EPISODE 6

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:06] 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.

[00:00:19] RT: Hi, everybody, and welcome back to 10,000 Swamp leaders. I'm Rick Torseth. This week, my guest is a friend and colleague, Matt Barnaby, an Englishman who has uprooted himself and his family in the last 18 months in the middle of a pandemic and moved to the Netherlands, The Hague, to be specific, to start a consultancy, and also to continue and further his practice of facilitation in an international setting.

Matt's a good friend. He's a wildly and crafty and very creative man. He's a risk taker and he spent the last 18 months deeply embedded in this issue of hybrid working and how people can actually get productive work done online in groups. He's a world class facilitator, and he's just a joy to listen to. So, pay particular attention to his thoughts near the end of our conversation about what he sees is a future of hybrid work. He's a thought leader in this area, and he's probably on the leading edge of some of the emerging issues that are coming, and also a conspirator to evolve it into a fashion that he thinks is productive for all. So, enjoy the conversation with Matt Barnaby, and we'll see on the other side.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:31] RT: Matt Barnaby, welcome to the swamp, brother. How you doing?

[00:01:37] MB: Thanks, mate. It's alright. Well, it's a swamp. I brought wellies. I'm doing well. Thank you.

[00:01:43] RT: You brought him? Are you wearing them? That's a question.

[00:01:45] MB: I brought them. I've not put them on yet, it depends on the conversation.

[00:01:50] RT: Okay, let's see if we can get a place where you have to Don them. So, I come with some thoughts and some questions here, which we may or may not get to. We're going to let you kick us off here. So, my first question to you is, with people who are listening, share your story, and you can pick wherever you want to begin in your story and just give people a sense of who you are and what you're about.

[00:02:09] MB: Oh, there's no leading time for that. Where do I start? First and foremost, I think I am somebody who is quite curious, quite kind of exploratory, quite playful, and I bring those passions, if you like, to what I do for a living, which is ultimately consulting. So, I consult, I facilitate, I mentor, mainly kind of public services in the UK, or NGOs, across Europe and elsewhere. Yeah, I basically help people to solve problems. That's what I like to think I do. I help people to kind of get their head around sticky stuff and get it unstuck. So, that's what I do, this is where I'm at.

My story, though, is I started off as a hairdresser. This might come into the leadership compensation at some point. So, I'll start even bit further back. I've always had a problem with authority. My dad was a firefighter and I've always tried to sort of have quite an authoritarian presence. And because of that, I kind of kicked against it a little bit. One of those things that I kicked against was education. So, instead, I became a hairdresser at quite a young age, and did that for about sort of five years. Actually, for about seven, eight years.

But at the time, I was also volunteering with young people in youth centers in the UK, and sort of fell in love with that work. I found a sense of kind of purpose and meaning in that work, working with people that were trying to find their way, maybe we're a bit stuck. And ultimately, I left the hairdressing and went to university at 25, I think it was. Studied, actually went twice, studied and became somebody who worked in children's services, working with young people and families that have been, by and large, excluded from society, whether that be sort of education and get in trouble with the authorities and stuff like that.

[00:04:07] RT: This is a piece of your background I'm vaguely familiar with. But I have some sense. But was there a draw to youth services? Or did you get assigned to that, and it became interesting, once you were into it?

[00:04:19] MB: It was a personal thing. It's quite a quick story, actually. In my early 20s, I went through a period in my life where I kind of struggled a bit, sort of anxiety. I would refer to them as kind of sort of light mental health issues, sort of panic attacks, anxiety, feelings of kind of those feelings, and I've got some great help. I've got some really great help of some really great people. And I felt a sense of, if I've been through something similar, if I've been through something like this, that maybe other people are and I actually walked into a youth club, it called Boat Lighthouse in Stevenage in Hertfordshire in the UK and walked into a youth center and said, "I want to be a counselor." Those are literally, those were the words I said. And they were like, "What do you do now?" I said, "I'm a hairdresser." They were like, "Right. It takes a while to become a counselor." And I was like, "Okay, what can I do in the meantime, then?" And they said, "Well, we've got a skatepark upstairs and we're looking for volunteers." So, I was like, "Okay, fine."

So, about three weeks later, I started as a volunteer in this same youth club working in a skatepark. And I spent the next kind of nine months working with these kids in the skate parks. My first project was, they were all smoking on a balcony and getting into trouble. So, I convinced the person that runs the youth club to buy me a load of spray cans, and some MDF wood boards, so we could do some graffiti projects with them. Because I was into the street art and graffiti. It went from there, basically. So yeah, that's how that happened. So, it was a personal thing that got me there, and then just the joy of kind of doing creative stuff with people, that took me further.

[00:05:56] RT: And when was this? What year was this?

[00:05:59] MB: This would have been 1998.

[00:06:02] RT: Okay, so we're 23 years on from that, and that's your professional starting point for intervening in systems and facilitating and coaching and consulting, I would say. So, bring us forward a little bit, without every step of the way. What jumps out for you, when you look back from then to now as salient moments in your professional and personal life that's formed up a little bit about how you go about your work today?

