

**EPISODE 007**

[INTRODUCTION]

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

**[00:00:20] RT:** Hi, everybody, Rick Torseth. Back for another episode of 10,000 Swamp Leaders. One of the advantages that comes from producing your own podcast is you get to choose who your guests are. Today, I'm indulging that opportunity by inviting a friend, a colleague, somebody that I have high regard for, and somebody I've known for about 15 years, Lars Thuesen.

Lars is a Danish consultant, and friend, and colleague that I met when we were doing some graduate school work. At the time, Lars was working in the Danish prison system. No more. He picked up an influence in our program called Positive Deviance. And he's been running with that ever since. Positive Deviance is a remarkable and, I think, underutilized strategy for producing social change and social impact. Lars saw that opportunity and mixed well with his desire to have an impact in the world. And so he's now arguably one of the world leaders in this discipline of positive deviance.

So, on our conversation today, he'll talk about what positive deviance is. Why he thinks it's useful? What's helpful about it? His lessons learned. And how he's blended it with other methodologies to do the work he does in the world. Lars has traveled to 15 countries working with people in high-need areas, both personally and professionally, as they try to sort through some of the really messy problems that they face in their countries. He is also now an instructor of positive deviance in the very program that he and I met. So it's come full circle for him.

So sit back, enjoy the conversation with Lars, and learn a little bit about what positive deviance is, how you could use it in your life, and what the flip is. On with the show.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:02:11] RT:** Hey, everybody, welcome to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. And I am quite pleased, fortunate and happy to have a friend and colleague joining me, Lars Thuesen, from Copenhagen, Denmark. Lars, welcome to the podcast.

**[00:02:25] LT:** Thank you.

**[00:02:26] RT:** I'm glad to have you. So I've given people a little bit of a background in the introduction about who you are and what you've been up to. But I want you to put your voice to it. So tell us about who you are, what you do, why you do it, why it matters, anything you want to cover here that you think's important for the listeners to know about you.

**[00:02:41] LT:** Well, I'm brought up and taught political scientist as a background. And I used to be a civil servant for many, many years, both in the Ministry of Finance in Denmark, but also in the Ministry of Justice, where I worked in the Danish Prison and Probation Service first as a consultant. After that, as the head of strategy and organizational development. And I learned a lot. It was wonderful. But also found out that sitting in HQ, and trying to direct what's going on in the swamp, probably you would call it, is not working very well.

So I began thinking about what does it take – As a leader, what does it take to inspire people to change their behaviors? And I found out that I didn't know shit about that, because I'm a political scientist. We don't learn that. We learn how to deal with politics, and policies, and power games and all that, but we don't really learn about inspiring people to change their behaviors. So I got interested in the human side of change, and that's where I met you, because I found Oxford Saïd Business School, and as you see, in Paris, and they had this program called coaching and consulting for change. And we were actually in the same cohort. And that really changed my world and my mindset.

Many things to say about that. But especially one module was really a game changer, where I met Richard Pascale and Jerry Sternin, the two people who worked totally differently with leadership. Saw leadership not as fixing things and coming up with all of the solutions, etc., but more as a learning process where you cocreate and codevelop with communities and the people who own the problems. And Jerry was the founder of the Positive Deviance Initiative, which is basically a methodology where you learn from people and situations, behaviors that

already work well, that are successful. And you try to see if you can learn and scale that so other people can learn.

And I came back and I remember I was walking in my garden. I came away inspired, but also really puzzled because I realized that I had to change my way of doing things with my team and so on. And I didn't know what to do. So I was both inspired, puzzled, frustrated perhaps also. And I remember I called Gary walking around in circles. I was saying, "What did you do to me?" And he said, "Well, let's do something together."

So we decided to start working with this type of leadership and this positive deviance methodology approach in the Danish prison service. And then I worked there as the head of strategy innovation for six more years. And I found out – I don't know if you say that in English, but in Danish, we have this expression that if you have been in a place for maybe too long, you can either stay and put gold on the water taps, or you can leave. So I decided to leave. And I gave in my notice, and I didn't know what I was going to do. And then one of my clients, partners, said, "Well, can you come over and pet some strategy and innovation processes with us?" And I just didn't feel like doing it. And then I set up my own company. So I've worked as an independent consultant and have been doing that for the last seven years.

