EPISODE 17

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:06] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[00:00:19] RT: Hey everybody, this is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders, a podcast that is a conversation with leaders who have made decisions to lead and work in very complicated, complex and messy or what I refer to as swamp issues. Today is a pretty unique day for me. I have an opportunity to talk to a colleague, a peer. We share positions on a board, and my colleague's name is Dave Cooper. Dave has an extensive background in leading and certainly in a complex world. He was 25 years and Navy SEAL. So our conversation is going to be not just about his experience in Navy SEAL, but what he's doing since then, and how it all fits together.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:03] RT: David, welcome to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. It's good to have you.

[00:01:06] DC: Well, thank you for having me. It's good to be here.

[00:01:08] RT: Alright, so there's a few places we'll probably explore in this conversation. But let's give people a chance to get to know who you are. So what is it you think, is relevant for people to understand who Dave Cooper is in the context of leading but also in life?

[00:01:24] DC: The thing that jumps out when you ask that question is that there is absolutely nothing special about me. Humble origins, I grew up in a place called Manheim, Pennsylvania, which was a small town. I graduated 1983, like many of my friends, went off to college. I had always been a good student and a good athlete. It was assumed that when I was at university, I would go on to study medicine, but my major was molecular biology. I was also on the wrestling team. Those two things kind of define me, academics and athletics from an early age. I always

gotten bored with both of them, like halfway through the semester or halfway through the season, I was ready to move on.

I had this inkling in college that maybe there was some place in the world that brought these two realms together, the mental and the physical, if you will. I had no idea what that place would be or what it looked like. One day, I was sitting in an elective, history class. It was a history of the Vietnam War and the professor mentioned a date, January 8, 1962. It was the day President John F. Kennedy signed into existence, the United States Navy SEALs. I had no idea what a Navy SEAL was, other than some circus mammal, perhaps. He didn't mention anything about the SEALs, it was just a date, you're going to have to regurgitate it at some point of the test. But the name stuck, that I went in search of. No internet, and this is 1986. No Internet then obviously, and what little information I could find, though, intrigued me. Here were these guys operating in small teams all over the world. There were no wars at the time and I didn't want a war.

But they were operating all over the world. Small teams jumping out of airplanes in the middle of night at 25,000 feet, they were braving the North Sea, like Vikings and climbing mountains. And I thought, man, this is it. This is what I got to do. I told my friends, "Hey, after we graduate, there's going to be a little change of plans. Dave's going to go off and become a Navy SEAL." My friends didn't know what Navy SEALs were either, and they said that, you can imagine what they said. They told me, A, I was crazy. B, I would never make it, and the military environment would not be kind to second generation flower child like myself.

That might have been true. It just only made me more determined to actually go be this thing. And so that's what I did. After we graduated in '87, I went off to be a Navy SEAL. I think my parting words were, "Just give me a few years to get this wanderlust out of my system." And I'll grow up, I'll come back home, I'll go back to school, and we'll all live happily ever after. Bet few years turned into 25 years.

By the time I was ready to move on, 2001, I was considering the military med school, and we all know what happened. At the end of the summer, the towers went down and for me and my teammates, there was no looking back. We spent the next decade plus in one war zone or another. I finally retired at the end of 2012. I always tell people that while I didn't set out to spend a career in the military, I will always look at that service as a privilege. With the men and

women I had the opportunity to serve within the SEAL teams and our most elite SEAL team which we call the Naval Special Warfare Development Group. If you follow the news, it's known by another name, but we call it Dev Group.

After I retired, I was really fishing around, walking through doorways that opened to see what I might like. I worked for a big consulting firm that bored me to tears and I knew I had to get back to school, a graduate school. As I talked to my friends, this is the social learning aspect. They all said, "Hey, you got to get an MBA." I thought, "Well, I'll try it out." Stanford had a unique program for the summer to kind of give us the Wave tops in the MBA program. And I thought that was fascinating. But while I was there in 2014, I opened up a magazine, *The Economist*. I recommend that for everybody who's interested in actual news.

There was the advertisement that you and I have both seen. Advertised this really unique program at Oxford and HEC Paris that blended complexity or elements of complexity with leadership and a host of other things, and I thought, "Man, this has my name all over it." I went to the Dean of the Business School, and I said, "Hey, this is where I want to go and that's what I want to do with my life." And the assistant dean, actually, who's become a good friend of mine. And I said, "In order for me to get there, you need to write me a letter of recommendation." So, so she did and off I went, and I had started a business that time with friends, it was a security consulting business, it did well. Again, it wasn't what I saw myself doing for the rest of my life. So when I had the opportunity to divest my third of that business, I did so, I sold it.

