

**EPISODE 009**

[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.

**[00:00:20] RT:** Hi, everybody. Rick Torseth. Welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This week, our episodes are going to take us to Amman, Jordan. Specifically, we're going there to have a conversation with a colleague and a friend, Safiya Ibn Garba. Safiya has really two projects that she's going to share with us. They've been co-mingled together and supportive of each other for about 10 years.

She is the founder of Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative, or EWEI, which is set up in Nigeria 14 years ago. She's also working for Generations for Peace in Amman, Jordan, and she's been there for 10 years as well. What she's going to actually do is talk to us a little bit about what drives her to be this involved with these kinds of projects for as long as she has. She says, she's a runner. She says, she chases things that produce a burning desire in her and they will not let her be. She knows she's got to get after it. Boy, is she doing it with these two projects.

Talk a little bit about how important the work is of changing mindsets that affect individuals and the cultures that they live in, in order to do the work of supporting initiatives for women, and also finding peaceful ways to deal with conflict. Then, she will also spend a little bit of time talking about what leadership is to her. Basically, it's about being a servant. She's got some very specific, well-formed opinions and points of views about the work that she does and the importance of it and what it means to lead. Also, some good counsel for people who are thinking about this kind of work.

Let's head off to Amman, Jordan, and let's have a conversation with Safiya, and we will see you in the conversation. Thank you.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:02:03] RT:** Hi, everybody. Rick Torseth back for another episode of 10,000. Swamp Leaders. Thank you for joining us. Today is, I think I say this on every episode, but this is different. I think, I say a lot of times, it's my pleasure to have somebody special on the show. Today, it is my pleasure to have somebody special on the show. Safiya Ibn Garba is a woman that I met, Safiya, I'm guessing five, six years ago. Does that sound about right?

**[00:02:31] SIG:** Yeah, that sounds about right, Rick.

**[00:02:33] RT:** I met you in Amman, Jordan. Full disclosure to listeners, we've done some decent work together over the years. I know a bit about your story. There's lots of reasons why I asked you to be on this podcast. Hopefully, those will all come forward in the conversation. Let's get rolling here. I will say, that as I got prepared for this, I re-remembered some stuff about you that has been invisible to me over the five years, because I guess, I just take it for granted. I just want to call it out before you go, that you are the founder of the Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative, or EWEI in Nigeria 14 years ago.

10 years, you've been working in Amman, Jordan for Generations for Peace. Right out of the gate, I'm thinking, I forgot. She's got these two massive projects that she's involved with in two different parts of the world, with two different teams. Let's not forget that you started a four-year journey this year to get a doctorate in peace and conflict. Questions abound, my friend. I want to give you first shot here, just share with listeners, who are you, and what propels you to do the work that you're doing, because you've been at it for quite a long time.

**[00:03:54] SIG:** Thank you, Rick. Let me start off by saying, thank you for having me. It's actually my privilege to be on this podcast with you. You have been an amazing coach, mentor to me. I mean, I think, first time we met, as usual, I'm always very – I don't want to say suspicious, but I'm always very neutral about new people I meet, because I feel like time will tell, or what value will come out of that relationship. I can say that not a minute, or a second of regret has come out of this relationship. I want to thank you not just for having me before all the mentorship.

I am just this girl from Nigeria who has worked a lot in her life. I'll put it that way. I'll even add on to the hats as you mentioned, those hats are, yes, Founder of Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative in Nigeria, headquartered in Kaduna, Northwest Nigeria. I'm also currently Director of Institutional Learning and Generations for Peace, with headquarters in Amman. I worked my way up from being a volunteer, all the way to leading the newest department in the organization.

I also actually lead the locally registered organization of Generations for Peace in Nigeria, as a Chair. I had a nice, brief stint with an organization in Rwanda, leading that as well. Yes, as you mentioned, currently doing a doctorate. I'm someone who is what I would call a runner with visions. I believe that, and this is how I started a lot of what I do. There's a vision, there's a burning. There's a passion. There's something that just won't let me be, and I have to do something about it.

Or, it could be that someone else has a vision, has identified something and feels, this is something worth doing. I'm the person and I'm the one that says, "Okay, I believe in this and I'm going to run with it. I will run with it for myself, or for you, or for the people we're going to serve." Lots of aspects of my identity, I come from Northern Nigeria. For those of us who follow the news, you know that that's a part of a country that's currently under a lot of, should I say, facing a lot of challenges. I am the third of three daughters. I have an amazing mother who taught us what work ethic is, and really, how important it is to go to school, study well, come out strong, independent, and do what you believe in. I would just say, I'm a runner. I'm a person who believes in something. I would give my all to make sure as much as I can that it's done.

**[00:07:00] RT:** Good start. Let's talk a little bit about what specifically is the belief, or beliefs you have. I suspect, there's some common denominators between the work of EWEI, GFP, the work you're going to do in your doctorate program. What is that? For people who are listening, what do you believe in that is important enough for you to do the work that you're doing across these different platforms?