**[00:06:11] RT:** Okay, so hang on a second man. So this is a part that I don't know. And you're right. Actually, not only we're in the same program there. We sat side by side with each other for a couple modules. And I remember clearly, the PD thing having an effect. And a little bit we'll dig into what positive deviance is for people who don't know, because I think it's important.

**[00:06:31] LT:** Yeah, sure. We can do that. Yeah.

**[00:06:33] RT:** But talk a little bit about this decision. You got a pretty good job in the Danish prison system, and you're having impact. Not what you want probably. But you making a difference. And then you tell your wife, "I'm bagging it. And I'm going to start this thing." Help people understand your thought process to make a decision like that to alter the trajectory of where you're going in your career and your work.

**[00:06:55] LT:** Well, I guess I found myself sitting next to the Director General, the CEO, of the Danish Prison and Probation Service. I had power, influence. But I did not – Well, the first couple of years, when we worked with positive deviance, we had a chance to go out and work directly with the guards, the social workers, the inmates and so on, and their families. But the last couple of years, we did a new corporate strategy and reorganized the whole prison service and so on. And it was great to learn. It was a great learning process. But I was just thinking, I can stay here, and honestly, get really bored with my great salary and all that. Or I could go out and maybe meet people in their communities, and maybe be more helpful there. And I think that was why I did it.

And I had a very supportive family. My wife, my kids said, “Oh, that's good, Lars. Try it out.” And I was also thinking I can always, if I want to, go back to be an administrator, in a way. And then I fallen in love with the positive deviance approach, obviously, that we spoke about earlier. And I can see it work so well in our efforts to solve really, really complex social problems. And I couldn't do enough of that. I was sitting on the fifth floor looking out at the harbor, very nice view and everything, but it was just not enough. It was comfortable. Really, it was, but it was not – I felt I maybe could help more and help to get more impact out there if I took the lift down to the ground floor and walked out in the world.

**[00:08:46] RT:** So you underscore a premise I think you and I share. Let's make it explicit here. And this distinction to leading is a choice and an activity rather than a role. Meaning making a choice to take the lift from fifth floor to ground floor where the action is, and where you have a sense you can make a difference. It's not a job that people assigned to people. It's usually a thing that comes as a choice the individual makes to go into that deal. Or as euphemistically, I'm saying into the swamp where the messes actually exist.

**[00:09:16] LT:** Yeah, you're right. I think you're totally right.

**[00:09:19] RT:** So you go down this lift, metaphorically and literally, but you're carrying with you this framework called positive deviance. So tell people who don't know what that is, a little bit more detailed about what is going on and why positive deviance matters in the world.

**[00:09:37] LT:** Yeah. When we went to Oxford, we both met, as I said before, Jerry Sternin. And Jerry Sternin was the founder of the Positive Deviance Initiative. The definition, or the concept, the model, the approach comes from nutrition research. And it's basically the fact that despite you have access to the same nutrition, same resources, same amount of water, whatever, there will always be somebody who is better nourished than others. And you can see that. There's evidence for that.

And when Jerry started the first project in Vietnam in 1990, there was a really bad situation there with kids dying of severe malnutrition. I think it was one out of five in danger of doing that. So it was really a matter of life and death. And they didn't know what to do, because they didn't have a lot of resources, or money, and so on. They've tried a lot of things. And then he thought, "Well, we might try this, and see if it worked."

So what they did was to weight all of the children, and they were really poor. I think they had three cohorts. One, very poor, very, very poor and a very, very, very poor. And they found that there were families where the kids actually weighted more, and then they were finding out, together with the families, what those families do? How come they were different? What did they do, what were their practices, and so on? So that's the basic idea of the positive deviance approach is that you look for people, situations, teams, communities, and look for people in those teams, communities, that actually behave differently, and have practices that work better than their peers. And then the process is to discover that, unfold that, to understand exactly what's going on, and why people are doing what they're doing. And then initiate learning processes so other community members, other people can learn from them. So that's the basic idea.

**[00:11:34] RT:** So the term positive deviance, therefore, means there's a deviation from assumed norm, and it's a positive deviation rather than a negative deviation.

**[00:11:42] LT:** Yeah. We usually explain it with the bell curve, the standard distribution curve, where you usually have maybe 5% to 10%, that are negative outliers or are performing badly could be the marks for students in a class. Then you maybe have 80% to 90% kind of an average. And then you have the 5% to 10% that are positive outliers, or positive deviance, as we call them, people who perform better than the norm. And the trick is, of course, we explore

what the problems are with this approach. But once we have found out what are the appealing problems from the community for the community, then we switch and we do what we call the flip. So we flip to look for those who actually behave more successfully and learn about what they do and how they do things so we can learn from it. And it's a very, very impactful, wonderful way of working. It's not easy. It's messy. It's in the swamp, as you said. But I think that was also a main part of the reason why I had to go. I had to leave because I wanted to do more of that.

