

EPISODE 18

[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.

[EPISODE]

[00:00:19] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth and welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This week I show up without guest in hand. That was originally part of my design and idea for this episode. Primarily, because after 17 episodes talking to 17 different swamp leaders, I wanted to take a moment to reflect a little bit about what I've learned, and some themes that have been emerging in the conversations and use a short episode to sort of coalesce around some of those bits and pieces.

I also have been away out of the country for two weeks working in London and Paris. It was not hard duty, for sure. It was wonderful to be abroad. It was wonderful to be in those two amazing cities. I had good fortune to be with a lot of colleagues and friends through the alumni group that I'm part of, regarding a master's program it did few years ago. There was one primary question I kept getting from these people could they've listened to the podcast. That question was, and I actually get this a lot here, which is, "What's up with the name 10,000 Swamp Leaders?"

I had originally intended and I'm going to explain the origin of that name and how it comes to be attached to this podcast. I'm going to do that first and then I'm going to go in another direction. The inspiration for the swamp comes from a gentleman by the name of Donald Schön, who was a MIT organizational development guy. Donald has passed now, but he was one of the leading figures shaping the conversation around how organizations can function more effectively. In a book called *Knowing for Action*, he says this, "There is a high hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solutions to the use of research base theory and technique. In a swampy lowlands, the problems are messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of

the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or societies at large. However, their great technical interest may be while in the swamp like problems are the greatest human concern, the practitioners confronted with a choice, shall she remain on the high ground where she can solve relatively unimportant problems according to her standards of rigor or shall she descend into the swamp of important problems, where she could not be rigorous in any way she knows how to describe? People tend to feel this dilemma of rigor or relevance at a particular intensity when they reach the age of about 35. At this point, they ask themselves, 'Am I going to continue to do the thing I was trained for, on which I base my claims to technical rigor and academic respectability? Or am I going to work on problems ill formed, vague, messy that I have discovered to be real around here?' Depending on how people make this choice, their lives unfold differently."

That is an understatement and I'm pretty sure Donald Schön knew it was going to be an understatement when he wrote it. That is the source, the headwaters, if you will, for how I determine who I'd like to invite on to 10,000 Swap Leaders. They are those people who somewhere in that age 35 to 40, made a career decision, a life decision that they're going to spend their time dealing with really complex, wicked, messy swamp problems. Their lives have all turned out remarkably different. Not always great, but certainly interesting, and full of passion, and commitment and challengers. I know, for every one of them, they would not have it any other way. We'll stay in that conversation with people in the future. Starting next week, we'll be back on par with a weekly episode from a new swamp leader describing what it means to lead in that condition.

Now, then I come with a wicked, messy swamp problem. I am not alone with this problem. I'm speaking specifically about the mass shootings that have taken place in the United States two days ago, down in Uvalde, Texas. On May 15th, 10 people were killed in Buffalo, New York in a mass shooting. I thought that was the sequence unit that I thought was remarkably tight, but I did some research and I came across a website called gun violence archives. What I learned was just blew me away that between May 15 on the episode and Buffalo and the episode two days ago in Texas, there have been 18 other attacks with guns in the United States, 18 that have left 25 people dead in 70 people injured.

We are living in two pandemics in my country, and we used to think COVID was the worst, but I'm not so sure. We don't seem to have any antidote for the violence that's going on in our country with guns. We have, depending on your political persuasion, an inert Senate that's unwilling to take up some of the most basic issues around background checks, an issue the majority of the population would like to see put into law. Interestingly enough, today, in the New York Times, they published a list of all the senators who are either undecided on this issue or opposed. They're not even hiding in broad daylight. They're just out there walking around making their case for why this is not necessary legislation. Meanwhile, virtually every day, something goes wrong with a human being and a gun and the consequences are really dangerous for other people.

All right. So here I sit, somebody who's claiming to be active, and supportive and helping people develop their capacity to deal with this kind of stuff. My reflections on the flight home from Europe, and then starting in earnest yesterday, was just to what extent am I really doing anything around these kinds of issues. I had to be honest, and say that, for the most part, I live on the balcony. I say that in the context of the leadership platform that I'm most familiar with, and also a big advocate of. That is the work by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, out of Harvard 30 years on now, around adaptive leadership.

Now, adaptive leadership is fairly well known at this point around the world, but I'm going to suggest it is known more as a concept and a conversation than it is as a practice for the people who need it most and should be practicing it. There are some reasons why that's a challenge and I've made it my business to see if I can help those kinds of people develop their capacity to lead adaptively when they're doing the work of living and functioning in the swamp. When I say help them build their capacity, what that really means in real terms is the ability to function differently when the clock's running and something's at stake, so that you're able to function at a higher level, deal with complexity at a higher level than you would have you not develop the practice to build that capacity.