**[00:07:24] SIG:** If I was to put it in one word, I would say, it's service. Service in the sense that you may or may not have a title as a leader, a manager, or whatever title you carry. It is about serving. Not to sound cheesy, like saying, serving humanity, but it is about service. It is about

giving from what you have, from what you know, from what you've been privileged to have access to to others as well.

If, in one instance, it's education, its knowledge about something, it's service and giving that to others who may not have that opportunity. If it's about peacebuilding, you have seen, you've experience, you've been in places where people live in a culture of peace. How can we share that? How can we make that happen with another group of people? If you're working with girls and women, what opportunities have I had in my life that I wish other girls, I wish another girl somewhere in Nigeria and Africa, in any part of the world can access? It is about what you've been given, what are you doing with what you've been given? How do you make that accessible to others?

**[00:08:36] RT:** Okay. You and I have talked about this before. Actually, you've talked about it. I've listened to you talk about it. I think, for our conversation, it's useful for people out there, is if you don't mind, share explicitly how your mother influenced who you are today.

**[00:08:51] SIG:** Sure. I am, as I said, the third of three daughters. Now in certain cultures, especially around the global south, there's always long-term cultural issues about having daughters and how much value does that bring to a family and all kinds of negative gender stereotypes. My mother was widowed when I was a very young. I just had my third birthday, actually, when my father passed on. My mother was incredibly devastated.

One of the things that I think seriously shaped my thinking and my outlook to life was the fact that number one, she had made sure, as an individual, aside from my father, had pursued her education, was already embedded in education. It was like, like-minded people came together. He was also an educator. That was key, because at that time, within the cultural context, what may have been expected was for her to probably get married to a relative of my father, brother or whoever, and just stay at home, and possibly, even the girls married off early.

Because my mother had invested in herself, and understanding that she had to take care of her children, she did that. I can tell you, it wasn't easy. Even today, it's not easy for women who are in that same situation. Single parents, for one reason or the other. Just that courage, just that dedication, I mean, blew me away then, probably subconsciously. Every single day that I wake

up, it blows me away, because I can't imagine how difficult it is to lose someone you love who you've planned a future with. Understanding that you have a responsibility to those that depend on you, and even others as well.

She went on herself to continue her education. She started her doctorate. At the end of the day, it was just that epitome of strength and courage, that has helped me through a lot of things in my life.

**[00:10:59] RT:** And your sisters?

**[00:11:00] SIG:** My sisters. My mom was very insistent in us making sure we went to school and we put our noses in our books and got our work done. I'm happy to say that – oh, my eldest sister passed, but my elder sister is – she went on to become an architect and started off another business. I would say, my mom did a good job with her girls, let's put it that way, especially within the context in which we live. The thing is, she kept always reminding us, “You need to be equipped enough to be independent.” That is not to say, that you do not appreciate others around you, or work with other people. You must be able to be equipped enough to be independent.

**[00:11:50] RT:** Let's take in turn, the work that you initiated with EWEI, Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative, and then Generations for Peace, just so people understand how you spend your days and what you're focused on in terms of the work. I think, probably also, we want to get into for sure, how in the world you balance these two major projects, and have been balancing for 10 years. Let's start with EWEI. Tell people what the point of this work is and this organization and mission is trying to take care of.

**[00:12:23] SIG:** I would say, Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative was almost like, the actualization of that vision and that understanding that you have to be independent, you have to work hard. Especially as a woman, as a girl and a woman, you have to invest in yourself, and not fall prey to negative cultural, social stereotypes, or things, narratives that you've been told ever since you've been young, regardless of whatever your identifiers are. Whether it's race, religion, whatever it is. Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative seeks to provide multi-sectoral interventions for the empowerment and the enlightenment of women.

We're very focused on mindsets. It's so key that mindsets are in the right place to be able to achieve whatever you want to achieve, or at least strive for them. Because without the right mindset, the mindset is what guides you. That is what enables you, helps you to make decisions in one way or the other. If I already feel I am inferior, I have this mindset, it's been passed on to me for generations.

If I already been told that this is all you are worth, or this is all you're going to do in your life, then it will affect your decisions. It will affect the effort you put into life. It will affect you when the challenges come. Then you're like, "Well, this is all I am. That's it." Through EWEI, we're really working to provide multi-sectoral. It's important that it's multi-sectoral, because honestly, there are so many problems in the world, that no one person can take care of everything.

We're talking about different sectors, whether it's health, whether it's education, whether it's the environment, and so on and so forth. We want to try as much as possible, working with a strong, dedicated team to see the areas where the needs are highest, and then respond to those needs to capacity building, advocacy, both at policy level and at grassroots level. I'm very proud to say that Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative is a grassroots organization, because that is where life happens.