Around the same time, I was graduating from the Oxford ATC program, and then I went off on my own, and I kind of take the world of complex systems and organizations these days, and it's about change, and that is a many splendored thing. It's also a many sided thing, but I use that – what we know of complex systems to help people try and create positive change in organizations in their lives, and that's me in a nutshell.

[00:06:21] RT: We're going to crack the nut open a little bit here. How's that? So I want to go back to this modest way in which you said, "I want to be a Navy SEAL, I was going to sign up for Navy SEALs." It's a dang rigorous process to be accepted as a Navy SEAL. I mean, physically, mentally, all that stuff. So, as I was preparing for our conversation, and I live with the phrase Navy SEAL for a long time, and as I was doing some research, I really didn't know anything about it at the end of the day. But it did come across the fitness requirements and the other

things and I thought, "Man, this is a weeding out process is hugely robust. I think they said in what I was reading 85% of the people apply don't make it. It's a huge number, I think."

So how did you get yourself prepared for what it was going to take to just get into being a Navy SEAL, much less than the long training process that would ensue, iff you got in? How did you go about that?

[00:07:19] DC: I went about it by doing absolutely nothing. I was a wrestler, so I was in good shape to begin with. I also became a lifeguard when I was in college, not for any other reason other than I needed a job for spending money, right? There was this choice between washing dishes or being a lifeguard. I thought, "Well, I'll be a lifeguard." So I went through the lifeguard certification. Of course, I knew how to swim. But that gave me some insight into the water world. But even so when I went into the SEAL teams, I didn't really understand anything about it. Today, obviously, there's a lot more information. The information you have saying, that 85 some percent fail, I didn't really have access to that. I just knew it was difficult.

When you get into the SEAL teams, you recognize, as I have, that we go to great lengths to recruit athletes like wrestlers, and water polo players, not because there's any attribute that a wrestler or water polo player necessarily has that makes him a good SEAL. It's the fact that we know how to suffer. Wrestling season is nothing but suffering, with water polo was well. So I really didn't do anything special. Obviously, I kept up with my running and weightlifting and stuff like that. After we graduated, from college, I had the summer, before I was going to go off to the Navy and be this Navy SEAL. What did I do? I always wanted to be a lifeguard of Ocean City Maryland. So I went down to the Ocean City Maryland and became a lifeguard. And so I spent the summer swimming a lot.

That certainly helped me but more than anything, it's a wrestling season where you're fasting most days and still struggling constantly and physically and all of that contributes to your ability to make it through buds. I would also say aside from that is that 85% number is a little bit deceptive, right? Because the Navy lures young men in. It's a constant rebel kind of thing. It's the allure of being the Navy SEAL. What they don't tell you though, is that you're very unlikely to make it as an 18-year-old boy, or young man coming out of high school. You've lived with mom and dad your whole life, you just have no concept of what this is going to be like. So just the four years of college adds a little bit of maturity that helped tremendously as well.

[00:09:33] RT: I think most people view government, especially the federal government, as a hierarchy, a slow moving, bureaucratic institution, and therefore everything related to the government falls in line with that sort of modeling. I'm putting it in a specific context of leading. I suspect you have a different view on that based on your time in the SEALs, so help people understand a little bit about what leading is when you're a SEAL, as opposed to what the perception might be, well, it's a government agency with its own kind, and therefore its bureaucratic and top down, things move slow. What's the reality?

[00:10:09] DC: That's a great question we get. I still go back to my old SEAL team a couple of times a year with a friend of mine, and we do what is nominally billed as a leadership course. It really isn't. I'm kind of the anti-leader in terms of how leadership development goes, in the United States or in some of your business schools. We recognize it, I think, in a slightly different way. You are spot on when you say that military is hierarchical. It's not just hierarchical. It's a dominance hierarchy. And in this course, that we do, I don't pull any punches. I spell this out for these young SEAL team leaders is who the course is for.

And when I say I don't pull any punches, I point out to them that they have to live in two worlds, it's kind of a schizophrenic existence. One of those is the bureaucratic world, the in garrison world when you're in, at home, in the building, that's the military term, in garrison. Versus the combat world, which is incredibly complex. And that hierarchical world that in the military is, and you see this, this is complexity. You don't just see this in humans, we see this in ants and bees, and birds and stuff like that. These dominant hierarchies are very much about status. And the military is very much about rank and status. If I outrank you, there is the assumption that I know more than you, that I'm wiser than you, that I'm more capable than you are. I don't really need any feedback from you, which leads to that saying, hours is not the reason why but to do or die. That's the military.

As I said, I don't pull punches in that regard. It's a hierarchy, its exploitation and status oriented. There is this notion in those hierarchies that power and influence are asymmetric. In any organization, they are some people have more power and influence than others. But in the military, that's taken by force. You have no choice but to submit to the person above you. In complexity terms, we may call that coherent functioning, right? Everybody marches the same direction, they wear the same clothes, they acted same, they think the same, they believe the

same, the relationships are very structured, et cetera, et cetera. And consequently, their ability to solve really tough, juicy, complex, wicked problems is low. It is limited to that small elite group at the top perhaps.