[00:06:29] MB: One of the biggest things was when I left public services. So, after doing that work for a good few years, I left public services to join a consultancy firm. It was really filling, I joined the sort of government area and it was really great. But around the same time austerity in the UK kicked in, and I couldn't carry on doing government projects, because there wasn't any. And so instead, I worked mainly in financial services for about two years. And it was great. I learnt loads about project management staples. Your Prince's, your PM box, and all this sort of stuff and it was really exciting. But over the long term, it didn't particularly feel as fulfilling as the youth work and those kinds of work that I had been doing for public services. And I realized that actually, I cared more about public services and service than I realized.

So, ultimately, I left consulting for a while. It was around that time, I met people that we both know, Ben Taylor, and Dennis Bernier and starting to discover ways of working that were much more human and intuitive. I found out later, they were called Agile. It made sense to me, because it was kind of in many ways, how it approached working with young people that were dealing with complex lives. So, there's these complex projects. Okay, this resonates with me. And so, that was probably the biggest sort of milestone of change for me. I've just gone from there, really. I've just carried on doing that and learning as I go, for the last 10 years, I think maybe, it's 10 years now, and never looked back. So, that was probably the fundamental change for me.

[00:08:04] RT: So, to speak a little bit then, about these whatever called forks in the road or decision points, from hairdresser along this journey, you walk into a place and you say, "Hey, I want to be a counselor." And they say that's going to take some time, go teach them how to skateboard and do graffiti painting. So off you go, and yet you keep navigating. What is it that's in you that you use as a compass that informed you that this is the place to go now for whatever reason? How do you navigate that? And what's your decision-making process that's driving it?

[00:08:36] MB: So yeah, there's an assumption that I make decisions. By doing, obviously, but maybe they're not conscious, maybe they're not conscious decisions. I think looking back to those sorts of main milestones, like leaving school without a plan led me to what can I do, that's fun and social, hairdressing, because I like people. Going into the youth centers and the youth service kind of world, I was driven there through personal experience and sort of wanting to be of service. And that was a genuine thing that I was conscious of, at the time. Going into the world of work that I work in, which is still very much back in that kind of service world from a consulting and facilitation perspective.

The decisions that got me there, not really ever thought about it in too much depth, really. I think I like knowing that my work has purpose. I like knowing that my work has meaning, and I like knowing that my work isn't for just this finite thing. I like to think that whatever I do, might carry on somewhere else. So, youth work and consulting, in the attitude I take. If I do a good job and deliver something of value to the person that wanted it, then they might go on and do a good job and deliver same effect. I kind of like that kind of idea. I'll never know, obviously, but I think that sort of sense of kind of maybe legacy is really there for me as I get older and think about it. Yeah, I think it might be those things. I like feeling like what I'm doing has a point.

[00:10:06] RT: So, we should pull back the curtain here a little bit with anybody who's listening and make explicit that you and I have done a lot of work together, our plan is we will continue to do work together. So, we've actually been involved in projects and shared the room with people who are on that learning journey. So, it's given me a perspective about how you go about your craft, and I'd like for you to share a little bit about what your philosophy is, this question is going to initially relate to pre pandemic, and we're going to catch up into what's happening now and how we do our work. But let's start with before we got into this mess.

So, you're about to walk into a room 10, 15, 20 people, and you have some work to do, and you've been tasked with getting these people moving down the road, in some particular way, for some particular reason. So, what's your approach? What are you thinking? What's the secret sauce that you bring to the conversation in front of the room and with the people that helps them make progress on what they're trying to do?

[00:11:10] MB: I think I thought about this recently, actually. And I think my process is going into whatever kind of piece of work or event or situation I'm walking into, is going in curious and wanting to be helpful. I'm not one for wanting to walk into a room and say, here's the answer for this, follow this recipe and everything will taste amazing. I'd much rather go into a room and say, "What have you tried before? What have you got in your drawers that you want to sort of spices that you want to sort of throw in and mix around?" I go in kind of curious, with an aim to be helpful. I think that's part of my process.

But the other part is, in any work that I do, I kind of want to have fun. I don't mean fun, as in the stereotype of it's silly, it's irrelevant. It's like, I want to have fun, I want to enjoy what I do, and I want people to enjoy what they do. So, I go in with a mindset of, okay, how

can you make this experience enjoyable, make sure you remain curious, and try and be as helpful as possible. I think those are the three things I think about whenever I go into a piece of work, wherever that might be. Because some of the work that we deal with, is pretty kind of – cannot always be the light stuff when you're dealing with public services or things like that. The things that these folks deal with on a day to day basis is really important, and it's really heavy stuff. So, you've got to try and kind of lift them slightly to move forward, otherwise, people remain stuck. So, I intentionally try and lift it.