Regardless of how nicely we sit in front of our computers, or we go for conferences and seminars, that is not where life happens. Life happens out there on the street. It happens in my home. It happens in my neighbor's home. Whether it's advocacy at the grassroots, enlightenment, seminars, a lot of knowledge sharing and making sure that our beneficiaries, and by the way, our beneficiaries are not only girls and women, even though they are primary. Those are the groups that we target, first and foremost.

It's also very important for us for inclusion, to ensure that if, for example, you're addressing an issue of violence against women, and the perpetrators in the data show us that, okay, men are higher perpetrators of violence against women, why wouldn't you involve men and boys in that programming? We are doing that, through all these different interventions. If you look at the website and so on, you can see all of that. Through that, and through that work that we started

in 2008, I was actually invited to a network to come to a Generations for Peace training camp in 2008.

At Generations for Peace, what we do is we work with the youth, or youth leaders, who, by providing them world-class free peacebuilding education and conflict transformation education to help them address issues of conflict within the communities. There's this bridge, again, of grassroots, working at the grassroots. Yes, we would work and sometimes with policy level and national level, but it is about communities understanding what are the issues? Because they know. They're the experts in these things. You know what's going on. Who are the actors? What are the factors that are affecting what's going on? Then, what can you do about it? What do you have access to? Who do you have access to? Who can you influence? Who are the influencers? I've been invited to the count in 2008. I actually went in there with a lot of questions and saying, "Well, Generations for Peace –"

**[00:16:36] RT:** Of course, you did.

**[00:16:40] SIG:** Yeah. I mean, I always go with a lot of questions, right? Little too much for my own good. We went in there, because then, the primary tool being used by Generations for Peace was sports. I was like, I come from a nation where sports is so important. I'm not so sure it's for peaceful purposes, but let's go, let's see. By the time I went, went through the training, I understood a whole lot better. I understood how those things that may seem like they divide the social activities or whatever, could also unite us.

Because then, I talked about the fact that okay, if within a country, let's say, in my country, two different clubs are playing, we might be fighting. If we were playing another country, all of us, despite our immense and diversity, I come from a country of more than 200 million people. 350 dialect, 250 ethnicities, we were one. It was like, "Oh, okay. Aha, that's it. We can use those things that may seem to divide us to actually bring us together."

I also wanted to make sure it intersected with EWEI's vision of empowering girls and women. We started to address issues of gender inequality, girls and women's inclusion and communities and started to include other groups, the media, male, youth, elders. I'm very proud to say that in Nigeria, we have actually used all the tools for peacebuilding. We call them vehicles for

peacebuilding at Generations for Peace. We have used all of those tools, except the newest one, we just started this last year, in Nigeria, to build peace and bring about better social inclusion, gender equality, and a lot of other things.

**[00:18:24] RT:** Okay. Let's unpack a couple pieces here then, because that's a great overview for people to understand and be – actually, beginning to see the overlap between EWEI and GFP. You talked about mindsets. When you're trying to help people develop a different mindset, talk a little bit about, what's actually going on? What's the work of that? Second, I think connected to that, when you saw the work of Generations for Peace and using sport, how did that approach help address mindset? Take mindset to start with first in your own organization, and then how GFP may have supported it.

**[00:19:05] SIG:** I would say that changing mindsets is arguably, one of the hardest things that could possibly be done in life. Because mindsets, in the way I'm defining it, it's about your thinking culture, the way you think, the way you approach things, the lens through which you look at things. They are developed over years. They are developed and influenced by society, your family and all the factors around you. They're deeply entrenched.

I mean, for some people, I don't think there's anyone that mindset is easy to change. We might say that there's some people who are easily influenced, but it's still not the same thing. It might be related to a particular issue. When we speak of changing mindset, it is okay, look, this is how you think about something. It's literally putting a mirror in front of a person and saying, “This is how you think about it. These are some of the elements that have fed into it.”

I think more, it's questioning. You must give that freedom to whoever is listening to you to do a lot of self-reflection. Because you do not want to come in and say, “This is how you should do that thing.” Nobody's going to follow you. They may follow you, because they're going to get something out of it, just for a bit. When we speak of the deeper things, those things that are entrenched, you must allow for self-reflection. You must allow for people to be honest with themselves and your job as a practitioner in that is making the space safe to do that. Making the space safe enough to question my mindset, or the way that I think about things.



As a woman, I've been told, you're only useful for, just go to school, get your basic degree, and that's it and then go get married and take care of your husband have kids. That is a choice for some. I do not say, there's anything wrong with that. What I'm saying is that, if that's all I've been told, and my worth is related to that, that is a mindset that has been entrenched in me. I cannot change that mindset with one event, one seminar, one anything. This is also where the great work of Generations for Peace comes in. Because what we do is we work long-term with communities and with individuals. It's about us.

Okay, finding a space, using a vehicle to get into the community and say, "All right. Okay, we just played a game. What are your reflections about that game? What did you learn? Then how does that translate to real life for you? Are the questions you need to ask yourself? Why did you hit that person? Why did you let that person get the ball? Why did you do this and do that?" Such a safe space for self-reflection is what changing mindsets is all about. Key to remember is that mindsets will not be changed, until the individuals themselves decide to change.

