

EPISODE 16

[INTRODUCTION]

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

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:19] RT: Hi, everybody. Rick Torseth. Welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. 10,000 Swamp Leaders is a podcast where we talk with leaders who are experienced at dealing with highly complex, messy, wicked, or what we would call swamp problems, because they have lessons to teach us, wisdom to pass on to us. Today, it's a really warm pleasure for me to have a friend and colleague on who I've known for about 15 years, Sharon. Sharon Wood is my guest today. Sharon comes to this conversation with a massive amount of leadership experience as modestly as she is inclined not to own that, Sharon. At least three decades of time working with Chinese companies at the highest levels in the organization, doing work not just inside China, but globally, representing the company, dealing with issues of IPOs, the recycling industry efforts that they had to employ, getting the organization situated as a global entity. Another item that I think Sharon will be interesting for us to talk about is mentoring future generations in a family business, which has its own level of complexity, I am guessing.

Sharon, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:34] SW: Thank you, Rick. Thank you for giving me the chance to tell my story.

[00:01:40] RT: Let's get you started here. Tell people what you think they need to hear initially about who you are, and that will give us a starting point to get a little deeper into

some of the areas that I think are going to be of interest to our listeners. Tell us about yourself.

[00:01:54] SW: I'm a Hong Kong born Chinese who grew up in Macau, which is a Portuguese colony. People see me as a Chinese, but if you take away that head of mind, there's nothing very Chinese about me, but because I grew up in a very Western environment. I was educated by French nuns and the American school system. I didn't do the GCSE or whatever, but I did Washington papers, which were linked to the Catholic University of Washington. My teachers were all international, I had English teachers, I had Scottish, I had Irish, I had American, but I never had any local teachers teaching me English. It was probably in an era where it was easier to find teachers to teach English than today. I grew up in a multicultural environment, which has really nothing at all to do with the world of today. I'm still struggling to understand how people deal with today's way of living.

[00:02:59] RT: How do you mean that? What is the way of living that you're referring to?

[00:03:02] SW: I find that in today's world, everything is very much about myself, selfies, vlogging. I'm drinking a cup of tea, I'll take a photo and I'll post it. Which is a total contradiction to how we were brought up, because we were brought up not to create waves, to be who we were, but not to draw attention to ourselves. We should give up ourselves, we should help others. Probably today with the Internet, the exposure that everybody's craving for has made this world quite difficult sometimes to understand and to follow.

[00:03:41] RT: Okay. I think we're going to end up coming back to this, because to some degree, the experiences you're referring to are not necessarily new. In my experience, in our conversations together is that I see, if people asked me, "Who is Sharon Wood?" I would say, she's a kind of ambassador in the global world, because of the experiences you just referenced in terms of your upbringing. But also, that you spent

a lot of time in China working in a Chinese organization, representing the organization and actually the brand China to some degree, globally. You've had a lot of, as you call a cross cultural environmental experiences as a leader. We'll get into that a little bit, but let's start a little bit in more specifics. Where did your leadership journey begin? Who or how were you influenced in that journey?

[00:04:36] SW: Well, like I said, I was born in Hong Kong, but I moved over to Macau. My family moved to Macau when I was really just a baby. At the age of 12, my father abandoned us, so I had a very unique childhood, because I had to learn to help the family from a very, very young age. Thanks to the nuns who were educating me. I was given the opportunity to be educated in a very, very good school by teachers who were more than qualified through scholarships. I never paid for my tuition, but there was a condition. Back in those days, we had a report card every month, at the end of the month, there were about 30 to 40 students per class. The condition was that, I should not rank lower than second. Otherwise, I would lose the scholarship. With this scholarship offered to me, I was able to get a very good education in English, I was able to learn piano which led to help me because I became a piano teacher also for a while while I was trying to make my living.

Then, when I had finished work, because of my cultural, my multicultural upbringing, being Chinese, but growing up among people who are really international. From the start, I had a very open view of things. The one thing I didn't get was a very good impression of China. My parents had fled the Chinese revolution in 1949 and they hated China. I was brought up not to appreciate China as a country or even the language itself. This was a bit of a deterrent to me later on in life. When I finished my studies, I became a teacher, I taught English and then I taught piano just to make a living. I had the opportunity of working part time for a South American Chinese, who taught me the world of fashion. In a way, this was the beginning of my career.

[00:06:53] RT: How old were you when that happened?