In any complex situation where things are changing weather rapidly or even slowly, the environment throws so many pitches that there's no way a small group of people at the top can possibly come up with all of the answers to those questions. It's a math problem, and they can't do it. Consequently, you see our record in these, what I call adaptive wars, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia. We lose. We have abysmal record. Yet on the other hand of this, you have these guys like the SEALs, not just the SEALs, but particularly the SEALs at the development group, or our counterparts in the army Delta Force, much different. We're still hierarchical. But instead of this dominance hierarchy, we have what would be termed, I guess, more readily a functional hierarchy. Still you see influence and power and things like that are still not distributed equally. They're asymmetric. But that asymmetry is given by consent.

In other words, if we're building a house, the problem is a plumbing problem. Well, then the plumber would step up and say, "Hey, I have some experience here. I think I can help you solve that problem." The rest of us back away and say, "Please, lead us." The SEAL team is no different. If it's a snipers problem, the sniper step up. Because your mark one motto is we say normal assaulter problem, kind of a hostage rescue, well, those assaulters would step up. The lead climber step up, if we have to scale something. So we will willingly back away and see that power and influence to our teammates. I think that's a substantial difference there.

And when it comes down to solving these really tough problems, like hostage rescue problems, or counterterrorism problems, our ability to solve those and come up with some really novel solutions is high. An example I give, is the bin Laden raid where you had a young man who grew up in Texas, he had a high school diploma and he is kind of debating with another guy who went to one of our finer institutions. He's an officer and I chuckle as I watched the two of them debate and I asked people all the time, "Well, who do you think won that debate?" And the debate was, how do we handle the civilians in Pakistan? We had no idea what the civilians were going to do. Talk about complex, right?

So there are initial solutions when I was kind of throwing the civilian problem at them in our – we had a half a dozen training missions or so. Their initial solutions to civilians, kind of storming the

castle, as it were, was pretty brutal. They shot the civilians. Now, there are role players, and we're using paint not real bullets. We don't want to shoot our role players. But I didn't tell them how to solve the problem. I just said, "Hey, man, let's think about this. We are invading a sovereign nation, we might be forgiven considering that it's Osama bin Laden. But if we start to destroy property and kill innocent civilians, this isn't going to go over well. We have to come up with a different solution."

So here are these guys debating on how best to handle this. And as I say, I chuckled, because watching them recognize that they both had a point. Here's conflict, and in normal situations, people bash their heads together until one person just beats the other down. Well, here these two young men realize, again, they both had a point and they integrated those points of view, to come up with a really novel solution to the civilians that are going to be far more powerful than anything any one of them could come up with on his own and that's what they did. And at the end of the day, they decided, "Hey, we'll put one of us in what is the Pakistani equivalent of FBI garb." They have ISI we say FBI. Well, their ISI is trained by our FBI, they have big gold letters ISI on their body armor, they have big gold letters on the back of their windbreakers ISI, everybody in Pakistan knows what ISI is. And even though they speak Urdu they refer to ISI by their English letters.

So that's what these guys did. They put one of their own in the ISI garb. And when those civilians started coming out of their houses, because they heard gunfire, because there's a helicopter landing in their backyard, right? This is a middle class section of Pakistan, there was this guy with ISI garb with a bullhorn saying, "Hey, it's ISI, everything is cool, go back inside." And they all did, and took that problem completely off the table. That's an example of how we can solve these adaptive problems by not by that one guy saying, "Hey, I outrank you, therefore you do as I do." But it's by both guys recognizing that each of them had a perspective that neither one of them had the corner to market on being right. And if they integrate those unique perspectives, they can come up with some pretty novel things, and that's really how we roll on any given target.

[00:16:56] RT: As I'm listening to the story, Dave, and that you're a bearing witness to this conversation is going on. I'm also thinking, you're creating the space and holding a container for the conversation to happen, so that all these discoveries and integrations opportunities could actually take place, meaning that somebody outside of them needs a perspective that this

conversation needs to go in a different way. But you got to create a place in time, a container, structure or a moment for them to actually work this process to get to the place, and that is oftentimes not produced for people who have these two opposing views.

[00:17:35] DC: Absolutely. Yes, I was holding that space, but if I didn't hold that space, I would get the feedback from even the most junior guy there to say, "Hey, man, you're not giving us an opportunity to speak up." And that's, again, part and parcel of who we are. Feedback is not something, again, on the left hand of the regular military, feedback goes one way. Feedback is just information. It's the information suggests you need to stay the course or change the course, right?