**[00:22:00] RT:** Sport is its own real world. Oftentimes, one of the great benefits of sports is a metaphor for real life, or for the rest of life. What does that translation of the lessons learned in the work of Generations for Peace in a community over time using sport, and I know you've diversified your offer now to be a little bit beyond sport, but just keep it there for the moment. What is the work that you support them in doing to take it out of the context of the sporting activity into another place in their life, where their life is more likely to be harder than on the playing field?

**[00:22:36] SIG:** Which is key, actually, and that is the actual peacebuilding work. That is peacebuilding. That is the real work there. You're going beyond just the things all at the top of things that are at the surface, and going deeper. If we use the example, the metaphor of sport, and sport values and all of those things related to sport, let's take an example of teamwork. If it's a team game, you know, no matter how good you are as an individual, as an individual football, and I'm proud to say that we have a lot of Nigerian internationals who played. No matter how good you are, you cannot run from your post to the other post and score a goal.

There are obstacles in front of you. There are other people trying to stop you, basically. Someone even trying to break your leg. There are other teammates that are there to help you.

Even just such a simple metaphor, you cannot achieve something in life, say on your own, all right, because there will be obstacles. There will be competitors. There will be people and other things to help you as well.

When you sit down after, say, a sport-based game, not even a competition football game, and you sit down and you say, “Look, okay. I learned to this game that I needed my teammates to be able to score the goal.” What does that tell you in real life? All right, I have a challenge. I have a goal. I need, first and foremost, to have the skills to be able to do it. I’m, not going to be picked for the national team, or any team if I’m not good with my skills. Whatever it is you want to achieve in life, one of the things you can translate that into is what I want to achieve.

I want to become a doctor. I have to go to school and get and get all the credentials. Fine. What else did you learn? I learned that there are obstacles and then people who are in the way. What if the goal was peace? There will always be obstacles in the way. There will be factors that do not want peace to come about, because of their own interests. What other forces around? There are opposing players, the defenders, there’s this, there’s that, and I’m not good at sports. Pardon me for whatever things I’m getting wrong.

At the end of the day, it is through that experience, sit down and self-reflect and say, “Okay. If my mindset was that –” I mean, I’ll take myself as an example. I used to be so much of a loner, when it came to work. I just want to sit down, get my work done, get out of there. I don’t need anyone around me. I’m going to do it. I realized later on that, fine, I may do a good job, but I found that there was value when all people brought in their ideas and things I never thought were possible, or ever thought of, came to mind.

I’m like, “Okay. If I’m in a team, and I’m running across the field, it’s important to have other people as well with me. We can achieve our goal collectively.” Even the achievement is even better, or it’s higher, or much more important. This is the way it translates. Mindsets, reflections, translating into real life. What does this look like? What does this mean as a concept in real life?

**[00:25:50] RT:** There’s a lot of people out here. You know, Mark was on the show a little while ago, but not everybody probably heard Mark’s conversation. Talk about, what it actually means to be in the peacebuilding business. For people for whom that’s not something that they see in

their community very much, because in some ways, it's not as needed as it is in other parts of the world. What does that work actually look like?

**[00:26:16] SIG:** Oh, my goodness. I could go on for two days answering that. I mean, you're just spot on, about the fact that for some, conflict, violent conflict, crises, whatever you want to call it, war, is not really a reality, so to speak. It's not a lived reality. It's either maybe too young, or you just find yourself, you're privileged to be in a situation where these things don't happen, or at least, they're not as intense as in other places.

Peacebuilding, in its purest form is dealing with the deeper issues that result in episodes of violence. I'll explain that a little bit more. For example, there was a car bomb. A car bomb went off somewhere, okay. We would call that an episode of violence, because it was something that's tangible, something that it's seen, something that's affected people. People may have died, injured, whatever the case may be. It's not just about that, unfortunately. It's about a lot of deeper things. We use this model and we use an iceberg model for a lot of different concepts, and different concepts.

When it comes to peacebuilding, it speaks about the fact that there are structural and cultural issues below the surface, that are feeding whatever episodes of violence are happening. What peace building is, is dealing with those deeper things. First of all, and this is where mindset comes in again, the cultural issues, which are the deeper issues. When I say cultural, I'm not talking just about maybe the general term, or what we speak about culture. It is, what is embedded? What are the mindsets? What are the narratives you've been told all your life about a certain group of people, about a race of people? What are the artifacts? What are the languages that are permissible about a certain group of people? Are you allowed to call a certain group of people a certain way? Are you allowed to mingle with this group of people?

Entrenched mindsets. Some of them even come about – They even inherited traumas and inherited cultural narratives that come where you have absolutely no idea how it started, but you just feel, well, and part of my identity is with this group, and so I must identify with this, without even thinking about how did you form that opinion? What informs that opinion? What happens then and what is happening now? Okay.