[00:12:46] RT: Yeah. So, the lifting part in some of the process part is a craft, tools, processes, et cetera. I know the answer to this question. But these people don't. You have some specific professional points of view and resources that you oftentimes bring to the work you do. I'm pretty sure that you don't even go to the grocery store without a Sharpie and a Post-it notepad. And they're never far from your existence.

So, give people a little professional background as to what kinds of craft and tools and processes that you can lean on and know that you can be helpful to people and you can lift people and you can bring them along, that might be useful for these folks, just as a point of reference.

[00:13:29] MB: So, yeah, I used to say pre pandemic, clearly, all I need to do my job is pens, Post-its, and people.

[00:13:35] RT: Let's assume that still true for the moment. So, that worked for a while. Tell them why it worked then and then we'll go forward in a little bit here.

[00:13:43] MB: Your listeners might disagree. I'm convinced that we're all making this up as we go along.

[00:13:47] RT: Say more about that.

[00:13:49] MB: I'm convinced that just because we've learned to brush our teeth, drive a car, tie shoelaces, day to day in general, we're still trying to figure out what this is all about,

either on a personal or professional level. I think that therefore kind of going in with pens, Post-it notes, you can just tap into that, that curiosity within people that need to sort of want to learn more, do more, and achieve more and help them to kind of figure things out. So yeah, I've not really thought about it in too much depth. I think that is just that is it for me. It's just yeah, I'm not sure where else I can go with that.

[00:14:31] RT: Well, talk about Agile then, because they know that Agile as a process, as a point of view, as a philosophy, as a resource, as a means to move is important to you and you've had some great success with it in some really difficult situations in local government. So, for those people who are either have a loose understanding of Agile, no understanding or naysayers of Agile, just share if you would any of your experiences that you think are relevant as to why you think Agile has value in organizations and change work.

[00:15:02] MB: Right. So that was really helpful. Thanks. Because I was mentally kind of getting stuck there. But I think I've got it now in terms of this whole process tools. And there's a quote, I think it's Marie Forleo, she wrote a book, *Everything Is Figureoutable*. That's kind of always been a similar mantra to what I've had as well. If it can't be figured out, can't figure it out, but everything else is figureoutable. I think that Agile speaks to me, because for me, it represents human change.

When a situation arises in your personal life, and they arise all the time, when an incident happens, a situation happens, an event happens that causes kind of the need to react as human beings, we do a number of things, don't we? We gather those around us that we can depend on, whether that's family or friends. We sit down and we talk about it. We express how we feel about the situation. We express our understanding of the situation. We laugh, we cry, we argue, we wrestle with it. And then we support each other in moving each other on, what are we going to do about it? What can we do right now to make it okay? It might not solve the whole thing, but what can we do right now to move on?

And then we'll go and do those things. But we'll make sure that we check in with each other on a regular basis, whether that's kind of a phone call, or grabbing a cup of coffee or something like that. That's how we move on in life. Now, we deal with some really traumatic stuff day to day, whether that's illness, pandemics, and things. We get up for this stuff. We don't need to be taught this stuff. We're really good at it naturally. But then when you go to work, it's almost like leave all that at the door, you've got to have the right answers, you've got to have the solution. And if you haven't, that you're not really kind of worth your salt, and you're going to struggle here. I just don't think that is by no shape of the imagination of progressive way to be.

So, the reason agile speaks to me is I try and bring that to my work. I try and walk into a room and think that people here in this room already have the answers. They're feeling the problem. They're feeling the pain of the situation, it's my job to create the environment, just so they can have the conversations that move towards what if we tried this? What if we explored that? And if I do that, and it has a positive outcome, then I sleep at night.

[00:17:29] RT: It's interesting, you're talking about this next week, doing a project, the leadership project, and the starting point for is helping this group of new managers and leaders build some leadership capacity. That's what I do and I've been doing for a while. And the starting point, they don't know this yet, and they won't hear this before next Thursday, when we start is similar to what you're talking about here, which is, the hypothesis I want to put in front of the very beginning of our two day session is, and I do believe this, just as you say, that everything these people need to know about how to lead is already in that room, and we sit down in the very first minute. So, the very first day.

The work is how do we get it out and make it visible, so that the collective has more access to more resources to lead than any one individual has? And therefore, most of the work in the session is to reveal that, so that people can put that into the communal pot of leading and build up more moves to make. I think that – this is going to be my view here. But I think that if you and I are people who do what we do are any good at all in the world is because we create that container of space where people can run those experiments and try those things. What do you think of that?

[00:18:53] MB: I agree. I agree. Those people that you're getting in a room, to sort of bring out those leadership skills in them. Before they walked into that room, before they got into their car to drive to work, if that's what they're doing, or before they logged on in the morning, they were using those skills elsewhere, with friends, with family with kids. They were using those skills elsewhere, and they're achieving using those skills, and to bring those skills into the workplace and just say, "Look, it's the same but the narrative is different." The language is just slightly different. Really kind of look, I think people's kind of, "Oh, yeah, I did bring something to this. And therefore, I'm going to suggest this or therefore, I'm going to do that."