In the military, that feedback goes one direction, top, down. Inside of an operational SEAL team, that feedback goes in every direction it needs to go. And that could be the most junior guy saying to me, "Hey, Coop, you are not giving us an opportunity to speak up." And that would be a signal to me to say, "Oh. Hey, forgive me. That's not who we are. It's not part of our culture. The part of our culture is that we have that space." It might be incumbent on the formal leader like me, if that formal leader isn't fulfilling his role, he's going to hear about it. So that's another difference in how we view leadership, we don't necessarily view it, I guess, in a standard way, it's out front doing these things. It's a role that you need to perform. You're expected to perform that role well, but that role is no more or less important than any other role inside of that team.

[00:18:56] RT: In some ways, therefore, leading is more of an activity than it is a description of the position. If I'm on a SEAL team, I'm expected somewhere along the line to lead with my voice around things and ideas that I have, that could help the team execute the mission. That's my obligation to the team.

[00:19:13] DC: Right. That's that functional hierarchy again. I do this for other people as well. But why do this course for these young SEAL team leaders? One of the first things I put up as a picture collage, right? It has a picture of climbers. The prefaces, I asked them, "Hey, when you look at these six or seven pictures, which one of them most closely resembles what you think of leadership? Is it this group of climbers that is helping each other to the top of the mountain? Is it the authoritarian where you know people are bowing down around him? Is it the one where the person is out front leading the charge, if you will, or leading by example? Is it Atlas with the world on his shoulders? Is it Captain Phillips?

We know the story of Captain Phillips because of the movie. He was held hostage by Somali pirates, but he surrendered himself, convinced the Somalis to let his ship and his crew go free. So is that leadership? Is it Gregg Popovich? I put him on there as well. Popovich is well known to be a relationship builder. Is it Kim Jong-un and Kim Jong-il kind of the Dear Leader syndrome? So these pictures are there and I don't ask them to answer that question. I ask them just to think about it. And at the end of the two days, we answer that question. And I think some of them will say, "Well, it's the Captain Richard Phillips." I do point out that well, it sounds cool, that he gave himself up and convinced the Somali pirates to let his ship and the crew go free, but he also forced them against their will to go through that pirate infested area.

The example there is here is a leader, but that leader is imperfect, and that is part of the picture. There are times when you're going to put the world on your shoulders, but you might not necessarily be the formal leader that's putting the world, the responsibility falls on you for whatever it is, your tasks that you need to perform that is pivotal. Relationships are huge. So obviously, it's somebody that can build relationships like Gregg Popovich, that's tremendous. The team helping each other get to the top solve the problem. I also show them the murmuration of starlings, and there's a lot we can learn from this collection of starlings that create these exquisite patterns as they perform a task of hunting, or foraging or avoiding prey, or is it the personnel. But sometimes it is, but it doesn't necessarily mean you're physically out front with your saber saying, "Follow me". It could be that you're leading by example, only in the sense that you are exhibiting those values that all of you share, right? It's easy to hang those things on the wall, right? The core values, how many of us actually live up to that and can lead that way simply by living up to those examples?

So the answer to that question is, at the end of this two days, most of them will say, "Hey, it's every one of these pictures except for two. It's not the authoritarian and it's not the Dear Leader syndrome that is focused entirely on status." All of those other aspects, though, are aspects of leadership, of influence.

[00:22:07] RT: So 25 years of serving your country, then you leave. In the time I've known you, which has been I don't know what, five years or so, somewhere in there. You have been a constant voice around complexity, science and complex adaptive systems. So I'm curious how you came to be interested in that? And to what extent are some of the roots of it based on your

time in the SEALs, or maybe it's not? But transition for us, just like you did out of the SEALs, and where does this influence show up in your life before you started to chase it in a deliberate fashion?

[00:22:45] DC: Yeah, great question. I mean, I'm always the science geek, the molecular biologists. To me, immunology was always fascinating. Cell biology, the connection between the cell and the team, right? The cell is the basic unit of life. Inside of a SEAL team, that team is the basic unit of life and I would contend that wherever you go, that team is the equivalent of the cell. It is the basic unit of life. There inside of a cell, you have organelles, performing all kinds of different functions inside of a team, you have diverse agents, teammates, performing all kinds of different functions as well.

So it was always there. What troubled me was, I guess the way we teach science. We have to break it down to its barest constituents, subatomic particles, perhaps. But that doesn't ever tell us anything about whether it's a molecule, we add up all of the atoms, we can study atoms down to the nth degree. It doesn't tell us about how a molecule is going to perform. Well, we can put all those organelles together in the cell and all those cells together to make tissues and all those tissues together to make organs. But that doesn't tell us how the human being is going to perform, and that was always something in science that troubled me. I mean, it doesn't tell us anything about how the world is going to perform, even though I know all the answers and all the definitions to all those parts.