This thing, that the deeper issues; peacebuilding is about dealing with the deeper issues. Because until those deeper issues, cultural and structural issues are dealt with, the episodes of violence will continue to happen. It doesn't matter what you do, how many people you arrest, or whatever, that's what we call negative peace. Just a cessation of violence.

**[00:29:13] RT:** Negative peace, you said.

**[00:29:14] SIG:** Negative peace. Yes, that's what it referred to. Because it just means, violence has seized for that time. It will come again, if those deeper things are not dealt with. That is what peacebuilding is about. It is essentially about changing mindsets. It may be changing mindsets to understand better. You do not necessarily have to agree, because that's another thing that as humans, we generally think, "Oh, okay. For us to all live together in peace, we must all agree on the same thing." No. What we do want to be able to do is we may have different opinions, but it doesn't mean that I have to be violent with you, because I have a different opinion. I have a right to mine. You have a right to yours. How can we respect those differences without it resulting in violence?

**[00:29:59] RT:** It seems to me that part of the actual interactive work that goes on here, because as you say wisely, a lot of this is cultural. It's generationally built up as cultural aspects. Asking an individual in the present day to change that long history by themselves is a big ask. Give people a couple of small wins, some successes that you witnessed in people who have made that, or at least got on the road to making different decisions in the face of that large, cultural experience that they've lived in and started to do something different. What's that actually look like in your experience?

**[00:30:38] SIG:** I'm glad you said small wins, because that's what it's about. It's small wins that will eventually, eventually lead to big wins. I cannot fail to say here, that peacebuilding is not a one-year job. It's not a two-year job. I mean, we've had countries where, who have been in violent conflict for more years than I've been alive. I mean, peace building is long-term work. That's the first thing to remember.

Now, what a small wind could look like is this. I'll give an example from Kaduna State in Nigeria. The metropolis of that town, you have one religion, that stays mostly on one side of the town,

and another religious group. Doesn't mean there's no mixing, but majority are in each side. This was actually a program amongst women, okay. It was an environment for peace program amongst women. Some of them, I'm speaking about a town, a town that is not so big that you ordinarily wouldn't be going to the other side of town. Some of them had actually never crossed the Little River, there's a bridge somewhere, to go to the other side of town.

There were markets on the other side of town. Their friend is on the other side of town. Just because we've created that space, and let me say, on such basis, must be carefully facilitated. That enables that reflection. We got them together, they started to interact, and began to realize, "Okay, we are different in this way, but we also have the same concerns, for example, for our children, or for our communities. Why are we not interacting?"

For the first time, some of them got phone numbers of women from another religion, and were able to cross that bridge to the other side of town. For some, that might seem something so small. Believe me, if you're within the context, you would be shocked and say, "Oh, wow. Something that I may not —" I mean, for me, I go, if I'm in town, I would probably cross that bridge up to five, six times a day for different things.

For someone else who's also in that context, can you imagine someone who has never done that? Who's never had the phone number of someone of another religion? In such a diverse country, are you kidding me? These are the kinds of things you see and you go, "Yes, this is worth it." This is worth what we're doing. No matter how difficult or small it may seem, that is what a small wind could look like.

**[00:33:09] RT:** Can we shift a little bit here then? This conversation and podcast has the word leader in it. Sometimes, I think, maybe I should have omitted that, but here we are and I'm sticking with it. One of the questions I have for you personally is, a little bit of a question about stamina. Personal human stamina. You have a project going on in Nigeria. You live in Amman, Jordan. There's a pandemic that's been going on for two years, that's restricted travel and face-to-face work for a lot of us for a long time. Yet, the work remains and probably got more complicated than it was pre-pandemic. How's it been for you to take care of yourself and sustain yourself in the work that you're committed to under these conditions?

**[00:33:56] SIG:** Whoa. I think, I would start by saying that you need to be honest with yourself about where you are. This is key, because I know that the past few years have been incredibly difficult for me as a person. The fact that you need to get to a point where you're honest with yourself and not pretend that everything is okay, when it isn't.

A doctor friend of mine told me, he said, "It's okay not to be okay. Don't feel guilty if you're not okay." The key the key is do something about it. No matter how little it is, the fact that you recognize it helps you. The thing is, a leader – for me, leader literally equals servant. Funny enough. It's literally for me, equal to. What that means is that if I in my position, I'm faced with XYZ difficulties, imagine what others are facing. Imagine with others who may not have access to Internet, who are not doing a doctoral degree, who are not running an organization, who are finding it hard, who are finding it hard, even before the pandemic to have two square meals a day.

That is what pushes. That is honestly, that's what feeds the stamina. Understanding that okay, I may not be okay, everyone is not okay right now. What can I do in my state of not being okay to help someone else? Not help in a condescending way. Just really being a fellow human and understanding that I'm in this situation. We're in it together. We're in it alone, but we're in it together at the same time. If there is anything I can do, I will do it, if I have to push myself to do it. Remembering that I must take care of myself to be able to do that. For every single person on the planet, I believe, and even those in the space station, I would guess, the past two years have not been easy at all. The thing is, it's time for us to be human. It's time for us to share our humanity and stop talking and do.