I learned from you about quite a while back, you use the term sort of raise your hand to lead. If you think about life in general, the majority of people I believe, do raise their hand to lead in some aspect of their life, whether that is within their relationships, whatever

relationships that might be, or within work, maybe. And if they haven't raised it in work, then they can if they realize that those skills aren't special. They've got them. They've got them. And therefore, they're not intimidating technical skills that they need to kind of be scared of. They've got them within them. And therefore, our job, I agree, it's just to create the container to say, "Let's give it a go, shall we? What have you got?" And that's great.

[00:20:19] RT: I think what we're playing with here, to make it explicit is, and I love how you started this deal out that you have some resistance to authority, because I think that people and I think it's a construct that probably occurs when they walk to the door of the office, because I completely agree with you that a lot of these skills around how you choose to lead your life, how you use yourself in leading, they do all the time in the rest of the world. But when they walk into this organization, they walk into a hierarchy. It's the nature of an organization is how they organized to get work done. Nothing pejorative about that.

But there's also this notion, blind assumption that that chart represents the map of leadership. And what we know is it maps the authority in your organization. And again, authority is not bad, we need authority in certain doses, in certain places. We're in business to do covertly, sometimes, indirectly, sometimes, is to release more leadership in the individuals inside the places where they have professional impact. And so, your point is spot on. I believe that it's not about giving them something new, it's re-reminding them that they're already doing this, and how do they do it in the context of this work world? Which is different. It's different than where they live privately.

[00:21:42] MB: Yeah, it's is, absolutely. I think to build on that some more is the fact that part of the work is to sort of encourage that. This maybe goes back to the whole kind of youth work thing for me, is encourage that curiosity for something better in them. Because when you trigger that off, how might we do that? What would it be like if? And asking those types of questions, it gets their brains in a creative space, and that creative space triggers off different answers, different suggestions that they then need to do something with. So, almost they're teaching themselves, "Yes, I've got this idea. And now I know I've got to do something with it." And doing something with it is an act of leadership.

[00:22:25] RT: Right. We would be remiss if we didn't put into this conversation, that making that choice to lead, particularly in a hierarchical organization where I am not at the top of that hierarchy has some risk to it. You can't get hurt. It doesn't always work out. Sometimes the authority trump's the choice to lead. It's an eyes wide open decision making process, so to think is important to carry with it. I want to jump here a little bit, because

people don't know where you're talking from right now, but I do. So, where are you right now in the world? Where's Matt Barnaby?

[00:23:03] MB: I am in [inaudible 00:23:03] in The Hague in the Netherlands.

[00:23:08] RT: And you've been there for how long now?

[00:23:11] MB: Well, let's follow the story, possibly. I think that's where you're going. I've been here since April this year, but I've been in the country since July last year.

[00:23:18] RT: Okay, so if my memory is correct, July last year, we were in the early throes of a pandemic with no solutions and no responses, and certainly, no vaccine in sight. So, what in the world are you thinking about? Because you are married, and you have two kids in school, packing up and leaving the UK and coming to the Netherlands in the middle of a pandemic? Let's put that in the context of leader, yourself, you're using yourself to lead, you're a father, you're a husband, forget all this Agile stuff and public sector or NGOs. What's it like for Matt Barnaby to be a co-leader of his family and move them across into another country in the middle of a pandemic? And what lessons have you learned about yourself that are relevant to your work and may be useful to people who are listening?

[00:24:08] MB: Where do I start? I think the first thing is I sometimes refer to myself as not a finisher. I'm the curious player of kind of new ideas and new toys and new concepts. But sometimes I put them down and get bored and go and pick up something else. The reason I'm here is because I did see something quite significant through, that I'm really proud of. And that is about sort of four years ago, I think it was, I was sitting in a pub in London with Dennis Bernier, and you, and we were talking about kind of Brexit and things like that.

[00:24:41] RT: I should say that all good things in England emerge and start in a pub.

[00:24:46] MB: I wouldn't know where else it would emerge. So, we were sitting in there and saying, "Oh, you know, this whole Brexit situation. We're not sure how we feel about

it. I won't go into the kind of, in case people disagree with me." But I think it's fair to say that I wasn't particularly keen. We started talking about, what if we did this in mainland Europe, in EU, and it was literally that night, "We should start a company in the Netherlands." Dennis is from the Netherlands, we should do that. Sounds like a good idea.

That night, I went home. And I said to my wife, so we've just been talking and we got this idea. And her response was, "Yeah, let's do it. That sounds fun." She's the risk averse one. So, from that point on, we were kind of committed to this idea that two years later we saw through and it almost didn't happen. The pandemic started in March, everything went into lockdown. And by this point, we'd already sold our house. We were in a rental, which was lovely, and we could have stayed. But it was almost like we've convinced ourselves that this is going to happen. So, we have to somehow make it happen, and so we did.

