here, unfortunately for me, but I want to give you a little space to bring your wisdom into the conversation. Given that you have two granddaughters coming up behind you, maybe we frame this as the lippy skills needed to function well in society. Seriously, Kate, what advice do you have for people who might get into this world, trying to affect a change for the good that you've committed your life to for a long time? What counsel do you have for them? Two or three things that you think these are important things to know and carry with you?

[00:50:13] KC: It doesn't surprise me that it's old people like me, and young people, the Greta Thunbergs of this world are the people who are the revolutionaries. It doesn't surprise me.

[00:50:23] RT: Why doesn't it surprise you?

[00:50:26] KC: Because I've got nothing to lose. I've got nothing to lose.

[00:50:30] RT: What about Greta?

[00:50:32] KC: Well, she's yet to get onto the treadmill, if you like, of having to put lots of food on the table and pay mortgages and all that stuff to do with having dependents. She's free to be herself. It's more difficult for the anonymous Greta Thunbergs of this world, of which there are many.

[00:51:00] RT: Correct.

[00:51:01] KC: I think, that one of the things that I think young people today are showing is that they are speaking truth to power. You may disagree with the way they're doing, but they are speaking truth to power. The reason why they're doing it is because, they have their whole life to lose. I can do it, because I haven't got a life to lose. I've had my life. If I died tomorrow, I've had my life.

They've got it, because they absolutely know they could lose their lives. Deeds, one of the things I fear for my children and my grandchildren, somebody the other day said to me, "When do you think all this is going to happen?" This was about water shortages and that stuff. I've always thought that I will probably live my full lifespan and be okay, but I fear for my children and my grandchildren.

I'm 72-years-old, and I've probably – if I live as long as my previous generation, I've got another probably 15, 20 years to go. I'm not sure I will live that lifespan. I think, things are sufficiently terrifying at the moment. That might not happen. The disaster may happen within 15 or 20 years. There's so much could go wrong. I suppose, my advice to young people is speak truth to power. Risk it. Risk it. Risk it. Because if you don't, I fear for their future. Do it from a position of knowledge and not ignorance. Do it from a position of competence, not incompetence, but never, ever be indifferent.

[00:52:53] RT: Kate Cooper, thank you for this wonderful hour. It's been a pleasure and a joy. It's just great to see you again. Mostly, thank you for everything you've been doing. I know you're not done yet, and so you'll keep doing it. Just thank you for your good work. I appreciate it. Thanks for being on the show.

[00:53:11] KC: Oh, thank you for inviting me.

[00:53:13] RT: All right. We'll talk soon.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:53:16] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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