**[00:36:17] RT:** What's that look like? What would be different, given all that we've just gone through and you say it's time. What would be the work, or the actions that would be taking place now that reflect a difference?

**[00:36:28] SIG:** I think, one of the key things would be to ensure that this pandemic that we've been hit for, whatever reason, not going to go into that, but for whatever reason, we need to make sure that everyone is in a place where they are able to manage it. Manage in the sense that whether it's through government, whether it's through individual activities, or at whatever level, that people get the help that they need.

I mean, you hear things that are disheartening, like a whole shipment of say, vaccines get destroyed. Why? Because it got into a country where the infrastructure is not there to distribute it on time before they run out. It is about time that we're not talking about how much money we're making out of vaccines, but saving people's lives. I personally lost people to COVID-19. I know how hard it hit me. That's just me, and I think everyone else on the planet. We need to be more human. We need to start prioritizing humanity and human beings and human life and not playing around with our egos as leaders, or political leaders, or decision makers. It's time for us to put aside our selfishness, which is a part of the human characteristic.

Say, "Look, there is a time when you forget, or you have to forget, or put aside all those things that will bring you profit, to make sure everyone is okay." There is a, I believe, is an African adage that says, "A person is not rich by how much money they have. Really, how many people they have affected in their lives." Because the thing is that if you are "rich," and everyone around you is poor, you are going to live in constant fear, because those people are going to come after you. This is the truth.

It is about making sure that all these emergent – Look of the climate emergency and all that is happening now. All of us are guilty of not taking even the smallest precautions, or things we could do. We come together in big conferences. We promise we're going to do this. We commit to this, we commit to that. At the end of the day, how has that been translated in real life? This is why I keep championing the cause of grassroots, grassroots, grassroots. Bottom-up. Not always top-bottom. Let's do things, rather than talking, or just talking, put it that way.

**[00:39:01] RT:** That's the runner in you then.

**[00:39:03] SIG:** I guess so. Yes. I mean, what's the point? I really don't get the point when I know there's absolutely a place for disgust, there's a place for policy, there's a place for structures and systems. If the people who these are supposed to benefit are not benefiting, because of, I don't know, bad governance, or just simply the fact that we are satisfied with simply talking and not doing, then what's the use of those things? Don't be surprised then when you see movements, and people just get so frustrated. Young people setting themselves on fire,

because they're frustrated about what's happening in their countries. Why are you surprised? Let's do.

**[00:39:49] RT:** You and I have talked about this often. You're discussing it now. I want to add, I think, a little more specificity to it, which is this distinction between people who are in authority and people who choose to lead. Meaning, that they are not the same thing. There's a long history of social change actually emerging from the periphery and the edges of society by people who had no authority, but decided, "I'm going to do something about this." I'm going to run with it, as you said. In the time I've known you, I know that you're smart and wise enough to take full advantage of the authority that comes with every role you have to use it wisely to deploy resources and get things done.

I also know, you have a long history of raising your hand and deciding without any authority, you're going to go do something and then figure it out on the move, so to speak. For people who are listening, who have a story, a mindset that says, "I want to be more impactful, but I got to have more resources and authority position in order to do that. Therefore, I'm going to wait until that time comes. I got to go more school, or I got to do those kinds of things." Share your own view about what goes on for you and your life, when you've decided, "Enough. I'm in action now. I don't have the portfolio to do it, but I'll figure that out." What counsel do you have for people who are down behind us, who are listening and thinking, "Yeah, Safiya. All good for you. You work in two organizations." What do you say to them about this choice of leading?

**[00:41:22] SIG:** I mean, I think that's an excellent question, and very realistic, which is key. I'm a realist. I would say, first and foremost, that as much as I rave and rant about people in authority, who may not be doing as they say, there are a few who are actually doing that. Such people must be applauded. They must be acknowledged. They should be acknowledged. Examples should be shared at whatever level, whether it's a president, prime minister, whether it's someone who's a local government chairperson. Whatever the case may be, there are people who actually do it.

Every time, who are – that intersection of authority and leader. Every time I meet such people, I'm honestly so amazed, and I feel so privileged to be in the presence, because the thing about authority is that when you're in a place of authority, your job, to be a leader, your job is to create



an enabling environment, for work to get done. That work is changed, that work is whatever it is, whatever portfolio it may be.

I will say, there's always something you can do. It doesn't matter how old you are. Again, whatever identifiers you go by, there is always something you can do. When you see the little kids, I mean, you watch American movies, and you see little kids setting up little lemonade stands and selling lemonade during the holidays, or during summer. That's an example of what you can do. Because those kids, I mean, you hear amazing stories about how they donate to maybe less privileged neighborhoods, even amongst them. Some of them as young as five and six, and I'm like, "What am I doing? I'm not even close to what this young person has done."