So we have been lucky, and fortunate, and honored to work with all different kinds of vulnerable groups in the world, women entrepreneurs in Palestine, avoiding early marriages with Roma girls, kids, teenagers, violence against women, lots of school dropout with Roma kids, lots of things, but also adding the leadership component or whatever you could call it, because one thing is to facilitate change processes in the field, or in the swamp, or whatever we call it. Another thing, or a very important thing, not another thing, it's obviously connected and intertwined, is to think about how you lead these kinds of processes. It's very different from a normal leadership practice where you – At least in my part of the world, and we have talked about it. So I think it might be a similar thing. We are brought up to understand what problems are. Analyze them and fix it. Come up with solutions ourselves.

And when you work with social change and the positive deviance, that's not what we do. We ask open-ended questions. Listen very carefully. Facilitate processes. But it's the communities that come up with both the definitions of problems, specific definitions of what the problems are they want to work on. But also discover the solutions themselves, and actually also initiate the learning processes that will enable the change. So it's very difficult.

And for me personally, that was maybe the toughest thing to let go of control. I think, Heifetz, the adaptive leadership guy, would say that giving work back to the people actually is easy to say. It's not so easy to do it. But I think once you begin learning about these things, it's kind of an infectious disease, a positive infectious disease, I think.

**[00:14:44] RT:** Finally.

**[00:14:45] LT:** I cannot go back. It's not possible. Probably you can't either, Rick. I would imagine.

**[00:14:50] RT:** Yeah. You raised this distinction about having no answers. And I understand it. We're rewarded and recognized all through our school terms to get good grades, good marks. Knowing answers is how we do that. We get jobs based on our accomplishments. We get elevated, compensated, etc. Therefore, I'd say is a generalization, from my experience, we're really poor at diagnosing the nature of a problem, especially when it gets complicated.

And so I'm thinking, I'd appreciate you sharing this transition from having to find at least a better balance between solving, and inquiring, and understanding. In the adaptive leadership world, it's a three-step process; diagnose, interpret, and then intervene. And generally speaking, for most people, we go right to intervention. So we're putting in two moves before we intervene here. So what was it like for you to build that capacity, to diagnose and interpret before you started taking action? And how did perhaps positive deviance provide a structure for you to build that capacity?

**[00:16:01] LT:** So maybe the answer is quite simple. But then learning how to work with the process is not that simple. I think the answer is simple because I've seen so many complex social issues and problems not being solved, despite good people, competent people, lots of efforts, lots of resources being used, spent money, etc. Maybe for a short while, while the project is ongoing, and the resources available, things might change. But then you go back to sometimes even a worse situation than before.

So I think that's the answer of why you need to work differently as a leader and also as a subject matter expert, as a community, as peers, because that's the other part. Sometimes people expect. No. Not only sometimes. Often, people expect from leaders that they have the answers. So it's also a learning process, I think, from the people you work with.

When it comes to positive deviance, I like the three steps you just mentioned from the adaptive leadership model. In positive deviance, we maybe name it a little bit differently. But I think it's basically some of the same things. So we basically talk about four, sometimes just three basic steps. So one is defining and picking the right problem. We spend a lot of time on that, because it's behavioral things we are looking for. So we need to define the problem really specifically. And it's not us as leaders. It's the communities. So we can ask questions that can help the

community members formulate and pick the right problem, so to speak. And it needs to be something also that's kind of measurable. So we need to be able to say, "If people are doing something or not doing something."

Like let me give you an example. When we worked with the Roma kids in Romania, in Transylvania, the big problem was illiteracy and school dropout. And of course, there were many layers of that. But then we would say the PD problem formulation would be almost no kids come to school. And most kids drop out of school, something like that. And then we would flip it, and that's the next phase, and then ask, "Does that mean that all kids drop out? Does it mean that all kids do not attend the classes and do their homework?" And obviously, the answer is, "No. There are somebody, a few perhaps, that actually behave differently."