[00:06:54] SW: I was about 21. I graduated very early, because I was on scholarship. Okay? I finished high school before I turned 16. I was what you would call the valedictorian of the class. I was the one who spoke, and so on and so forth. I finished high school one month before I turned 16, but I've already been working while I was studying. I was teaching, I was doing private lessons. These were all introduced to me by the nuns so that I could make some money to help support the family. I've been working since 12.

[00:07:26] RT: And always having to be no lower than number two in your class.

[00:07:30] SW: Always having to be no lower than, because if I went lower than number two, if I was number three, I wouldn't use the scholarship. There'd be no way that I would be able to continue to my studies. I learned to play piano at the same time. The only thing I paid for was the examination cost once again, because it's linked to the Royal Schools of Music in the UK. I got my diploma in music and piano, piano forte, from the Royal Schools of Music in the UK. I was very lucky in that sense.

[00:08:00] RT: Let's jump ahead a little bit then. What happens to the next part of your life?

[00:08:04] SW: I was young, and I was feeling that life was being unfair. Why did I have to work, and work and work to take care of the family when other people are enjoying themselves? I thought the best way to get out of it is to get married. I met a guy when I was working in a tourist agency. I had a lot of jobs. In fact, I did several jobs at one go, which meant that in the morning, I was teaching English from eight o'clock to eleven o'clock. Eleven o'clock, I went to work for that South American boss, doing French commercial letters and communications things for him. Two o'clock, I went back to school to teach English. Four o'clock, I went to the Academy of Music to teach piano. I finish at seven o'clock at night. That was my life.

I decided that, I was going to get married, and have my own life and so on and so forth, which I did. That happened pretty early also. I was barely 20. That's why I got married. It was not a very smart move, but nevertheless, I did it. I had four girls from my first marriage.

[00:09:11] RT: Four girls from your first marriage?

[00:09:13] SW: Four girls, yes. Four girls with my first marriage. Unfortunately, my husband was a violent man. Throughout the years, I was in and out of hospitals and stuff, and I never said anything. Until one day, well, it became to evidence to hide that my godfather – because my dad was not around when I got married. The guy who gave me away at my marriage was the Commissioner of Police of Macau. She told me, “This has got to end. You're a Catholic, you don't want to get a divorce, because it doesn't meet with your religious beliefs, but this is it.” The church got my marriage annulled. It's not just a divorce. It was an annulment.

Unfortunately, back then, divorced women were not viewed very well. They looked down on us. It was always the woman's fault. It was never the man's fault. But I did what I could.

[00:10:08] RT: You have four daughters at this time?

[00:10:10] SW: I have four daughters at that time. When I got divorced, I had to make a very important decision, because my ex-husband wanted to leave with the girls and go to Canada, because he felt that they would have a better future in Canada. I thought so too, but I didn't want to lose the girls. At that time, at that moment in time, I had to decide between my girls and my mother, because my mother was very, very sick. She'd been down with emphysema for almost three years, constantly on oxygen. I was working not just to support my girls, but also to support my mom and I couldn't do everything. I had to make a choice. Either we split the family up. I took two girls, and he took two girls or I left the girls with him so I can take care of my mother. I decided to go

with the latter. I gave up on the girls and let them go with their dad to Canada. But what he did was, the condition was that I would continue to support the girls. I put all my photos through school, which is why I continue to do three, four jobs a month, just to make things work.

[00:11:21] RT: How long did this go on?

[00:11:23] SW: This went on for a long time, until I was 35, 36. About 20 years. It went on for a long time. My mother passed when I 31. That I think is one of the things that has impacted me the most.

[00:11:37] RT: How so?

[00:11:39] SW: Which is why today, I always tell people, “You’re going to have one set of parents, respect them, stay close to them. Because you feel guilty, even though I had spent my life taking care of your kids that I hadn’t given her enough of my times. But back then, it was not possible, because when I was growing up, we didn’t even have a telephone. I mean, I’m 74 years old now. Back then, we had no television, we had no telephone. It was after I had graduated that we managed to get a telephone, that was a landline. We didn’t have all these portable telephones and stuff like that. We didn’t have telex or faxes back then. Certainly, no computers. Not like today where you have an iPhone wherever you want to go, and you can hook up with anybody and talk to anybody. You can do that, right?

I was working day and night supporting my mother, but realizing, in retrospect that I was supporting her financially, getting her the medical care that she needed, but not in terms of being there for her because she couldn’t reach me. There were no phones.

[00:12:48] RT: Right. And your daughter’s at this time?