There's always something you can do. The question is, what? That's where the reflection comes in. What do you have? What do you not have? How do you bridge that gap? Again, you do not have to have that title of authority to do things. Because believe me, when you are a leader, even if you do not have the official authority, you are going to find other runners. You're going to find other people who will share your vision, and who will support you and push you forward and help you in what you're doing.

Eventually, you may get to a place of authority. We've seen a lot of people like this, who started as leaders without the title. Before we knew what was happening, they ended up in that place of authority. Whether they delivered or not, is another story. If you do anything, if you do something, no matter how little it is, just do it. Go ahead. Just go ahead and do it.

**[00:44:13] RT:** Be in action.

**[00:44:14] SIG:** Just take action. It does not matter how small. Get inspired by those kids with the lemonade stands, and do something and keep doing it. Again, that's the other thing, consistency. That's why, before you get to that point, you really should have thought through things and said, "Look." As I said, this is what you have, this what I don't have. Do I need this right now? No, I can start here. As I'm consistent, there will be obstacles. Oh, my goodness. There will be many obstacles. Don't ever think that it will be smooth. Yeah. You cannot imagine the kinds of challenges that I face as a person. There will be obstacles, and you have to make

up your mind at the beginning that they will be and just like that team player, they're going to be people on the way that will help you, okay.

**[00:44:58] SIG:** Okay, so hang on a second here. You just said something. I want to go there, if you will.

**[00:45:02] SIG:** Sure.

**[00:45:03] RT:** A couple of really hard challenges you've had to face on your journey.

**[00:45:08] SIG:** Well, there's the big famous one, of course, being a woman and various intersectionalities. I am a woman. I am a black woman. I come from a country that is incredibly endowed, but unfortunately, in many places, does not have a very good reputation. You should see me at an airport line, and how I am treated, for example. It's one of the biggest things is just the issue of identity. The fact that if you know what you want, I mean, I speak of myself. I know what I want. Then for some, that surprises them.

First of all, what gives you the right to think you should be in X position, or in X – in this place? That's been a challenge. Thankfully, my mom's influence has helped me a lot with that, because my sense of worth is not attached to what you think about me at all. That pushes me. My faith also, definitely helps me in in that. That's been a big challenge that people often get surprised by, say, my capacity, or – I mean, they just get surprised. Or my drive, or my vision. That's been a big one, I think.

Another one I've personally found, and this is something we talk a lot about in our work together, is just for me to be able to understand, be more understanding of different levels of commitment and approach to work. That's been a big struggle for me, because I tend to always think, “Okay, this is how I think. Why shouldn't everyone think this job should get done, even if it's going to take us till 3 am? So what?” Not everyone's going to think like that. I'm like, “Why not?” That's been a big challenge for me to understand that, and adapt accordingly. Yeah.

**[00:47:03] RT:** It seems to me, too, Safiya, that I've told a few people this about you, who don't even know you, just because I'm so pleased to know you. Is that “She's a force of nature.” By

that, it just has a indomitable source of staying with it. What I know is that that's not common for people. It's easy for me to imagine people finding themselves in your tailwind, so to speak, and trying to keep up, because of the pace at which you can go and more importantly, as a leader, you know they can go faster than they think they can go. How do you bring them along? Because you're going to need them. You already said that. You're going to need people. How do you bring them along, so that the work gets done and they realize more of their potential through their lived experience, as you said, without them burning up, if you will? How do you manage that tension?

**[00:48:05] SIG:** Whoa. That's a difficult one, because first and foremost, I think the first place is recognizing it, which is work, you and I have done a lot together. I would say, before I met you, I struggled a lot more with that. Just being able to recognize that you cannot expect the same things that you maybe are driven to do, or the way you approach them that everyone else will do that. The first place is that actualization and understanding that. I think, the other thing then would be figuring out, because I've had such situations where like you said, I know, this person has potential to do this. Why on earth are they not doing it?

Then sometimes, depending on it's very contextual, of course, but it may require a conversation. It could require a simple conversation, honestly. Other times, it requires broadening their horizon, and helping them to understand that look, you're looking – this is a tunnel. Look beyond the tunnel. Show them that these are the potential benefits, if you go out of your comfort zone. I'm constantly out of my comfort zone. I think, that is why maybe I'm also quite – I find myself in that constant state of tension that I cannot be satisfied where I am. I just cannot. If you're able to convincingly or not, at least broaden their horizon and say, “Look, this is what is possible.” All right.

I think, the third thing, quite one of the things that I felt has been very effective is giving people responsibilities that they thought they could not take on. That could be in two ways, right? It always depends on the individual. In some cases, I give them responsibilities and give them no help deliberately.