So when we have defined and pick this problem, we kind of move to the next phase. And it's not that linear in practice. And then we discover the solutions that already work well. We discover the positive deviance, the positive deviant behavior. In some countries, we cannot name it deviance, because deviance is in many cultures, and especially in the Middle East, where we have worked a lot, it's seen as being sexually deviant. So we rename it and reframe it as championships or even out layers sometimes.

And then the process of discovering that is an equally important thing, of course. And that's not me saying, "Oh, there we have a deviant. There we have a champion." Again, it's the community. They nominate them. They both nominate the problems, and they nominate the deviance, or the champions.

And we have toolbox, lots of tools, interviewing techniques for doing that. But the basic idea is to unfold **[inaudible 00:19:29]** inquiry. I think you've said in the beginning also. We call it the positive deviance inquiry, the whole process to get the champions to speak up. It's not always easy, because sometimes people don't know that they do things differently in a positive way. And there might be norms and other things that can make it difficult. For example, when we worked in Kyrgyzstan with couples sharing household work, the men, when they talk with us, they could tell, "Oh, I share household work with my wife." But they couldn't speak up in the community because it was not the norm to share household work. So we need to find other ways to get them to talk. And it's simple. But one of the basic tricks was basically to find more



than one man, and then they could stand up together. That was easier. And also, to investigate and find out about why. Why did they do it? Because if you can explain why you do things, then people can see, “Ah, there's actually somebody over here just like me, and he or she does something that's actually meaningful.”

So first part is picking the right – The problem definition face. Secondly, to discover the solutions together to find the PD solutions, the positive deviance solutions. And the third phase I would call learning, dissemination, scaling. So in a way, it's quite similar.

**[00:20:53] RT:** Very similar. So talk about then, though, because I imagine people listening to this work, are thinking, “Oh, my goodness. This takes a long time. Isn't there a faster way?” So independent of the process that you just described, and since our conversations about leading, talk a little bit about your own learnings about how you develop your own capacity to keep yourself and the group that you're working with on this path that takes longer than maybe they're predisposed to want to spend to finally get to see some results that matter. How do you do that?

**[00:21:30] LT:** You're right. It's resource – It takes time. And that's maybe also why the positive deviance approach has not become kind of a mainstream change approach, I would say. Maybe a little bit in the kind of humanitarian social change world, but definitely not in the corporate world. And I think it's because it is time consuming. It takes time. And I think in lots of organizations, time is obviously a limited resource, and you need to go fast with things. In this approach, in our approach, we say you need to go fast. You need to go slow to go fast. Sorry. Because otherwise you cannot change.

And I think, over the years, what we've been trying to do is also to make the positive deviance approach even better. So we have spent a lot of time on being clear about data, and how to collect data. And that data are both qualitative data, numbers, statistics, and so on. But it's, of course, also qualitative data, the stories about people. What they do, and how they do things, and why they do things. And this combination, I think, has made the approach – Yeah, I don't know, at least in the work I'm doing with the people I work with, stronger and better.

**[00:22:46] RT:** Is this a merger then, of your prior background?

[00:22:49] LT: Yeah, I guess so. In a way.

[00:22:51] RT: With positive deviance in a way to bolster –

[00:22:53] LT: Yeah. Yeah, I think so.

[00:22:56] RT: Wasn't doing that taking that approach. Was he?

[00:22:59] LT: Well, there were lots of data, but at least my understanding is, of course, they weighted the children. So that was data and so on. But I think there are lots of ways of being very clear about the role that data needs to play, because otherwise, we cannot monitor whether we have success once we have found the positive deviance. We need structures for monitoring evaluation that the communities can do together. Again, it's not us. It's them. So we help them with the tools to define, you could say, the KPIs and so on, indicators for success.

And then I would say also, there's another thing that I have found extremely useful in the work we do, is to look at the behavioral science field. So the whole thing of nudging, and service design, and so on, is very, very helpful. Because it's kind of sharing, I think, the same DNA in way it's cocreation, it's very community-oriented, and so on.

But I think from the design world, we can learn a lot, because their tools are very, very practical. And they're very visual. So service journeys, user journeys, working with personas, working with different types of service design tools, we have found that extremely useful. And then also, simulation techniques. Different types of simulation techniques.

Recently, we worked in a project in Moldova, where we worked on eliminating, or at least reducing gender-based violence among youth, teenagers in Moldova. Seven out of 10 women are experiencing violence, which is huge. I think, on a world basis, one out of three. So it's enormous in Moldova. And we wanted to prevent that from happening, because, of course, you can do a lot. And we did have the deviance structure also with survivors of violence. But we wanted to see if we could do something before it happened.