[00:12:52] SW: When they moved to Canada, my oldest daughter was 11 and my youngest daughter was only seven.

[00:13:01] RT: How are they doing in Canada without you?

[00:13:03] SW: We sent letters, we communicated by letters, but that was about it. Because back in the '80s, long distance calls were very expensive. I went to see them a couple of times in Canada, but they were already a lot bigger when I went. They were in their early teens when I went to see them. But there was already a lack of communication because we didn't grow up together. My eldest daughter was close to me because she was practically the only one that I took care of. I remember very clearly that later on in life when they had graduated, they came back to visit me. My third daughter, Angela, she came back to visit me and the first thing she came up with was, "I hate you, mom. Why did you leave us on our own? Why didn't you care for us?" I told her, "I said that's not true." She said, "That's what daddy said." I said, "That's not true."

What I did was I showed her the monthly transfers that I made to Canada to pay for their schooling and their expenses. I was making 5,000 Hong Kong dollars a month in salary from Air France. 3500 of my salary went to Canada, 1000 of my salary went to my mom. I was living on 500 a month. Anyway, whether you say that it's a good thing or a bad thing, that's how life is. I met my husband, he was also a divorcee. We got together. Nothing was planned, of course. He said it, "Why don't you move to Hong Kong? Since you're so unhappy in Macau." I said, "I can't, mother." She said –

[00:14:40] RT: Sharon, just so everybody's tracking here. This is your second husband you're talking about now.

[00:14:45] SW: This is my second husband, yes. I met this Frenchman on a boat, actually, because I was traveling between Hong Kong and Macau. I was going to see a customer and I was coming back to Macau after seeing a customer for my boss. We happened to be in the same boat. I looked at him and I said, "Do you remember me?"

and he said, "Who are you?" I said, "You don't remember me. You went to see my boss, the South American a couple of weeks ago and I was there doing the letters." He said, "Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. Now, I remember." I said, "What are you doing going to Macau?" He said, "I'm going to spot check a factory. He was an engineer, and he was living in Hong Kong and placing orders for a very big French firm." I say, "But it's the Dragon Boat Festival. You will see nobody in the factory today." He said, "No, no. I'll see them. They'll let me in." I said, "Nobody's working today." He said, "No, no. You must be wrong."

We got to Macau, and we got off the boat. He said, "Can you wait a few minutes for me?" I said, "Why?" He said, "I got to find a phone so that I can call" because like I told you, there were no portable phones back then. He had to find the telephone cabin. He got hold of a telephone, came back like 15 minutes later and he said, "You know something? You're right. Nobody's working today. I've got nothing to do. How about we go for lunch?" I said, "Okay." He said, "I will need a hotel room." I said, "I'll make a booking for you." I know there's a hotel and I made a booking for him in the Hotel Central. Got in his room and he said, "Shall we go out for lunch?" I said, "I have something to ask you." He said, "What?" I said, "Your room has a fantastic view of the bay. At three o'clock this afternoon, there will be the Dragon Boat Race. I'm a divorcee, can I bring my kids here to watch the race from the window?" He said, "Sure. Why not?" He said, "I'll tell you what, let's go for lunch and after lunch, you can ask them to come." I said, "Okay." We went for lunch in the hotel and I called the girls. they took a taxi and came to the hotel. When the knock came, knock, knock, knock, he opened the door. He looked at me and he looked at them and he looked at me again and start to count, "One, two, three, four." I said, "Yes, four." That was the introduction.

[00:17:08] RT: Because I know your husband a little bit, we should jump forward to say, if this day right now, they're still part of his life.

[00:17:16] SW: Yes, yes. Yes, they still are. That's true.

[00:17:20] RT: All right. This is a remarkable tale. I want to move ahead a little bit because somewhere down the road here. You find yourself working for a Chinese company that has big aspirations to do work outside of China and around the world. Can you move us into this conversation a little bit about what that was like and how you got there, and a little bit about what then happened?

[00:17:43] SW: He proposed, then I moved over to Hong Kong. I thought, what can I do in Hong Kong? I need to find a job. He said, "Air France is looking for a staff, looking for a PR person. Why don't you go and interview?" I said, "I don't know anything about the airline industry." He said, "I'll give them a call." He's French, okay, but nonetheless, he didn't know anybody in Air France. He just called and made an appointment for me and I've got an interview at three o' clock in the afternoon. I went up and I saw the general manager, his name was Mr. Kraft like Kraft cheese, Mr. Kraft. Mr. Kraft takes me and he says, "Do you live in Hong Kong?" I said, "No. I live in Macau." "Oh, you leave in Macau. Do you speak French?" I said, "Yes, a little bit. school girl French" because it was quite elementary. I said, "I will speak French. I can manage." He said, "Shall we do the interview in French?" I said, "Okay." We did the interview in French."