That's what intrigued me about this notion of complexity. Being a SEAL only accentuated that. You get the sense of something Aristotle said many moons ago, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." What he should have said is the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, doesn't have to be. There are many holes that are not greater than the sum of their parts. And so inside of that SEAL team, you start to see that. Here's a group of guys that are completely normal. We are not rocket scientists. I tell people that all the time. If we were a rocket scientist, we would go be rocket scientists. That doesn't mean we don't have a great deal of diversity in our education. We have guys with GED's, we have guys with Master's Degrees and PhDs, all kind of working together.

What comes out of that is something far, far, far greater than the sum of our individual parts. And as soon as I listened to Jean Bolton, I don't know if you had the pleasure of having Jean

when you were in the Oxford HCC program, Jane's a theoretical physicist. She was day one for me at Oxford. She started talking about complexity and complex systems science. I was like, "Holy cow. This is what I been looking for." Right now, I've read a ton about complexity and all that stuff in the interim, but no one ever explained it to me, and she explained it to me in that short lecture, and I walked up to her, and she's a diminutive, older woman, so polite, and so kind. I went up to her after the lecture, and I said, "I have always looked at complexity, really, as a metaphor for life." She looks up at me, and she patted me on the shoulder, and she said, "Hey, it's reality, get used to it."

I'm like, "She's right. It is reality." That doesn't mean that it necessarily complex systems science, it doesn't mean that it necessarily – not everything in the lab can be taken into the world of humans. So we do have to be careful about that. Some of it is metaphorical. Some of it is analogy. But a lot of it does play out. We know that patterns that play out, insects play out, in humans, as well. I mentioned those hierarchies and stuff like that. So we know these patterns play out at different levels. So that stuff I think, is relevant. And even just understanding how emergence works or what it means when we talk about basins of attraction or the power of initial conditions and stuff like that. Those are important concepts for people to learn, and when they do get a sense of it, that's what I do these days, you get a sense of that stuff, then you get a sense of how to tinker with that system. And those small changes can lead to some big impacts. That's really the whole gist of it.

[00:26:27] RT: So let's go there a little bit. I'm reading off of your bio here. It says, "Dave's mission quite simply, is to help teams and organizations tell a better story to their clients, their customers, their employees and their stakeholders by generating a nuanced awareness of the complex context in which they live and work and how they might then positively influence that context to become more responsive and resilient together." That's a mouthful. But let's take it apart, because you have this experience with Jean, in the program, she sounds like what you said is she gave you direction and orientation and sense making some things you were trying to sort out. And you got on this journey of complex systems you've been on since then.

So even in your description of the conversation that you had with Jean and what's going on in the classroom, it's still pretty high level for a lot of people. I also now imagine that in this time, you've been working to get this stuff onto the ground where you can actually work it and help people understand it so they can do something different. How do you do that work?

[00:27:32] DC: Yeah, you do it by not mentioning physics. A lot of this stuff, we're chatting here, but some of this stuff, make your eyes glaze over, right? You don't talk about phase transitions. Instead, you use terms that we're all familiar with tipping and stuff like that. The story piece is key, and something you mentioned there, the sense making pieces key as well. I tend to start there. This is a model I took away from Brian Arthur, W. Brian Arthur. But he's a renowned economist professor emeritus. One of the founders of the Santa Fe Institute, at least one of its early members, it's not a founder. But he said, "Hey, we all use the same decision making model. Don't complicate it. We try and make sense of what's going on. We explore our options, we experiment, and we adjust based on the feedback."

He's right, we all do that. Problem with humans is we don't do it well. So, we notice. When you want to make sense of what's happening in your life, you tend to tell a story about it. From that mission is, let's not run from that. Let's tell a better story, and that might be about starts with understanding bias. How does bias work? When we look at something that's transpiring in our world, a pandemic, how does bias impact the story that we tell. If you're off just a little bit on that initial condition, your end result, the actions you take based on that are going to be way off here in a war, bias.

My earliest entree into combat was chasing Bin Laden in 2002. We had this convoy moving towards the border of Pakistan, and we are adept at interdicting these convoys. But while we're in the air, the powers that be said, "Hey, the convoy stopped, the people got out of the car, one of the guys was tall, wearing white robes." Therefore, it must be Bin Laden, and we can't afford for him to get away, we're going to bomb the convoy. And you have myself and one of the other team leaders on the helicopter, get on the radio and say, "Please don't do this." Let us get on the ground and sort it out and we were overruled. Rank is right in this case. They bombed that convoy. That guy was tall, and he was wearing white robe, but he was tall because everyone around him were women and children. It was not Bin Laden. And that is not the only time we did that. We killed scores of women and children on that day because of a bias, because the story we told ourselves, and we're all in this together. I don't blame this on the people above me. The story we told ourselves was that tall guy, white robes must be bin Laden. That is faulty logic. That is bias. That's fallacy.