So we developed lots of – I think we have 11 or something, scenarios or PD situations, harassment, flirting. How do witnesses react when they experience a violent situation and all different kinds of things? And then what we did was to build that into a virtual reality environment. So we made an animation where you are, as the spectator, or the participant, you put goggles on and then you experience different types of situations where you need to make choices and take decisions that can either be bad, or good. And then of course, they reflect the positive deviance situation. So there's one about the party where a boy is going to harass a young woman. And there's a situation with nude photos being shared on social media. And what do you do about that? Things like that.

So I think, combining, actually, a leadership approach where we – And it doesn't necessarily need to be only the adaptive leadership approach, but this area where you work with how to deal with complexity as a leader in another way than we usually do with positive deviance, data collection mapping in a more systematic way, perhaps, service design, behavioral insights, nudging and simulation. You don't need to do it always. But if you can think of, yeah, how you can combine different approaches, I think that makes our change efforts stronger and the impact much, much better is what I'm learning.

**[00:26:26] RT:** So you're not saying this directly, but I'm going to say it on your behalf. I think that you've managed to produce an identity, a legitimate identity, for yourself in the world. If not the leader of positive deviance, certainly somebody – It's a small cadre of people with your skills, background and understanding. And most importantly, the actual practice of it in the field with people. I mean, your experience base is deep and broad. And so I'm really intrigued by how you built that up, and then evolved Jerry's original model of positive deviance to include these other frameworks to continue to pursue good outcomes for groups of people you're working with.

So what have you learned about – I mean, you know how it is, Lars. We can get really married to a framework and actually subscribe to it like a church that we go to. And to some degree, you're quite open to all sorts of other influences in pursuit of having impact. So tell us a little bit about your thinking about that independent of PD. What's going on in your head where you start to see things that you put together?

**[00:27:31] LT:** I think this is a very interesting. From a leadership point of view, this is very interesting. I remember, when we started working with this in the prison service, we were kind of fundamentalist when it comes to the PD methodology. And I guess, perhaps you are, perhaps is in our human nature. When you're learning how to work with a methodology and an approach, you need to kind of stick to it.

But then my former deputy, he came up to me and he said, "You know, Lars, we are not in the positive deviance business. We are in the solving problem business." And I said, "Yeah, well, maybe you're right." And then we talked about that.

So I think maybe the reason why I have done more of this by – And I think you're right. I'm trying to be open to new approaches and new influences and tools and so on, but with kind of the same mindset in the background. And when I see – For example, I think it's fair to say that I really admire and I'm addicted to the – And I have the positive infectious disease called positive deviance, definitely. But I can also see that there are some challenges in the original approach. And I would say one of them is it's not very strong when it comes to the learning and the dissemination and scaling processes.

And once I might have seen that a couple of times in the projects that we are engaged in, then you need to find a way to deal with it. And then I had the luxury of working with some service design people and some people who do a lot of nudging and so on, and said, "Well, let's see. Let's try it out. Let's experiment and see if we can combine something here that could actually work."

So we took the positive deviance situations. And then we said what would a learning journey look like? And then we used user journeys to describe what would the learning journey look like for different types of personas, for example, and that really helped us. So I think it's still kind of the same DNA, but it's a matter of adding a few simple, yet very powerful tools.

**[00:29:41] RT:** It's a great metaphor, meaning the DNA framing, because that's how we evolve, right? The DNA runs experiments and keeps what works, gets rid of what doesn't, and then adds. So my sense of it is, somewhere down the line, when the next Lars comes along, who wants to take on positive deviance, they're going to inherit a higher order orientation about how

you might use this framework based on the additive – Not necessarily maybe specific frames, but the concept and the idea and the openness to say, “This can hold up within the addition of other elements that play with it and still have quality impact.” And I approve that.

**[00:30:24] LT:** Yeah, I don't know. I hope. I would also say that one of the learnings that I would like to highlight is that I think the positive deviance approach, and this way of working that we are talking about now, you don't necessarily need to call it the positive deviance approach, but where you look for solutions that already work well, and combining different tools, and so on. I think it works everywhere. I've seen it work in many cultures, but you need to be aware of the culture. For example, in some cultures, you cannot go directly to sit in a circle and begin defining the problems. You need to be aware of hierarchies, and power, formal power, authority and all that. And you cannot just take that away and assume that you can.