I look at this mass shooting epidemic, and it clearly meets the specs for a wicked problem or a swamp issue. It's also so that we are floundering in any attempts to organize yourselves around how to resolve it. There are some structural and systemic reasons for that part of it being size and scope, but there's also some available ways in which we can do something about it but we

are somewhat inactive in a broad enough basis. I thought what I would do today in the time that I'm going to take here is using the orientation perspective and frameworks of adaptive leadership, look at a few different ways in which person like myself, and I'm going to put myself in the middle of this conversation and say, "These are things that that I am looking to do, I have a request of help for anybody out there listening at the end of this conversation. I'll get to that in a few minutes.

I do want to address a couple things that provide access points for how somebody who doesn't have requisite authority might choose to raise their hand and try to lead on an issue, in this case, this issue of dealing with gun control, and verification, a suitability for who should get guns, etc. That's a starting point. There's lots of points of entry here, but I'm going to use that as my framing for this conversation.

Let me begin by saying that in the work of adaptive leadership, it makes a very specific distinction and defines it as a central task of people who are choosing to lead, is to help educate people on the difference between technical problems and wicked problems. Schön talks about a little bit here in that quote, "A technical problem can be difficult. It can be hard, but we do have a solution to it and we know how to solve that problem." I cannot do heart surgery. If I needed heart surgery, there are some people out there who are experts and for them, what would be a complex problem for me, it's a technical problem for them and they can handle that. There are lots of other examples of what are hard, but solvable problems.

On the other side, the swamp problem or what Heifetz and Linsky would call an adaptive challenge is a problem that represents a gap between the desired state and the reality that cannot be closed with existing approaches. Meaning, we can't keep doing the same thing over and over again and think we're going to get a different outcome here. A wicked problem and adaptive challenge is a problem where the solution lies outside our current way of operating. The way we do everyday business so to speak. Every problem is understood as a gap between our aspirations, what we really want and what the reality is. That gap, we're trying to close in favor of our aspirations. This is where the work begins for people.

The second major distinction that I want to reinforce and I think I do this on every episode is this difference between authority and leading. Authority has to do with providing direction, protection

and order in a system, in an organization, in a team, in a community, wherever the case may be. We need a certain amount of authority in order to organize the work and it gets organized around those themes of direction, protection and order or systems processes. Leading on the other hand is an activity, it's a choice. It can literally come from anywhere in the system, and it often does come from anywhere in a system. Which means, somebody without quite the requisite authority chooses to raise their hand and lead on an issue.

Ideally, in organizations, we would have the people who are an authority, also choosing to lead. But we know from our own experience, that isn't always the case. Therefore, a lot of times, the work of making progress on these problems comes from different places in the system than the authority. I would argue right now that the authority vested in the United States Senate to take on issues that are represented by the demands and requests of their constituents, of which there's a majority of people in the United States who see it as appropriate to have background checks are not actually leading very well, if at all. We have a gap there between our aspirations for what we think we would like our elected officials to do and what they're actually doing.

Now what, so therefore, there's an opportunity to lead, to raise your hand and get into some action. The first thing that happens when this occurs, is that you have to understand that the people with the problem are usually – have a hand in the mess, they're part of the problem themselves. It's important to understand that at the outset, because the gap between our aspirations and our reality only closes when we understand that and recognize that what's at stake there is we have to learn some new ways of doing things, because the current way in which we do it isn't working. This act of learning comes into play almost immediately upon discovering A, that we have a problem that's messy and wicked, and B it calls for leadership.

Leaders job as oftentimes at the outset is to organize the learning processes that people need to embark upon. So that they can arrive with a different set of understandings a different way to identify the challenges, different ways to go to work on them than the current ways in which they're wired to do it. Another move that comes into play rather quickly is to understand that if the people are part of the problem, that they represent stakeholders in the system, and that responsibility for making progress on this challenge certainly lives with the stakeholders as much as it does the authority figures.

For me, Rick Torseth sitting here outside Seattle, I can sit here and grouse about the 50 senators or so in Washington, DC who aren't doing their job, leading or even using their authority wisely. If that's all I do, and I'm a stakeholder in this situation, which I am, because I live in this country, and this issue is happening in my country. Therefore, I am part of the problem to the degree of doing nothing. I have to own some of that and understand what that entails. If you're using yourself as a leader, you need to understand who the stakeholders are in this conversation. They're not monolithic. You have different groups who have different representations of things that matter to them, different values, different wants and desires, different concerns. What they have a sense of what's coming with this idea of leading is that something's going to change. When that something is going to change happens, they understand that it could represent that they're going to be at risk of losing something that matters to them in order to move forward with the change.

As somebody who's choosing to lead, it's important before you get yourself all wound up and to work on advocating what you think needs to happen is to step back a little bit. Heifetz and Linsky would say, "Take a place on the balcony, look at the dance floor where the action is happening and see what you see from a different perspective. Just sit there and observe it for a little bit. Metaphorically or sometimes physically, understand the broader picture and see if you can begin to identify who the factions are. the groups of people who have different interests in this change proposition that you're bringing to the conversation. What is at stake for them is loss."