So it starts with that, how do we tell a better story, and if we can tell a better story, the options that we're able to explore the different perspectives and methods that we're able to combine tend to expand. We expand that space of the adjacent possible. I rarely mentioned the word experiment. We got to try some of these things out. But people don't like experiment, they hate the word. We've heard this before from one of the guest speakers we had at TCL, on The Change Leaders. They do like things like pilot programs and stuff like that, it lands easier. So I use that language instead of experiment.

And then feedback, it's where the magic happens. It's one of the things that separates an operational SEAL team, again, from the rest of the military. As I mentioned, we're open to feedback. You have to be open to feedback. It's a kind of a mixture of autonomy and feedback, you're free to act. But then you also have to be open to freely giving feedback, even to your boss, and freely accepting it, which is really difficult for people to do. I love feedback when it's glowing. I don't like feedback when it's critical, and you have to somehow get over that. I tell you, it's easier to get over it when you have a group of people around you who are helping you get over it, because they're struggling with it as well. That's again, what a SEAL team brings it.

So that model is really that I introduce it all the time. We got to make sense, we got to do a little bit better, because the story we tell has to be more accurate. We know in sensemaking, this is Carl White, right? Today, our sensemaking in humans doesn't have to be accurate, it only has to be plausible. The earth is flat, moon landing was faked, it all sounds great, right? It's not the truth. So we start there, we explore options, expand those options, we experiment, and then we have to adjust based on feedback. So we're changing constantly, and those landscapes that are changing constantly, if you will.

[00:31:50] RT: As in our conversation and the point of this podcast, one point of the podcast is to be able to provide possibly useful ideas to future leaders who are a little behind us on the trail.

So you're coming into this conversation with this large experience around being a Navy SEAL and leading in that place, that may not be the option that people are taking. But the conversation around complexity, science and complex adaptive systems, and its relevance to understand that as somebody who's leading is important, regardless of the role they play. So what counsel do you have for these people who are maybe listening in and they're not very familiar with

complexity science, or complex adaptive systems right now, but here you are talking about and it seems relevant. How do you help them get going on this conversation in this exploration so they can get some grip to it?

[00:32:43] DC: It's not necessarily about being a better leader, that's kind of an emergent property, leadership. It is about being a better teammate. And if you can focus on that, and that's again, what an operational SEAL team does, it focuses on the mission. But in order to achieve that mission, we are not individuals, we are teammates and we focus on that. Again, on the other side, you have the military, which is focused on what some call the primacy of the individual. It is about status. It's about them. Why sometimes I take exception with traditional leadership development, it's individually focused at times that some people become better narcissists, not better leaders.

[00:33:20] RT: I got to write that down. That's good. Sorry, keep going, man.

[00:33:26] DC: Yeah. So, to kind of combat that, focus more on being a better teammate, on being a better mom, on being a better dad, on being a better brother, sister, whatever the case might be in whatever functional unit you're in. If the focus is on you, then make that focus about being a better team member. We can do that. Talking about the bones of a complex system, right? Relationships, that's one of those big bones. We can get better at relationships. There's relationships between protons and neutrons and electrons. Relationships are bound.

So on the human scale, we can be respectful, up, down and sideways in an organization, not just respect based on rank. Again, like the United States military. We could actively show care and concern for our teammates, right? Those are simple rules. The role piece, we can optimize our roles. We can get better at the things that we do. That's something we have influence over. We can actually learn new skills and demonstrate new skills. We can try to contribute more to the group. Those are all aspects of fulfilling our roles. When it comes to rules, that's another one of these bones that we have that's kind of the structure of a system. I mentioned the murmuration of starlings. For those who know about the starlings, they have three rules, right? They maintain a constant speed, they steer towards the center of the flock, and they avoid contact with their neighbors. Those three rules allow them to be one, to form these really cool patterns, but they're not out there doing air dancing or sky dancing, they're hunting. Abiding by those three rules, allows them to be one of the most successful species on the face of the

planet. I say that knowing full well, they can't make red wine. But they're still pretty good at hunting and stuff like that.

And then the feedback piece, all systems have response mechanisms, right? Open yourself up to the feedback, even open yourself up to the possibility that your boss could use some feedback too. That could be positive feedback, "Hey, I really liked what you did here, that was cool. Made us feel this way or that way. Or made us feel that we're really part of the team." You we can concentrate on those areas as individuals, but they all help us be a better teammate. The relationship, the roles, the rules, and the responses that we have. That's one thing I would say. There seems to be a dichotomy there or distinction, but it really isn't there. You might focus on yourself and improving some of these areas, but those areas that you're improving, are going to make you a better teammate, and you will, by necessity, like in a SEAL team, be called upon to lead at times. And that only means giving your opinion and influencing that way. That's leadership. It's towards a shared goal.