I'm from a Scandinavian country, and we are quite low on the **[inaudible 00:31:10]** and so on. And I'm not saying that's better or worse. I'm just saying you need to be aware of the culture you are working with. So being aware of that, and if you acknowledge that. For example – And this is not, again, to say something negative. But when we worked in Morocco some years ago, you always had to have the high-ranking people needed to speak for a while before you could actually – That's my words. Get the real work done. Which is fine. And you also had to praise the king. And if you don't do that, then you cannot work in a culture like that, which is totally fine. You just need to know.

It's the same in the Middle East, where we work with the women, survivors of violence and entrepreneurs and people who wanted to avoid early marriages. You cannot come up to a woman and just say hello by shaking hands. That's not appropriate. And some women, especially in the West Bank, I found, did it, but it needs to be on their initiative. Otherwise, you'd take your hand and you put it through your heart and you nod your head and then you say hello.

And if you don't know these norms and kind of cultural codes, then you can have work with people from other cultures. But basically, it's about respect. It's about, yeah, being respectful to other people, I guess. And I think leadership is a lot about that, too, actually.

**[00:32:38] RT:** What you're saying is everything happens inside the context of culture as well. So understanding that independent of the specific work you're trying to do is critical to how you go about what you're going to do. Yeah.

**[00:32:50] LT:** I would say that the process, the PD process, and with the tools and the way of leading we've been talking about kind of works everywhere. But the solutions and the way it unfolds, the way you unfold the problems are different. But you can use – I think you can use all of the necessary tools. You just need to be aware of the specific context and the cultures and so on.

**[00:33:13] RT:** Okay. So if you don't mind want to shift our focus a little bit to your particular point of view about leading. I know that you're a student of leadership in all its varying forms. But you've also been a practitioner of it. You've been a leader for quite a while. So you have your own views. So I'll give you an opportunity to add your definition of leadership to the mountainous list of definitions of leadership so that you're on the roles here. So what is leading to you?

**[00:33:41] LT:** Oh, wow! I guess, for me, in the beginning of my career, it was a very technical form of – Kind of more management style. Fixing things and come up with solutions and different scenarios so our management and our senior management could take good decisions. But I think now, it's changed over the years. So basically – And I don't know if it's too loose, but enabling people and communities to grow so they can change in a positive way. That's basically, I think, what leading is about. And that has lots of implications, of course.

**[00:34:22] RT:** Well, let's play with some of those implications. So what are the acts? If you're choosing to lead, you're going to wait in and use yourself. And we should talk about that, how you use yourself here. But let's hold that for a second. What are some of your enabling strategies that you think are worth carrying into a conversation where you're going to lead? Because if you're going to enable them, what's actually happening between you and them? The I receive is being enabled.

**[00:34:49] LT:** I think one of the very good things you can do as a leader is really to ask a lot of questions. I work a lot. I don't know if that makes sense. We work a lot with this notion of

psychological safety. Amy Edmondson from Harvard University came up with that a couple of years ago. And it makes a lot of sense. So having this curious way of defining processes as learning processes instead of fixing problems processes is very very powerful. So I think I try to understand what the people I work with, what they do? How they do things? And what they are interested in? What are their passions? What are their aspirations? Their hopes?

And by doing that, I can ask questions about how they explore and experiment with solutions. Of course, I can be decisive also. That's not it. And sometimes you need to be as a leader. So it's not an either or. It's both and. But especially, if we work within this complex area that we were talking about before, the usual way, the standard models of leadership, they don't. They simply don't work. I think the framing challenges, I think Heifetz is talking about that too. Also, how you frame things. How you frame problems, challenges as where you need to work together. As teams, to be able to solve that is really important.

I don't know, maybe I have the fancy positions that I – Well, I had good positions in the past. So I'm not that interested in that anymore. And that's maybe arrogant to say that. But I think when I see people getting inspiration from each other, when I helped to create spaces where great conversations can actually happen. I think, another scholar calls it timeout. **[inaudible 00:36:47]** guy. He talks about basically stopping, freezing what you do, and then making sense together. If you can work in that way as a leader, at least that's my aspirations. I don't know if it works all the time. I don't think so. But yeah, does that make sense?