During the pandemic, there was a window of opportunity in mid-July. The plan was originally to be out in March, when the pandemic first happened, but then everything was delayed. But then in July, we had a window of opportunity of, I think it was about three weeks at most, where we were able to go, let's get a removals firm, let's book a ferry, pack the car up, and let's just go. And so, that's exactly what we did. In that three weeks, we also managed to find somewhere to live. We didn't see it until we actually arrived in the country. The stroke of luck. It was lovely.

So yeah, we just, I don't know, held our breath and done it. But not to get overly stoic because we weren't at the time, but not to be overly stoic, this is all just an adventure, isn't it? So, you might make the most of it. That was kind of the attitude, not consciously at the time, but that was kind of the attitude. It would be easy to say no right now and just go, "Nope, we're staying put." And we will still be there. So yeah, I'm really proud of us, proud of the kids, especially for doing what we've done. Because it's only over the water. It's just a short hop from UK to Netherlands, but culturally, is significantly different. And yeah, I'm really proud of us all.

[00:26:57] RT: So, let me ask you this question, a question if that thought to ask you. So, you're working in the UK, and you're helping people deal with change and processes and Post-it notes and Agile stuff, and you're the expert here. Suddenly, you're in a country where nobody can understand how the Dutch speak their language initially, it's very complicated language. So, how did you – what did you learn about your own capacity to change when you threw yourself into this completely different world with a wife and two kids? And a need to work and get a business rolling? And what did you learn about yourself and your adaptability?

[00:27:34] MB: Recently, actually, I think that what I learned about myself is that I'm quite resilient. And historically, I'd have never have probably given myself that kind of moniker, that credit. But I think I'm quite resilient to curveballs and there's been a lot, but I seem to be able to kind of – I stress, I fret about it, and then deal with it, and it all ends up kind of okay. So, I think I've learned that I am more resilient than I would have ever previously given myself credit for.

I think I've learned that I'm not ready to settle. I think that's the other thing. Because when we were in the UK, we had a lovely house, and it was in a lovely part of the country. I loved my commute into London and all those things, there was nothing that I would have trashed. We've gone to a really great place. But I learned about myself during the process that it's fun to keep stretching that fabric. And even though where you are now is good, it's not that you're ungrateful for it, but keep going. Yeah, I think that's the thing for me is just to keep going. I know, that whole kind of Simon Sinek thing of kind of find your why and things like that. My why is just to sort of create a good life for my kids. If it's in the Netherlands, and I'll give it a go. If it's not, then I'll move on.

[00:28:49] RT: I know this to be true that your kids are having a ball living in the Netherlands.

[00:28:55] MB: Yeah, we can't leave now. Even if we wanted to. Even if everything collapsed around us, we would still have to just go live in a tent so that kids could go to the school, and that they go and hang out with the friends they do. They've just flourished. It's a joy to see.

[00:29:09] RT: It's cool. All right, so let's shift gears into another domain here that's pandemic related consequence. So, as you said, you, Dennis and I conjured up this idea, and we had a scheme about what the focus of the work would be and who we do it with. And you were the bold one to go first and move to the Netherlands and we're kind of moving down that road and then COVID comes, and then it comes, and then it comes, and it keeps getting worse and fairly quickly, it's determined that people shouldn't really be gathering in their offices and working, that's not safe. We barely even had mass production going there. But government started to recognize that this was a real problem. And so, we moved into this work from home, work remote, and while that had some benefits, pluses and minuses of which you know more about actually, than I do, we've been navigating through that process ever since.

So, I know that you're very deeply into being helpful in your skill set inside the constraints of the pandemic, and working remote and working online. And you won't say this, but I will, given the early ways in which you and Dennis and others in the team saw the situation and embrace it and tried to figure out how to make use of it, not only to be in service, but also to support the growth of the business. You made some early decisions that I think came before most other people in organizations and consultancies did. Now not everybody, some of them are lockstep with you, but you were early in the process. And so, you're also quite experienced around what's worked and what's not worked, what the pros and cons are.

I want to get to your views about what's ahead. But I want you to share a little bit about what you did, when it became apparent that this consulting thing in person was off the table. And yet, you needed to work and survive and help other people in organizations work and survive. So, lessons learned here, and knowledge, and then we talked about the future. Let's keep that separate for the moment.

[00:31:12] MB: So, I think that there's a number of things really for us. When we were talking about milestones. And I said, you know, leaving school, hairdressing, youth work, choosing different kinds of consulting, the other major milestone was actually the pandemic. I still remember the day, it was actually mine and my colleagues, Rebecca. We share a birthday and it's March the 13th. That was the day that we decided that that was the day that we weren't going to come back into work. So, we were all together, and then we sort of dispersed after a couple of birthday drinks as a team, and then from then on in, it was remote.