[00:36:01] RT: Your characterization of individual leadership development programs being more narcissistic than leader based, I think is accurate, even as it's provocative. And my experience has been that where the most traction occurs is when groups of people who are in some kind of authority and leadership mix, are working with each other to solve challenges. So maybe I have a challenge in the moment, and my peers are helping me through it. Meaning that every challenge that you helped me with also helps you with your own challenge, because we're invariably going to have some common DNA there.

So I think you speak wisely, to that dynamic is the point of leverage for this development, which leads me to another question. I want to ask you about a leader that you know, her name is Sonia Cooper, and she is a VP of a hospital in Virginia Beach. If I remember correctly, she got that role in the middle of the pandemic. I might be a little off on that, but somewhere there. And so, she has been having to lead in a very complex, messy, wicked, swampy world for two years. So it got me thinking, what is the conversation that goes on between Dave and Sonia around leading, given the world that she's been living in for two years? And what possibly have you picked up about leading from your wife based on the world that she's working in?

[00:37:27] DC: She is the Interim President right now of one of our newest hospitals. I will tell you this, she is a far better leader than I am, although I can still beat her in arm wrestling and

jujitsu. But just barely. She can run faster, she's got that edge. Sonia's strength is the relationship piece. She is a relationship builder and she is really, really good at that. She sees that as her role, as well. These things aren't necessarily instinct relationships and roles, right? She's just really good at that. But I will tell you that when we chat about issues that she might be having at work, we never ever come to the conclusion that there's an elegant solution to the problems she's dealing with. And this is your realm, right? There's wicked problems. There isn't. There aren't elegant solutions.

Even if you happen upon an elegant solution today, like a vaccine, it won't necessarily be there tomorrow, because the world is going to change. That's one of the things that constantly crops up is the fact that there are no elegant solutions. How do you get people accustomed to that? That's challenging. That's where I think, you know, she is that person, she's just approachable, super approachable. People come to her and talk to her about their issues. She talks to them about issues she has. The weaknesses that she thinks she has. The troubles that she has. Huge trust comes out of people that can do that. And that's not necessarily me. Like I said, I think she's a better leader than I.

Yeah, so those conversations never land on the elegant solution. I will tell you that the outset, though, of the pandemic, the one conversation we had, was kind of starts off as what do you think? I said, "Man, I have no idea what to think here." March of 2020, I said, I do know this, though, that as soon as ideas start flying around your hospital, and you guys in the executive team, shoot those ideas down, you'll never see those ideas again.

[00:39:19] RT: Or the voices of those ideas.

[00:39:21] DC: Or the voices, not more than two or three weeks later, she came home and she said, "Let me tell you about the story." She said, "You know what, the labor and delivery nurses had an issue, and that issue was only one person can go in with mom to deliver the baby." Previously, I'd let two or three or however many people wanted to go in and be there with mom as she delivered the baby. Well, now only one person could go in and dad was deaf. He communicated by lip reading. But everybody's in a mask. So he can't take part in the birth of his own child because he has no idea what anybody is saying. And I'm like on the edge of my seat. I'm like, "How do you solve that problem?" She said, "I don't know. But the nurses said, I think I have an idea." And they took some clear surgical material. So mask out of that, and everybody

on the team wore these see-through masks, so the dad could read their lips. That's how you solve complex problems.

A couple of weeks after that they were all on The Today's Show. That's great. There's a little recognition for that. But the beauty of that was in that team solving that problem, and not having been shut down by venturing forth with that idea of, "Hey, what if I make a see-through mask and somebody saying, 'Well, that's a stupid idea." None of that happens at where she works. Or if it does happen, it happens with very limited bases. Because of that space, they were able to create this unique solution to what is a tough problem.

[00:40:43] RT: Yup. That's a cool story. Let's stay in a family deal. So you have three sons?

[00:40:48] DC: Yeah.

[00:40:49] RT: One of them is about to head off to college, if I'm correct in that, and couple still on that journey. What kind of fatherly counsel do you give your sons around this thing called leading?

[00:41:01] DC: Oh, that I threw out the window, I become the authoritarian. Do as I say – whenever I do that, because we all break down, as leadership takes self-control, right? Self-control goes out the window at nine o'clock in the evening when your kids won't go to bed. And always when I become the authoritarian, there's a hand on my shoulder that hand is my wife saying, "Sorry." We have a motto, it's school, it's sports and social activities. It's be a good student, be a good teammate, and connect. That's how we give each other feedback on that.