**[00:37:05] RT:** Yeah, it does make sense. And I think that, again, going back to what you just mentioned about different cultures of people, it strikes me that there's a culture of learning, or that you walk into as a leader in whatever group of people you're with. And so the inquiry into the questions helps reveal the culture, which I'm seeing maps, more accurately, the terrain of which the leader can actually work off of to mobilize people into actions, because you've done a good typography, if you will, through your inquiry to understand at least better than had you not done it.

**[00:37:45] LT:** I have this wonderful picture I'm thinking of right now. Because when I met Jerry Strenin, the founding father of the positive deviance approach, he was telling different stories. And he was a very humble guy. So maybe it was others telling stories about what he did,

actually more than himself, which was actually a wonderful thing. But one of the stories, examples of, I think, phenomenal leadership, was that I think he went to – I think it was Ethiopia. I'm not sure, an African country, to sit with the **[inaudible 00:38:16]**, the tribe there. And the elderly men met at the Savannah, discussing their problems and issues of the village and so on.

And Jerry came and was going to help. But he spent the first couple of days just sitting, literally, at their feet, listening to what they were talking about. And he had an interpreter, obviously, whispering in his ears and so on, but he did not say anything. He was just listening. And that was not part of the official interpretation. But then one of the men said, “A guy that is so respectful, that he is listening to us before he actually is beginning to help us. We can work with this guy.”

So I think it's a lot about humbling yourself. I think the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, that you might know of. He actually said, “You need to humble yourself before you can actually help people.” And I think it's about that.

**[00:39:15] RT:** You know, when you go back, and if you should go back and listen to this conversation, you're going to notice something. If I don't say this, you probably will. But I'm going to say it so you do, is how often you lead your conversations with we. And I think that's a reflection of whatever you're doing, you couldn't possibly do it by yourself. And there's a group of us that are **[inaudible 00:39:35]**.

So I'm interested in what you've learned from successes and failures. We learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes. So would you be willing to share some of that both on the success side and also the failure side for people?

**[00:39:52] LT:** Let's start with the failure. I think my first – Not my first. But a very serious failure or an experience that was very emotional to me was when we began working with the positive deviance approach in the Danish Prison and Probation Service. We were fortunate to have some funding. We could get Jerry over and so on. Unfortunately, he got ill. So we had one of his dear friends and colleagues, Mark Monger, to help us. So that was great. So the setup around our initiative was actually quite good.



I had the steering committee, and we started the positive deviance process. And as you said, before, or we talked about before, it takes time. It's not something you just do in a couple of weeks or a month. It takes time to build trust, psychological safety, so people actually speak up and share their problems and stories and so on. And they were impatient. And they thought it was a little art, this strange initiative. So why are you doing that?

When I asked the director general whether we could do it or not, he said, "Yeah. Well, you can do it, as long as you do all the other things you need to do. You can actually do this strange positive deviance thing."

So at a certain point, I think it was maybe nine months, maybe a year into our process. They said in the steering committee, "Why are we doing this? Nothing is happening. It's really a waste of time, and money, and so on." So I had sleepless nights. And I was seriously considering to close down the project, because there was a lot of pressure, because they wanted quick fixes, like management stuff, monitoring stuff, evaluation, all the classical things, which is fine. I decided not to, which was really good. But it was really, really frustrating those weeks, because they couldn't see why we should spend more time and energy on this.

And then fortunately, things began to happen. Jerry had this wonderful picture of a ketchup bottle that you sometimes press. And sometimes it's difficult to get the ketchup out. But once it gets out, it's kind of – And then lots of small signs of ketchup or positive things begin to happen. And that's actually what happened in the prison system. So I'm really pleased that I was stubborn enough, perhaps, to stick with the process and trust the process.

And during that time, the CEO, the general director, he also asked me to come to a meeting, because the kind of my team was kind of this innovative type of team with lots of ideas and so on. And we were maybe not that good at – How do you say that? Not coming with all the things at the same time. And it was a big system with five 5000, 6000 people, both employees and inmates. So of course, it was important to not come with all things at the same time. And in the beginning, I don't think we were very good at that.

So he called me for a meeting and I sat down and the two deputies on each of his side. And he had taken lots of notes about what he was hearing about what we were doing out there. And he

basically said, “Lars, this is too much. That's an overload of things in the system. It cannot go on. Can you deal with this? Do you really think you are competent enough to do this?” And I said, “Shit, I'm getting fired here.” And then I said, “Well, could you give me some time? And then I will think about it, and I will come back and talk with you again?” “Yup. Okay.”