**[00:50:07] RT:** By design.

**[00:50:08] SIG:** By design. In some other cases, depending on who it is, I may provide some resources. This is what you need to do. This is what you need to do. Sometimes, it just grows in complexity. You may start in that way. Then as time goes on, they have to figure it out on their own. When they do that, celebrate them, celebrate them, celebrate them. We affirm them, we affirm them. Before you know what's happening, they're running to and they're probably running past you.

**[00:50:35] RT:** Failure is likely to be an option for an experience for him, so you got to be there and have that be part of the learning process.

**[00:50:42] SIG:** Absolutely. I constantly tell people, especially when they're afraid to make mistakes, or they make a mistake and they're killing themselves about it. I'm like, it's okay to make mistakes. There are some things we can actually – You sent a wrong email. Fine. We correct it. We send another one. Okay. Don't kill yourself about it, because you're never going to be able to go past it. Yes, there will be mistakes. I make mistakes, probably every day. Everyone does. Then, what do you do with them? Do you use them as learning points? Or do you beat yourself up about them and remain where you are, or decline? You must not be ashamed, or ashamed, actually. I wouldn't even say afraid, ashamed of making mistakes.

**[00:51:29] RT:** Let's just touch on this briefly. Given all the stuff that you're doing, and people are listening and they're going to be thinking, “She's up to some big stuff, and rightly so.” What do you seek to get from putting yourself through four years of a doctoral program? What comes from that? Learning, for sure. What does it offer up to the world through you at the outcome that you think we need that you couldn't deliver, if you didn't do this program?

**[00:51:56] SIG:** Yeah. First thing would be the learning. I'm such an unrepentant learner. I mean, it's almost like air to me. Sometimes, I really feel like I have to stop myself. I see a course, an opportunity or something. I'm like, “I must do this. I don't care. I haven't submitted something. I must do this.” This is one of my driving factors that the learning that will come from it, and not just the technical knowledge is a process itself. How it makes me think, how it makes me approach certain things, not just from – because I am again, an unrepentant practitioner, I am so, so down for grassroots and work on the ground.

It also opens up my eyes to more of the top-bottom stuff; policy, academia, and how that can be passed on. I've been privileged a few times, during the course of my program to even speak to say, students who are doing their masters. For them, I love the intersection of academia and practitioners. The other thing would be that I would then be able to bring that passion for on the ground work in a different way, hopefully, a new way into academia and into policy and into higher level discuss, because I think that generally, when academia gather, their academics, they talk at that level, and may not really understand what it feels like when the policy you've made about, I don't know, loans at a top-level, as a World Bank, how does that affect the woman in the market somewhere in Sokoto State, for example, in Nigeria. For me, it is that bridge. That bridge is so important.

**[00:53:48] RT:** That strikes me, when you were talking about starting this process, that what was important here is just what you said, which is that community of academics, which we really need, because they have time and energy to produce some robust thinking, still need to be nudged by people living in the practical reality world, but who have – I think about you as somebody who will be able to translate those two worlds and bring them together, so people can hear it from a different angle than what they would before.

**[00:54:19] SIG:** I really hope so. Yes.

**[00:54:23] RT:** I hope it occurs before the end of the four years. I suspect it will. There'll be opportunities for that. It makes sense. Okay, so I have a question, then. What should I ask you that I didn't know enough about you to ask, that you think it's important for people to know about you?

**[00:54:38] SIG:** That's a tough one, Rick.

**[00:54:40] RT:** Good, good.

**[00:54:45] SIG:** Oh, wow. I mean, you asked me a lot of questions. You just said, I'm going to ask this question, and so if you haven't been asking questions. I think, maybe it would be how important our support systems may be, how important our support systems to keep you going on your leadership journey? My answer would be, they are irreplaceable. I don't think I could

ever be where I was right from that three-year-old girl, to where I am now without some key support systems. I'm proud to say, you are one of those people. They're not that many people, by the way, because there are people around you, who you inspire, and who need you for different things.

There are people you need to help you keep going and who see the positives in you that you refuse to see, or you fail to see. Because it just may be something that Rick told me two months ago, that just helped me out of a very difficult situation, for example. Support systems of whatever kind, value them. Value them. Don't take them for granted, please. I don't know. I don't want to say, live up to the expectations. If you have them, you will live up to the expectations, because what the expectations are, they believe in you. It's not about, "Oh, are you going to get your doctorate in four years or not?" It is, "Are you okay? How are you doing? Are you okay?" Nothing replaces that. Whatever system, it could be people, it's faith, it's more abstract things. Do not ever take them for granted.

**[00:56:39] RT:** Safiya, I'm reluctant to have this end, but it's at that point. If you're willing, I don't think we've finished this conversation for this audience. If you're willing to consider a return visit for part two, it would be high praise for our show for you to come back.

**[00:56:59] SIG:** I would be delighted to. Talking with you is always beneficial.

**[00:57:04] RT:** Okay. With that, thank you very much for joining me in the swamp. Until next time, thank you, Safiya.

**[00:57:11] SIG:** Thank you for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[00:57:16] ANNOUNCER:** Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more Leadership Swamp conversations.

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