That's been a milestone, because, you know, as an organization, with both the organization's basis and impact, we've thrived over the last 18 years. And I say that, in a positive sense in as much as we thrive and we're doing more good work with even wider audience of good people. So, still working with purely Republic Services, and in the UK, and NGO's sort of globally, so we're really proud of what we've done. But I think the lesson there for me was the fact that we always knew we, we always thought we were a good team, we always thought we were a close-knit bunch. And then, when the pandemic kicked in, we found out that we were more so than we thought ever. I'm still sort of in awe of the team, how all of us just mucked in, made it okay with each other, put others first.

Also, just got into how can we make this work together? And how can we make it work is one thing, how can we make it work together is another thing. How can we make this work together? So, we would play. We learned as much as we could. We learn as much as we could, significantly from people like Judy Reese, for example, who was kind of leading on remote work conversations and learning for a while before that, quite some time before that. And books that we were curious learners, we were curious players. We were playing with platforms, exploring what was possible. How can we do what we do with the tools we've now got, knowing that the tools, we had the Post-its and the pens, and now gathering dust for a little while.

Looking back at it now for the first time, actually, it's probably some of the best time I've had with my colleagues, even though physically we weren't together. We would meet every day, we would meet every morning for half an hour and the rule was first 15 minutes, how are you? What are you up to? The next 15 minutes was, what have you got on today? Do you need any help workwise? What are you doing? And then at the end of the day, we would wrap up. How did your day go? Let's have a drink. It was just a really special time. And I think it's changed all of us for the positive in so many ways.

Yeah, the lesson I learned there is around kind of, I learned that I was right. I'm surrounded by some incredible people. I learned that we were right, that we are a great team. But I've also learned that the ability to be curious and creative, and trying to make the best of what you've got sourced through. Because at the time, a lot of our colleagues and clients were in a state of – we have no idea what we're doing now. We know we have to make it work. But we have no idea. And we went out there and we were as helpful as we could. We've done a lot of stuff for free. We were working evenings and running sessions and stuff like that. It was just some of the best times we've had.

[00:34:44] RT: So, how did the work change? I mean, you went from pins, Post-its, and people in a room, sticking stuff on the wall, to staring at a computer screen. So how did you adapt the work so you could continue to have some impact and do the things that are fundamental to you about helping people navigate change?

[00:35:07] MB: One of the things that Judy Reese taught us in those kinds of early weeks of the pandemic was around, when you're redesigning what you do, don't start from the point of what tools have you got, start from the point of what is the purpose of what you want to achieve. And that stuck with all of us, I think throughout. So, for example, in advance of the pandemic, we would do design sprints, for example, impact sprints. Five-day processes where you lock people up in a room, and you wrestle with the problem, until you can think

about and create sort of potential, better outcomes. So, if you wanted to redesign your service, or create a new product, or something like that concentrated amount of effort in a room for five days, and go through the process of what's the problem, what's the opportunity, what the idea is this, prototype that and see what happens and come out the other end with something.

[00:36:02] RT: So, the design model, pre pandemic was a five-day model?

[00:36:05] MB: The design model pre pandemic was a five-day model, nine until five, in the room, locked door, pens, Post-its, blank walls. That was it. You'd invite people in to test the ideas out with them. But apart from that, you're holding each other captive. So, thinking about that in an online space is okay. So, what is the purpose of our work together? Not, let's do five days, nine to five, and lots of people in Zoom. What is the purpose of our work together? Okay, it's that, right? So how can we make that work with the tools we've got?

So, we played and we adapted, and we changed. And we were able to think about, okay, so we haven't got pens and Post-its, what tools are out there online that replicate that? Okay, so we've got that, great. So, knowing our purpose, what activities do we do, to get the conversations going the same way. And ultimately, we ended up for the most part of, the first part of the pandemic, we ended up doing so many impact sprints, we call them, people probably know design sprints with organizations around kind of the impacts of pandemic on people's mental health, for some London barriers, the impact of the pandemic on sort of black and ethnic minority groups, and so on, to look at how the local councils can respond better, and we achieve the purpose of the work. So, it adapted really well. But it does boil down to looking at the purpose.

[00:37:25] RT: How did the work change because you lost the nine to five, five days a week? That's 40 hours in a week. You can't hold people on Zoom calls five days for 40 hours. So, what are the tradeoffs around what you've been doing before? And I'm actually really curious now, I think about it, is what was going on in those five days that you might look back now and say, "That was superfluous. We didn't need to spend that much time or do this in that model, because of what we're learning now in this model." So, when you look at it, from both angles, what comes up for you? What do you think about about how you do it now, and what's useful about that?

[00:38:00] MB: That is a great question. I've not really ever thought about it, but it is a tremendous question, because there's more – I think personally, there's more satisfaction in doing it online than there is in person. Yes, you lose that sort of elements of that tactile world that we're used to. But you can focus a lot faster. So, when I say nine to five, when we do that online, is three hours max per day. We achieved in three hours what we could achieve in say, seven hours. And the difference there, I think is the fact that the focus is there, people are much more able to be sort present and focused on one thing. The conversation tends to meander less and those kinds of things really help people to sort of hone in. I think people arrive at these things with a sense of, "Right, I'm here now, I'm going to roll my sleeves up, let's get into it." Whereas in person, it cannot sometimes be a little slower, if you know what I mean. People's energies aren't as kind of focused. And so, I enjoy that more online than getting physically in the real world, wherever you want to refer to it as, I think.