So I spent a couple of days or a week or so discussing with my team, and actually also some of the people from Oxford that I mentioned what to do. And I basically came back and said, “I think we should still have the same ambition about what we are going to do and what kind of change we're going to do.” So I think at the time we had about 40 different projects over a period of four years.

So I said, “Well, maybe if we communicate in another way.” So instead of having 40 different initiatives coming at the same time, we say we have maybe three or four different main themes. And then when we talk about it internally, we talk about different projects. But when we communicate in the organization, it's more a few red threats with different things.” And he said, “Yes, let's try that.” And that actually, I think, worked. But those were really difficult things. And I learned a lot from that. Because I think you're right, you learn more from your failures than your successes.

**[00:44:19] RT:** Yeah, I also think that – It strikes me too, Lars, that a takeaway for people is how do you manage the heat and the tension so that people stay in action and be productive and they don't go over the top and they're in overwhelm, or it's too cold, and they're just not in any action? So it strikes me that that call to order, where you got put in front of these people, activated a thought process that helped develop an understanding of the dose of work that people can handle.

**[00:44:45] LT:** I had increased complexity before this meeting. And then I came back and was trying to reduce complexity, I think, by communicating another way. And I think Heifetz called it regulating distress, which is a very, very powerful thing. If you can do that as a leader, or we can do that as a team, it's a very, very powerful thing to kind of be able to turn off the heat, but also to turn it down. And that, I think, requires a lot of sensitivity to what's the temperature like right now in the work we do.

And that's not only when you are a leader in an organization. It's also in the different projects we do, because we did a project in North Macedonia a couple of years ago, and people got – They were a little bit laid back. And it was maybe they were in their comfort zones. And we actually needed to turn up the heat a little bit. So we actually began talking about what kind of failures we could see happening if we did not do our work, and so on.

So I think being aware of those, it's small things. But it means a lot if you can leave with those things and communicate it in a way that actually enables turning up the heat and increasing and decreasing complexity. I think that's very powerful.

**[00:46:00] RT:** Yeah. The point of the exercise is to keep people in motion towards where you're trying to get so that they're making progress on this. So one last question, then. And maybe you've actually been asked to do this. If so, then you'll be ready for this one, but maybe not. So let's imagine that you've been asked by some university in Copenhagen to come into a class of students who are in some kind of business or some kind of curriculum where they're looking at leadership. And your task is to give them some advice from your experience about what leading is and what you think they should pay attention to. How would you do that? What would you bring to that conversation for those young people?

**[00:46:43] LT:** Well, I'm actually an associate professor of the University here and teaching strategic management and change leadership and so on. So primarily, people from the – I don't know. I don't know, actually. But at least I have had the opportunity to have conversations about that, about these things. And I think the best conversations we have had is our conversations where we, together, acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. That we actually need to – In an open, curious trustful environment, need to work together in another way. And I usually say you can have all the tools in the world. But if you don't have the right mindset, then it won't work. So it's basically a kind of the conversation that we have had now, I would say. Yeah.

**[00:47:35] RT:** Hey, in some ways, I don't know that we're done with this conversation. So let's call this chapter one of a conversation, because I know that there's more stuff on your mind. There's more things you've learned. I'm particularly interested, maybe when we talk again, about the actual real impact you've had on the ground with the varying groups around the world you've worked with, because I think that that's – For a lot of people, it's important to know. Is this

exercise actually lead to stuff? And the time we've got doesn't get us to all those places. So if you're willing to come back for round two, then we can dig into that.

**[00:48:06] LT:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure. Just very briefly on – I'm happy to, Rick, always. We have managed to reduce school dropout, absenteeism among staff in vulnerable groups like guards and so on, in different types of prison service. Reduce early marriages, reduce violence, gender-based violence, and so on. So I think it's essential for us, as leaders, to work in some of the ways we've been talking about now, honestly, yeah.

**[00:48:32] RT:** Well, I'm particularly grateful that you're in this deal. I know that you've been on this journey since I met you. And I think it's also worth pointing out that while it can seem like a long time, really, it's only been – You got rolling on this at the end of our program to 2008, and it's 2021. And it takes a while to build up this capacity and get good at something like this. But it doesn't take a long time to start to have the impact as you're building your capacity. And I think that's a good story of your success and your impact in the world. So thanks for doing that.

**[00:49:06] LT:** You're more than welcome.

[OUTRO]

**[00:49:09] 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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