He says, "What do you know about the airline industry?" "Nothing." "Have you done any PR work?" "No." "You don't live in Hong Kong, you haven't done PR work, do you know who we are looking for?" I said, "I think you're looking for a PR staff to help with sales." I said, "I can do sales. That, I can do. Besides that, I don't know very much, I'm happy to learn." We had an interesting conversation that lasted about two hours. Then I left, took the boat back home to Macau, because I was staying with my mother. I walk in the door and my mother says, "Air France called." "Really?" "Mr. Kraft. Do you know a Mr. Kraft?" I said, "Yeah, that's the big boss." "But he wants to see you again on Monday." Apparently made a good impression. I said, "Okay."

I went back on Monday and Air France offered me a job. He said, "You don't fit the post that we're looking for, but I need a personal assistant to help me with the French community. Since you speak French enough anyway, and you speak Portuguese, and

you speak English and we've talked together and you're not very Chinese. You understand the European mentality. I would like you to come to work for me as my personal assistant and be my representative with the French community in Hong Kong, if you don't mind." I said, "I love to do that. I don't mind." "Okay. But you need to give me a little bit of time to resign from the work that I have in Macau," as I was working with that South American in the fashion business. I quit and I moved to Air France. That was in 1981.

I moved into Air France and that I think is where my real learning started, how to deal with difficult situations and learn to adapt in order to survive. The fact that I got, well, let's say, I became his personal assistant. People were very curious because they couldn't understand that somebody was not in the business managed to get employed. I spent a week learning the ropes of the trade, and then I started going out to call on customers. Things worked out. I think I have an easy way of talking to people. It wasn't really difficult, but I really didn't know how to do my job, which meant that if somebody was asking me, "How much does it cost a ticket from here to here?" I was like, "I'll come back to you tomorrow, okay."

I managed to get a lot of things going, and I think my boss was pretty happy with me. At the end of two years, in my third year, I was sent to Paris for a lot of training over a period of eight months, because my boss was promoting me to be head of reservations and ticketing. The job that some of my colleagues are expected to get. They've been in a company for 10 years, and I just left over the head and got that job.

[00:21:19] RT: You've been in there just a year or two, then.

[00:21:21] SW: Yes. Well, two years.

[00:21:23] RT: It strikes me that you're still employing the finished no worse than second strategy in your career.

[00:21:32] SW: Yes, I guess that's inculcated into me. It's in the brain. My brain says, "Do it" so I did it. That's when I discovered how important it was to get along with people. I didn't know that there was a lot of jealousy and a lot of hatred of me.

[00:21:47] RT: How did you navigate that?

[00:21:48] SW: Well, to give you an example. There were meetings that I wasn't invited to, I wasn't even told about, which I found about later. I went to them and I said, "What happened? I mean, I wasn't told about this meeting and Mr. Kraft was not very happy with me." They said, "Yeah. Why do we have to tell you about this?" That was the kind of attitude that they have. There's no Chinese, not Chinese, they don't have to be nice to you. I decided that what I needed to do was to make friends of everybody. I went out and I told them, "Yes, I don't know. I didn't come here to take over your posts. All right? I need your help. You need to help me. Need to help me, otherwise, I won't be able to do what I have to do. I'll give you the credit for whatever you do. I don't need to take the credit." That's what I learned. Get the help you need, give the credit back where it's due and things will work out.

The main thing is, do not be arrogant. You have to get along with everybody. It's not just getting along with your boss that's going to help. You need to get along with everybody, your coworkers, the middle management staff, even the guy who cleans the office. My boss came to me and he said, "When you call, he comes running with a cup of tea. I have to call them like five times before he even answers me." It's just a matter of respect. You respect the guy. He comes in and he says – this is early in the morning, "Would you like a cup of tea now or later?" I'm the boss. Not his boss. He's just feels that he can talk to me. Later on in life when I was working for the Chinese, it was the same thing. He ask me, "Why do you smile all the time?" I said, "First of all, if I smile, I'm happy." Secondly, I said, "If I smile, people smile my back." He said, "Yeah, but you're a vice president. Vice presidents do not smile at the people who are under them." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. I'm not Chinese enough for that," which is why I ended up being called the French lady.