[00:39:13] RT: So, say something a little bit before we move here forward about what has become the phrase, it's really a one-word phrase, Zoom fatigue. So how do you as a facilitator, knowing that people at this point have been on varying platforms listening to people talk multiple hours every day, and sometimes on the weekends, and here comes Matt Barnaby with his bag of tricks and his facilitation skills online and we're going to do some work. How do you contend with that?

[00:39:45] MB: How do you contend with Zoom fatigue? I think there's loads of things. There's a whole kind of skill set and and tool set there around kind of creating that. One of them is don't do it all in Zoom. If you don't need to meet, then don't meet. You can do a lot of work asynchronously. And I think that people are experiencing a lot of joy with asynchronous working. So, you and I are in different continents, but we can still work together, and I enjoy working with you, even though you might work seven hours after I've gone to sleep. I think injecting that element is really critical to create that sense of we're working on something because I think that's what people enjoy, working with others. So that asynchronous sort of mindset is something that I think reduces the fatigue down. Being clear on the purpose of the meetings, it's all obvious stuff in terms of structural. But I think the less obvious stuff is around, I don't want to sort of play it down. I don't want to make it seem less than it is, but it's about not taking it too seriously.

[00:40:51] RT: What's the it that you don't want to take too seriously?

[00:40:53] MB: I don't want to seem like I'm suggesting that kind of, you know, by injecting that kind of fun into it is the way that you get rid of Zoom fatigue. What I'm

getting at is that you want to make the experience something that feels meaningful, and lighter. And so, what we always try to do is break it up quite a lot. Keep that kind of lightness sort of ticking along nicely. So yeah, I think that there's so much there in terms of how to produce that safety. But yeah, you could go on for hours. I think we are getting too fatigued, though.

[00:41:29] RT: We'll spare them that the hours here. Let's jump forward now, because it's different time now than it was back then. Lots of vaccinations going on, getting a better handle on COVID, getting a sense of progress here to some new normal. I know you are right in the middle of this polarity, this debate about what is hybrid working? What's the forms it's going to take? What are the dynamics and challenges that are being contended around those on one side who say as soon as we can, we're all coming back to the office, and those who have been home liberated somewhat by working from home, don't want to come back to the office at least five days a week, eight hours a day?

I know you got a point of view on this. So yes, bring us current to brown, let's start with what you see as the choice points that organizations have to make about hybrid working, because it strikes me that every organization of size is going to come up with their own version of it relative to their culture, what they do in their business. But what do you see as the levers that organizations need to start to think about in order to arrive? And what is a version of hybrid that works for them in their business model?

[00:42:42] BM: I think the first question, and this is where I start to sort of go off on soapbox is what matters most? For leaders of an organization for owners or managers of an organization, what matters most? That's the question to wrestle with first and foremost, because when you get to that point of what matters most, how it gets done, where it gets done doesn't really matter. So, what matters most is really important, because then it will help you think about okay, so where do we need to be in order to do that? And if the answer is in the office, because you're you're a service-based organization, and you've got people knocking on your door, then is he going to be in the office? That's what it is.

[00:43:27] RT: Or a manufacturing site.

[00:43:28] BM: Exactly, exactly. I think that the conversation quite often goes a bit polar, because there's some that go, "Oh, we should all be remote working." Now, we're back in the office, and it's never going to be that simple, is it? You can't do some jobs, and not in

work environment as much as a physical office or something like that. But if it can be done, if it can be done, I'm not suggesting it should be done. But what I am suggesting is why can't it be done? If person A is able to be as productive, and as helpful, and as useful adding as much value as they can from the beach, in I don't know, the Bahamas, as long as you've the laptop that they need, then why not? What matters most is the value that they bring, right?

[00:44:14] RT: Yeah. What's the organizational counter to why not in your experience? What are the things that come up when you say why not? And they respond with some – what are some examples of that? And what's driving that?

[00:44:28] BM: How will we know? That's one of them. If I don't see Rick, how do I know he's working? If I don't know where he is, how do I know that he's not shirking off and putting his feet up and reading a book? I think that's one of them. The other one is possibly around, kind of, if I get stuck, I've got nobody to ask. So, I want my team here, so I can depend on them when I need them. A lot of that boils down to that's all personal need.

[00:44:55] RT: It strikes me that part of this debate that's unspoken and what's the mix of hybrid work designed for a particular organization is evolving around the exposure of our degree of trust in our workers. And when they're always there every day, that's somewhat invisible, because you can't see what's going on.. And when they're not there, you're not. So, what I mean by that is, it reveals, I'm going to say, a gap in management leadership capacity to be building your team around trust, first, as a fundamental building block, as opposed to technical skills and production and those kinds of things.