Be a good student, be a good teammate, there's that teammate piece again. And what does that take? And this leads into some really interesting conversations about what it means to be a good teammate and stuff like that. That's social activities, "Hey, you got to get out there and connect with people." Today's kids, they do connect, they connect virtually a lot of the time. Our conversations are more about, "Hey, I get it." That is one way to connect, but face to face contact and playing outside with your friends and going fishing and exploring the world, I think there's a good bit out of that.

So we do after action reviews when they come home from the things that they didn't want to do. I'm like, "Well, how do you feel now?" And they're like, "Well, I'm glad you suggested or you made me go do this." I'm like, "Exactly. All you have to do is overcome that inertia to go do some of these things and there's some huge benefit from that." So it's never about leadership directly. But again, it's about being a better teammate,

[00:42:25] RT: After action reviews.

[00:42:27] DC: I don't tell them the after action review, but I do say, "Hey, how do you feel now?" My oldest son is the guy, the one that's getting ready to head off to college. He is chip off the old block and me as a young guy sees some groups as, well, I don't need to parley with these people. They bother me. One of those was his National Honor Society. He was eligible to go into the National Honor Society in seventh grade. And we suggested to him, "Hey, why don't you go do this." "Uh-uh, I don't have to. I'm too cool for that." We suggested in eighth grade, we suggested in ninth grade, we suggested in 10th grade, it was suggested 11th grade before his senior year, we said, "Hey, okay, we've given you enough opportunities, now you're going to sign up for the National Honor Society." He goes off and does all of these activities with the National Honor Society. And every time he comes home, and I'm like, "What did you think?" He's like, "Yeah, it was fun. I liked it." He grudgingly has to say that. I'm like, "See."

[00:43:27] RT: It's comforting for a guy like me who's never been a SEAL to know that none of that SEAL stuff really helps when you're a parent sometimes. Okay, so I have a couple of questions in closing here. What's something people seem to misunderstand about you?

[00:43:43] DC: I get up in front of groups and speak all the time, and people will come up to me and say, "I'm not an extrovert like you." And I'm like, "Hey, hold on. I am deeply introverted." And I get almost no pleasure out of standing up in front of a group and holding court. I do it. But it's not something that makes me tick. What makes me tick is sitting down with a good book, often separating myself from people. I say, I'm deeply introverted, and people don't really get to see that. If they see me out at a party, I become the life of the party or whatever. But what they don't see is when I go back home and collapse, trying to reenergize and I think that's probably the biggest misperception that people have of me. Because yeah, I am in no way shape, or form extroverted, and I would much prefer to hold up in a palace somewhere and be an ascetic

monk, and read good books for the rest of my life. Unfortunately, I have to get over that inertia too, coached myself past that.

[00:44:39] RT: I could relate to that. That's my world, too. Okay. Last question then is what should I have asked you that I didn't know enough to ask?

[00:44:47] DC: Am I any good at being a husband and a father? That would be a good one. I'm not going to answer that. But you should have asked it. I will answer that. Those are things that are, I think, central to me. And if you were to follow me around for a day, and a teammate of mine said this to me when I was a SEAL once. We were considering to whether or not to punish someone who had done something wrong, and our tendency is to punish, right? But what we try to do is always set the conditions so that people can recover, and we try to learn from the mistake before anything else. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we want to try and learn from the mistake before anything else.

To remind me of this, he said, "Hey, Coop, if I were to follow you around for a day, here at the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, doing SEAL things, I'm going to find enough mistakes to fire you." And that shocked me back into reality. I think if you were to follow me around as a husband and father for a day, you will find enough mistakes to fire me. What I think I do well, though, and I take that from my days as a SEAL is I'm open to feedback from my wife. I actually ask my kids for feedback. I'm like, "Hey, how do you think I'm doing here?" And they get some point of feedback, right? That's a struggle. That's the thing that perhaps is most important to me, being a good husband, being a good dad, and it's perhaps the thing that I struggle with the most.

[00:46:03] RT: This is probably the third or fourth time you've referenced feedback. And maybe it's a nice place for us to bring it to a close, which is, it's my view that there is no such thing as high performance without timely, relevant feedback. It just can't happen.

[00:46:15] DC: Hallelujah.

[00:46:16] RT: And if that's the goal, then you're going to need to incorporate feedback as part of your practice, that's for sure.

So, Mr. Cooper, these people who are listening, some of them will know this, others don't. But our alumni group is finally going to be able to gather together again in person in about four weeks in Paris, and so I'm dang looking forward to seeing you again in the flesh. It's been three plus years or so. In the interim, thank you for doing this. It's been a pleasure. I will see you in Paris shortly.

[00:46:47] DC: You will. I appreciate it. I had a great time and thanks, man.

[00:46:50] RT: Okay, take care.

[OUTRO]

[00:46:54] 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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