[00:23:40] RT: Sharon, there's an important element that you're slowly moving towards. But let's make it more explicit for listeners here because I think it's a condition in which people who lead often have to deal with and oftentimes, they're not very good at it. That is, let's start by framing it as culture and then we can break it apart into different kinds of culture. But it's often said that culture will trump strategy every day, processes every day, etc. It's a pretty potent force in an organization. I know that you have spent a long time in that world dealing with that challenge, and you know some things about how to make it work. Share with people what you know, what you think about culture, why it matters, how you address it, what you've learned about it, those kinds of things that people may be a little fuzzy on that they could pick up some ideas and some understanding better based on your experience.

[00:24:38] SW: Culture is very important today, especially. People used to stay in their countries and not travel, but now we're all over the world, we're all over the place and culture is very, very important. What I've learned between my years of service in a French company compared to my years of service in a Chinese company are totally different. When I was working for Air France, the hierarchy was very, very much felt. The expatriates, they were the big bosses, then you had the middle management, which were the rest of the managers, including me. Then you had the staff underneath. I found out at a very, very early moment, that if I had to get somewhere, I had to deal with everything and treat everybody alike. I treated my boss with love and respect, but I would never – how can I say that.

There's no favoritism among the bosses who are French and the bosses who are Chinese. The reason I say this is that in the last three years in Air France, I was in charge of administration and personnel. In a French company like Air France, the local recruits had different rights and benefits compared to the expatriates. But whatever the case is not because they were expatriates, that they were allowed to get away with things. I was always fair in what I did with them or with my other colleagues. That I think came through very clearly, and it helped me a lot, because back then, they used to

worship the ground that the expatriates walked on in order to gain favor and I'd never done that. Because I didn't do that, they respected me back.

I had a kind of standing in a company that the others didn't have. That wasn't attributed to the fact that I was Chinese. I was not Chinese; I was brought up in different environments and nothing to do with it. So that, I think it's pure common sense and self-respect. You respect yourself. I am who I am. I treat everybody fairly, whether he's the guy who's sweeping the floor or whether he's my direct boss.

[00:26:47] RT: I'm going to stay with this, but I want to move you because you have spent the last 20 years working for China Ting, which I think it's going to help people to understand what that organization does to start with. But by the time you, and I'm also laughing at your bio, because you talked about retirement. When I read that, I have to tell you, I laughed. I said, "I don't think this woman ever is going to retire from anything."

[00:27:09] SW: No, I'm going to be fired.

[00:27:10] RT: But formally, maybe so, bring us into a little bit of the more current present here, because you spent the last 20 years at a very senior position in a very large organization doing work around the globe. I want to return to the culture aspect, but I'd like you to put it in the context of the work that you were doing in your recent tenure at China Ting and the positions that you held as an executive leader in the organization so people have the context of what the work is, and then what you are doing inside that.

[00:27:40] SW: Actually, my two careers are linked. What I did in Air France actually set the scene for how I was going to react when I was in China Ting. Because Air France gave me a lot of opportunities and learning that I never expected. When I was in Air France, I was ready to do anything. What the bosses did was, every time there's something new, they threw it at me. Aside from starting as a PA, I became assistant sales manager, I set up their offices in Macau, got the general sales agent, set up

Taiwan. Then Air France went on to represent **[inaudible 00:28:15]**, which is a government NGO entity that represents all the big exhibitions in France. Back then, there were about 23 of them. I did that as well. I said, "I'd give it a try" and I did and I ended up doing it until I left.

The first year I took that over, we were representing seven salons. By the time I had finished in the year, we had over 60% of the salons that we were representing, that we had not before. I mean, these were all opportunities that I got to learn. It's unbelievable what you learn from this. For instance, I went to the salon in France representing them, and I went into one of the brands stalls. The guy said, "Please don't come in." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because you're Chinese." I said, "What does Chinese got to do with it?" He said, "Because the Chinese only copy our stuff." I said, "Look, I'm sorry." I said, "I'm the one who represents **[inaudible 00:29:07]** in Hong Kong, and in China and in Macau. If they copy, I'm sorry about that. But I'm not here to copy or whatever." These are all the things that you learn as you move along.

I knew this resentment that people had of us. Eventually, I went over to start my first job in China with a Hong Kong public company. It wasn't public back then. I helped to take it public, five years after I went into the company. It is a very well-known fashion company in China, but with an IPO in Hong Kong. My responsibility was global business development. First of all, because of my language and secondly, because I understood the difference in culture, to be able to avoid cross-cultural collisions and also to build businesses, leveraging on the cultural strengths of partnerships.