[00:45:37] BM: Yeah. I was talking to a colleague of Vasa, Steve, Steve McCann, recently. He suggested in a slightly different context of it, he sees it, there's two trajectories going on at the moment. There's one trajectory, where there are people that are holding their breath, until it goes back to normal. They're making do with the basics of what they need around them, and they're holding their breath, until this is all over, and then they'll be back in the office.

But there's another trajectory where people are saying, actually, there might be a different way, there might be another way, there might be a way to be happier, healthier, more productive in work and life. Let's explore that together, and let's grow and that trajectory is going up quite significantly. I think what you're going to get is massive disparity soon, of

those that will kind of gravitate towards the office environment, not because they have to, but because they kind of – they haven't been able to adapt to a different way, and then you'll have others that go on a different trajectory. I think picking on a lot of what personal Chris Hurd writes about is those companies will thrive and these ones will start to sort of falter very fast.

I think he's talking like three years. You'll see a massive change and you could go really spacey. look at what Mark Zuckerberg released into the world two days ago, in terms of rebranding Facebook to Meta, and now, proactively talking about metaverse, technologies, to create more kind of collaborative online environments, whether that's in personal work. But we've been using them for years. He's just kind of starting to wrap a skin around it and develop it more. Nero, Google Apps, they've been it for years. It's now got an identity and that is going to push that directory even further.

[00:47:29] RT: So, what do you think, at some point, organizations are going to have to resolve, at least, a first iteration of their hybrid work model, and then run experiments and see what works, what doesn't work, throw away what doesn't work, add new stuff and keep evolving it. Ideally, that would be the way they probably go about it. But it's a pretty ripe conversation right now in the business. So, at what point do we start to see the energy dissipate on that in your perspective, because organizations are getting to grips with it, and it got a working model, and now they're implementing it. I mean, this is a long-term conversation, do you think? Or do you think this has got some short lifespan to it?

[00:48:08] MB: I don't think it's a short lifespan. But I don't think it's potentially going to be around for a generation, if you like. I think that at the moment, the biggest wrestle is is what is our kind of hybrid? That's the challenge is not is it two days in the office or two days not. It's what is our kind of hybrid? And by asking that question, they then have to explore, is our kind of hybrid right for us? And then adapt accordingly. That adaption will mean, that question keeps coming back. They'll look at things like staff retention, mental health, productivity, and so on.

So that question will carry on. It won't necessarily evolve, but it will continue to happen and continue to adapt accordingly, until they're at a place where they're feeling like, they are functioning in a productive way. But I think by doing that, people will leave because some people won't be happy, or some people will see an opportunity elsewhere that will fit their kind of desires more, and it will balance out because some people will join, because what they're doing works. So, I don't think it's a long-term thing, but I don't think it's

short either. I think it's kind of a medium term, for the next 24 or 36 months, this whole wrestling with it, adapting and wrestling with it.

But then after that, I think there's a number of things there. The biggest one is the climate emergency. At some point, you're going to have to change. You've got no choice. International travel for work purposes. Even the concept of it now is quite uncomfortable for me, and they're going to have to change. So, why not? Whilst you're doing that adaption, grow a little bit.

[00:49:42] RT: Yeah, so the of what our hybrid model is, is if I hear what you're saying, and I think this makes sense, should be integrating the consequences of climate change as part of the influencers and ways in which we think about the future. Because when we get the hybrid model worked out, we still have this other larger issue that we have to contend with. So, let's roll it up and get involved with it early on, which most organizations are doing some way, anyway.

[00:50:12] MB: I'll say, and I think that, with that comes kind of how can technology assist this, sort of, that we get what needs to be done, but also remain true to what keeps us human and healthy. So, I think there's a really exciting combination of stuff that is emerging. I don't think we're in that exciting phase right now. I think we're still in the kind of what we're doing phase, but I think that exciting phase is coming up.

[00:50:41] RT: I think you're right. Alright, so hey, we're coming here to the end, I'd say a couple questions for you off of hybrid work and climate change and all that. So as a teacher, as a leader, as a facilitator, what do you wish you'd known earlier that would have helped you had you known it?

[00:50:58] MB: That everybody's making it up as they go along.

[00:51:02] RT: You already told us that one. So, what's one you wish you'd known earlier besides that one?

[00:51:06] MB: I'm trying not to sort of think of anything too pithy or too overly deep. I think something I wish I'd known earlier on that it'll be okay. What is causing the anxiety or the pain now won't in five years, five months, whatever, we'll be okay. That is it for me.

[00:51:32] RT: Nice. Let's leave that there. That's a nice stopping point. So, Matt Barnaby, thank you for your time, for sharing your thoughts and ideas, and for doing the work you do in the swamp. It's much appreciated.

[00:51:45] MB: Pleasure. I've got my boots on still.

[00:51:51] RT: See you.

[OUTRO]

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