Now, it's not really so that people resist change. What they do tend to resist this loss, what they're familiar with, what they've been rewarded for, what they're recognized for, what is valuable to them is suddenly or some way shape or form going to change or go away. That will produce some resistance. Therefore, my job if I'm choosing to lead is to A, understand that by understanding who the factions are and diagnosing what some of those elements are play. Then B, figuring out how it is that I can compensate for that inside the new world that we're aspiring to. Now, not everything is going to match up and not everything's going to be perfect. We're all going to experience some loss, but there's probably also some gain that might offset that. That work by the leader is critical work that happens upfront, and then is an ongoing piece of work, because this is going to be a fluid process where you're running experiments, trying new things and seeing what can happen in the future.

What you're confronted with is a diagnostic process. One is to get on the balcony. Two is to understand what's going on down in the dance floor and make meaning out of it or interpret it. Then the third move, is to go down on that dance floor and begin to look at how you can run small experiments that look like change in the direction of where you're trying to move the group, and then iterate from there. The diagnostic component of that is to understand that through three questions, probably more, but let's go with these three to start. What is it about the way we do things now that we need to carry forward into the future? What stays with us? Two, what is it that's not essential that we need to leave behind as we move into the future? Then the third question is, what do we need to invent or bring forward that we don't have that will be essential in the future and add that to what we're keeping?

That's one way into diagnosing A, what the change looks like and B, how you address the stakeholders concerns about loss. What do we keep? What do we leave behind? What do we bring forward? Those questions answered are a good starting point and you would be wise to keep in mind that you probably don't have them 100% accurate at the outset, but they'll season themselves through the experiment that you run, and the outcomes that come from it, and your willingness to reflect on what happened, and how you can learn from it and then keep going.

Now, then, one more piece I'll throw in here and that is about timing. This is slower work that most of us are really wired for, we'd like to move things along, we like to see progress, we'd like to get things done. This work is, it takes time, because you have people in varying stages of adaptation into the change, but you're trying to mobilize the people to keep moving. Some are going to slow down; some are going to go faster. You're in a constant change of adaptation. The thing that I want to say here about this, around timeframe is, using yourself as a barometer, as a temperature gauge for your ability to mobilize and keep the group moving. Which is to say, that one, it's difficult for a leader to take people, and lead them and mobilize them into a different future that's more complex than what the leader's capabilities are to handle that complexity themselves.

If the complexity you're aspiring to is greater than what you can handle, it's going to be a challenge. The work often starts with the leader. What's the degree that I can handle the tension and understand that, that I'm asking people to absorb and work on myself as much as I'm

mobilizing the other people. Because if I'm not able to do that, they'll see that rather quickly and they'll lose contact with me. The second thing is that people want to practice what is called work avoidance, they'd like to find something they know how to do, something that works easy for him, because that's what they know, that's how they've been rewarded. But it's not the key work that needs to be done. It doesn't fit the three specs that we just asked questions about. Then, another strategy that they'll do is try and divert the leader's attention off the issue into someplace else. Sometimes mostly, this is unconscious, but sometimes it's conscious. As a leader, you need to have your eye out for people avoiding the work that we're trying to do. Are they trying to divert my attention?

This is a lot of stuff; people go to Harvard for 16 weeks and take this course there and I'm giving you just a dose of it. But I do want to say that, I think that in this world that we're living in right now, this capacity to build adaptive functionality as a leader is an essential skill set for people who've chosen to work in the swamp. I think that it's also where the riches lie in terms of your capacity to make a difference in the world through other people. I'm an advocate for that. Obviously, the podcast is purpose driven to address that conversation.

What I do come with now at the end is a request, because I am a little bit of a loss at how to actually practice some of all the things I've just gone over with you. Which is to say, I need to get off the balcony of being a consultant exclusively, being a facilitator of conversations, being an organizer, and a content producer of ideas, and implement and act on some of these myself. I have some thoughts and ideas about how me and my position might be able to do that. But I'd welcome your input and your thoughts and your ideas. If you have something that you think somebody like me or me specifically in the position that I am in with regardless, we can put it into context of this issue of gun violence in United States right now. That's the one that's got my attention, but there may be other things that you're thinking about.

I would welcome a note from you. You can reach me at ricktorseth.com. That's rick@ricktorseth.com. You may say, "Hey! Here's some ideas and thoughts that have." I'd welcome them. They give me more moves to make than I can come up with myself. Thank you for this time. I hope it's been useful to you. You've made my life a little easier today just getting some thoughts, and organized and a little bit spoken helps. I will be back next week with

another episode and another guest for 10,000 Swamp Leaders. Until then, please be safe out there.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:21:37] 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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