I went into this company, I helped them start their office in France, which was not an easy thing. It was very difficult. I brought brands to China, I worked with these international companies in EU. I worked with France, with England, with Germany, with Italy, with Spain, with big companies like Inditex, Zara, with Mango, with Benetton, Ted Baker, Gary Lafayette, all the big companies were the customers that are brought into the company. I worked with US who were 85% of the business of China Ting. Most of

the names that you name, we worked with them. It was like Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Macy's, a lot of American brands. I created partnerships and things like that.

What I found very challenging, but also very meaningful in making or breaking a deal is not so much the profit itself, but rather, the understanding, and the willingness to be open, to share, to understand and to communicate. It's not just words. It's also body language, attitude, how you talk to each other. But most of all, what is the most important is, you keep your word. You don't make promises that you can't keep. I have been really lucky working with all these people at very top levels. But at the same time, in order to get this to work, you also have to work with the people under you, because it was a fashion industry. The fashion industry is an industry full of problems. You have one garment; you have a thousand problems. You have 1000 governments, you multiply by 1000, you still have the same problems. When you have a problem, you have to find out why. The problem can be very costly, because claims run into hundreds of thousands of dollars, even into millions. It can just ruin you.

In order to find out the situation, you have to talk to everybody, you have to be able to deal with everybody. That was what I had to thank Air France for, because the fact of having been promoted over others and living in a very toxic environment taught me how to deal with others, and how I could best move forward. Not just for myself, but also how I could get partnerships going, troubleshoot and always, it boils down to the same thing.

[00:32:38] RT: Okay, so great. This is exactly what I want to ask you then. There's a song line going in your narrative from way back when you were in school, through the varying roles that you've had in your organizations you've been in. I think it's this piece we want to make as explicit as we can. You and I talked about this before we started recording. The part of the purpose of the podcast is to recognize one, that were further down the road in our careers and our experience, right? We're kind of elders in the tribe, if you would. There are future generations of leaders coming behind us. Part of what this podcast is about is to be at least a contributing voice of ideas, and experience and wisdom to the future generation of leaders.

Your expertise and knowledge about bridging these cultural divides, and getting shared understanding and providing what I'm going to say, experiences of people being heard and their concerns being heard is really where partnership begins and business starts to happen. You know an awful lot about that. Speak directly if you would to what you know about how you foster and sustain those business relationships, so the business keeps happening in spite of what you've already mentioned, the inevitable problems that are going to occur because they just do. What do you know that you can tell those people behind us? Here are the things that I understand about putting these relationships together and keeping them stuck together.

[00:34:10] SW: I think everything boils down to values. You need to find a balance between your work, and your family, your lifestyle. You also need to find a balance between the culture of the corporation that you're working with, the country where you are working in and yourself, your innate self. Because you were born and you were brought up in a culture that's innate to you. But this culture does not necessarily fit everything, all the different environments. For instance, today we talk a lot about work wellbeing, but if you look at this from two different angles. From a Western angle, a work wellbeing, you have to have a nice place, you must be happy in your work, you must be able to you know enjoy being at work. Whereas, for us in China, in Hong Kong, in Asia, work wellbeing is –if I can manage to get a salary, that will give me a good life because there is no social security. If I can get that salary, even if I have to work 14 hours instead of eight hours, I'm happy. That is work wellbeing. That is wellbeing at work, because why? I can make enough to give my family the things that they need. There's nothing that's going to come in.

Look at the COVID pandemic, there's no support. What you have? Me, I'm retiring. There is no retirement fund as such. You can live on what you have saved throughout your life. That's how it is in Asia. We grew up being taught, take care of yourself, make a career, make money, save, because in the end, you're going to have to take care of

your parents as well, because there's nobody to take care of them. If we lose our job, we stop eating. I mean, I think the values in life differ.

[00:35:53] RT: That's a really wonderful distinction that you're making here. But you in your work understand that people around the table, if you would. How do you help them reconcile or bridge those big differences so that these people can get work done together? Because as you say, a great word, this innate culture, and yet you're trying to bridge two innates into something in common that gets shared worked on. What do you do when that's happening?

[00:36:22] SW: Well, I try to have individual conversations before I have good conversations. What I tried to carry across is that they can trust me. What is important here is that I am on their level, it's not because I'm the vice president, and they are not, she's just a secretary, that I am above her. There's no arrogance in that, we are all humans. I am where I am because I'm old. I have more experience. Because I'm older, I'm more experienced, I'm going to listen to you and I'm going to help you if I can. If you are really doing your job properly, you are going to take credit for what you have done. I will not take the credit for you. Even among vice presidents in the group that I was with in China Ting.

This is what happened at the beginning, they didn't trust me, because they found that the bosses, the family were treating me differently. The reason the family were treating me differently was, they didn't know what to do with me, because I wasn't the usual Chinese. I was being myself, I respected them. But I wasn't going to be stepped over and told what to do. If I felt that that wasn't it, it wasn't going to be it and I will speak my mind. I remember telling them, "I'm not a yes person. If you need a yes person, it's not me. The door is there, I'll walk, just let me know." "Okay." Because I respect my superiors, but because they are my superiors, I don't need to have the same respect as I need to have with those who are under me. The lower they are, the more respect you need to give them because they have such a strong inferiority complex when they talk

to you. You have to gain their confidence. Once they trust you, you have one, that's the importance, the importance of trust.

[00:38:07] RT: That's really useful what you're saying here and it strikes me that you're able – you and you're not alone in this, but you have a lot of confidence and self-belief about understanding the world and human beings to allow you to be comfortable in that place, helping these people come along. That's not necessarily a common quality in people who lead at high levels, the self-confidence to be comfortable in your own skin and support others to move and grow in your presence. I know that you've spent a good chunk of time in your last part of your career mentoring younger people culturally business wise. What's your mentoring strategy? Maybe you've just spoken to it, but maybe there's some in addition? What is your mentoring strategy to bring young people along professionally and personally?

[00:38:57] SW: I've always believed in leading by example. I'm not trying to hold myself up as an example. But what I'm trying to say is that, I realized that if I am what I am today, and what I have learned from life did not come from books. It came from the people that I was working with. I learned from them, the way they dealt with me, the way they taught me and I learned from them. I understood that if I could learn from them, I could teach the others to learn from me. When I mentored these people coming in, I mentored the incoming second generation of the CEO, of the CFO. In Chinese culture, they are the next generation, but they have to listen to the elders. But they are more educated than their parents. They have a new way of looking at things which is more in line with the way work should be done today. And yet, they cannot carry that idea across. Why? Because of culture, because of tradition, because of the top-down attitude that they have in China.

When I was mentoring them at the beginning, I didn't realize it. When the boys were making suggestions, they just got shut down, their suggestions. We decided to talk together, the boys and me. We said, "Listen, we really need to get this across. How do we get this across?"

[00:40:20] RT: Just so we understand, the boys are the next generation?

[00:40:23] SW: The next generation, yes.

[00:40:25] RT: They're talking to not just their bosses, but their parents.

[00:40:28] SW: The bosses are their parents.

[00:40:30] RT: Yeah. Okay. All right.

[00:40:31] SW: The CEO had two sons who are coming in. One was taking over as the CEO, and the other one as the COO. The chairman's daughter was coming in over as a CFO. When the chairman's daughter was suggesting that we should group all the financial control, or the different divisions together, it was a huge, big no, because it had grown up that way and it was a family business. The big company was made up of 20 individual factories, and each factory had a boss, and each boss was a member of the family. You understand how difficult it was? These are the younger generation coming in just finishing school. They talk to their parents and say, "You know, you shouldn't be doing that and that." They say, "What do you know you young upstart? We are the ones who have been so successful, you should learn from us." That was the kind of attitude we ran into.

I was not part of the family. I was an outsider. That made it easier for me to talk to the boss, to the boys. Not so much to the boss, but to the boys. Boys and a girl, whatever. We sat together, and we put our heads together and we said, "How can we get this message across?" We found a way. We will propose it in a different manner. They wouldn't just come straight out. They would come up with a story. They would work over it. If it was an idea that was not going to – or not going down the right way, the idea would be mine. If the idea was a good one, and it was accepted, it was theirs. That's how we did it. We made a game of it. It started to work. Because the first few meetings

between the parents and the boys went very badly. The boys just stomped out of the room and bang the door. I talked to the dad. I said, "Listen, you want your son to follow in your footsteps, give him some respect, give him some leeway. Let him express to you what he thinks and then you can explain to him what you think."

I was lucky because I was older than all of them, and they listened to me because this is also part of culture. The respect for the elders. I wouldn't say that there is one single song from all these things, you just have to play it by ear. But I think that in general, for me, what really works is leading by example. Leadership does not come from books. It comes from example. If you are a boss, and you are in the office every day at 10:00 to 9:00, nobody will dare to come to work at 10:00. But if you are always late, who is going to be on time? It's simple.

[00:43:02] RT: Simple stuff.

[00:43:03] SW: Yeah. It's very simple stuff.

[00:43:05] RT: Okay. Sharon, unfortunately, we're kind of coming to the close here. This has been a really insightful conversation for me. One thing I want to say to the listeners is that, it didn't get mentioned here is, you have four daughters. You actually don't have four daughters, do you?

[00:43:19] SW: No. I have six.

[00:43:21] RT: You have six daughters?

[00:43:22] SW: Yes, I have six daughters. Four of them are in the medical field, two of them in the financial field. I've been very lucky.

[00:43:30] RT: Okay. I have two questions for you to finish. They're not related. They might be related. Can you share one or two things you've learned about leading that

have come from your leadership failures? I asked this question, because I think it's at least accurate, that we learn more from our failures than we do our successes. At least we remembered more of it. You got a couple of things that you know about leading that you learned the hard way because you got it wrong.

[00:43:59] SW: Oh, I'm sure. There are so many.

[00:44:01] RT: Give us a couple.

[00:44:03] SW: Well, you know, when you're young you think you know everything. When people say something, you jump in with your opinion. I've learned not to do that anymore. Put your foot in your mouth. That happened too often for one thing. The second thing is, I think something that really, really helped me was, that if I really did something wrong to own up to it. It doesn't matter if it's embarrassing or whatever, you have to own up to it. When you own up to it, you feel better. The situation gets sorted out and people respect you for owning up to your mistakes. I cannot think of any single ones. There have been so many, but I know that this is what I learned from my mistakes.

[00:44:41] RT: Okay. Last question here. You have six daughters, and I know that you have grandbabies now as well.

[00:44:49] SW: Only two.

[00:44:50] RT: But this format, this digital podcast, ones and zeros all strung together, and audio and visuals and stuff like this. God knows, this could live forever out there in cyberspace. As you sit here as a grandmother, what advice do you have for your grandbabies about leading themselves in the world that they might be able to leverage from their grandmother when they're old enough to even think this stuff matters?

[00:45:20] SW: For me, it's always just been one formula, keep the communications going.

[00:45:25] RT: Keep the communications going.

[00:45:26] SW: Keep the communications going, and communications are two way, not just one way. You do not punish a child. You explain to the child why it's wrong. You talk to your children. I have six daughters; I speak to them every day. They're all over the world and we call each other every day. I'm sorry about that phone call, that was my daughter. She's in Cambridge at the moment and I know that she can't call me tonight, which is why she's called me now. That's the usual habit. When she can't call me at night, she calls me now. I think that there's nothing more important than being able to communicate with your children. Because if they're happy at home, and they think that they can talk to you with all their problems, all the ideas and everything, and it doesn't get thrown out the window, they will always be there and you will always be there for them. But if they can't talk to you, they will find other people to talk to. That's when you don't have your family around. I would hope so anyway.

[00:46:19] RT: It also sounds like if it works at this level with family, it's got to work as a leader talking to people who you're trying to lead.

[00:46:28] SW: Yes, communications. There are communications at all levels, whether it's within the company, with customers, with partners, whatever. If something goes wrong, you have to talk. What you need to be, I think, for me, what I appreciated most, the comments from my staff was, that they found that I was very **[possessive 00:46:49]**. Not just to be talked to. I would understand, I would talk to them and I wouldn't judge them. But also, the fact that I am available at all hours of the day. Sometimes they call me at three o'clock in the morning, and I take the phone. That's it.

[00:47:02] RT: Sharon, we're going to bring this to a close, but I'm just going to say this out loud because I think it's a crazy idea we probably won't do. Just some thinking.

What would be like to have a podcast episode with Sharon and her six daughters at the same time. That could be pretty wild and we might want to play around with that idea a little bit. But in the interim, hey, first of all, thank you so much for coming on to 10,000 Swamp Leaders and sharing your wisdom, and your stories and your experience. I very much appreciate it.

[00:47:33] SW: Thank you, Rick for giving me the chance. I'm sorry, I rambled on so much. That's the problem with me. When I get going, I can't stop.

[00:47:40] RT: I think it's just fine. Thank you very much, and we will talk to you shortly. Thanks, Sharon.

[00:47:45] SW: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:47:49] 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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