EPISODE 19

[INTRODUCTION]

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

[00:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. It's Rick Torseth. And this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders, a podcast where we have conversations with leaders about what it's like to deal with hard, messy, wicked or what we call swamp issues here on the podcast. And I want to, a, acknowledge that it's been a couple weeks since you heard from me. I had the good fortune of spending two weeks in Paris and London. And the weather was fabulous. The work was great. The food was great. The wine was great. And I am back now. And I'm replenished and ready to go.

Today is a kind of blessing day for me in my guesting here, because I have a friend, a colleague, that I've known Max I think for seven, eight years now. And we do some work together. Full disclosure, we are partners in crime in certain kinds of work that you're familiar with. And Max is going to get into a little bit more detail here.

But let me welcome to the show Max Martina. Max is the President of Cambridge Leadership Associates, which I'm going to give him ample space to explain what that work is as we go along. Max, welcome to the podcast. And welcome to the swamp.

[00:01:24] MM: Yeah, thank you, Rick. It's truly a privilege and honor to be with you. And I love our conversations, because I always learn something, too. And I'll toot your horn for just a second. You have this ability to reference and leverage the learning that you've accumulated over the last little while to make things relevant for folks. It's really a privilege to be with you. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:44] RT: It's good to be here. Let's do some of that leveraging and connecting here in a moment. But before we get into that, tell people about who you are. Whatever you think is relevant for them to know about you in context for the conversation we're going to have would be great.

[00:01:44] MM: That's a broad question. And so, I could talk about, I suppose, my favorite color or where I'm from. But let me give you just a couple benchmarks. I am a white middle-aged guy living in the Pacific Northwest on an island with the same island that you live in.

I think, most critically, relative to the work that I've come to, I have been blessed, I think, to – Sound strange to say, but to have been born into a family where there was a lot of social complexity. And like many of us who have had experiences of trauma at a young age, that was foundational for some of the work that I later pursued in my life.

I always knew that I wanted to help people. Always knew that I had this kind of pragmatic optimism, but struggled for many years to figure out the best avenue for that, right? How do I leverage my highest and best use in the service of helping others? That was a core question for me.

And so, over the years I've been involved in private practice, private business rather, CEO a couple times over. Ran a nonprofit for many years. And then over really about the last decade or so, pursued executive coaching work and have done a lot of work helping very senior teams and organizations do the messy work of change. And that work has been incredibly fulfilling for me. Not always easy. But truly rewarding. Does that give us a start?

[00:03:20] RT: Yeah, it gives us great start. And I know, because I know your background, you, somewhere back in your younger life, made a decision. And as I was doing a little research on Max Martina, I realized I don't know what the fork in the road that caused you to end up at Harvard. But I think it's relevant for what we know is ahead in the conversation to help people understand your time at Harvard and the influences had on how you are doing what you're doing today.

The road to Harvard – And again, I feel blessed and privileged to have had that experience. Not all of us can do that. But I think the road to that experience was also pretty non-traditional. And I'll just give you the kind of quick high-level summary of how that happened.

For about 20 years, actually, after undergraduate school in the Midwest – I'm from New Hampshire originally. Undergraduate school in the Midwest. I thought I would become a U.S. Marine Corps Chaplain. Have a kind of spiritual upbringing and bent to me and actually was received into a full ride program in Boston University Seminary, where I started for about three months after a short stint in the corporate world and was utterly miserable.

Something about the program didn't sit well with leveraging the experience I knew I needed to help folks. And so, after a quick stint there, I ended up through a kind of a fortuitous set of circumstances. Ended up working for a serial entrepreneur with a large portfolio of family companies. That work was a phenomenal odyssey for me, because it gave me pragmatic grounded experience in building businesses, in building nonprofits, in working in disruptive enterprises.

And along that journey, it was about a 22-year journey. I began to notice some interesting threads. As I worked with a multitude of companies in different spaces in different industries as an insider, there was a common theme between the successful companies of which there were three or four that I worked with and the unsuccessful companies of which there were also a couple. And I always believe that you learn a lot more from the failures, the mistakes.

But the common theme wasn't marketing, or sales, or product, or engineering, it was always and consistently leadership. You could take a very successful company, supplant it with ineffective leadership and actually see the company crumble or drive it into the ground. Likewise, you could take a struggling company, supplant it with really effective behaviors that form the bedrock of leadership and pivot it and become successful.

And I saw this close to my heart and close hand in many cases, and it was after that, about 15 years of seeing that, I said, "That's interesting to me. That thing called leadership. Those sets of behaviors. That's fascinating."

And so, I looked near and wide and found this program at Harvard and I said, "That's what I have to do." Studied with an individual named Ron Heifetz, who you know as well, who was considered the father of adaptive leadership, right? Namely, the study of how do individuals, teams and organizations do the difficult work of change and innovation.

And so, that was a mid-career journey for me. And from there, I actually left that. Was asked by Ron to run his leadership consultancy, Cambridge Leadership Associates. And at the time, my wife and I had a third baby on the way, and we ssaid we don't want to live in New York City. And made a life change to move west. And I continued in my for-profit work. But as life has a way of happening, things come full circle. And about four years ago, we ended up purchasing CLA and have expanded that platform. It's been a blessing. Yeah, the journey is not linear by any stretch.

[00:06:57] RT: Let's get into some specifics here. At that point, when you had the insights about the potency of good leading and how it can affect the trajectory of an organization and vice versa. And then you had the opportunity to understand what Ron Heifetz was advocating at Harvard in the form of adaptive leadership. What is it about that work that has your attention? What is it about that work that had you decide to take on CLA as a president? And we should say that when you took it on, that organization needed a boost. It needed good leadership. What is it about that? Because there's lots of places you could have gone for leadership work. What is it about adaptive leadership that draws you in? And why does that work matter to the world in your opinion?

[00:07:51] MM: Yeah, great question. Well, you and I have this conversation a lot. And I think it's important to say that adaptive leadership is a set of tools, practices and frameworks. But it is a set of tools and practices and frameworks that doesn't exist in isolation. There are many tools, practices and frameworks in the market, in the broader market of ideas, to help folks think about leadership.

In that context specifically, it spoke to me. As a youngster, as someone growing up in informative years, I think there were some catalyst moments that helped me relate to that work in ways that were for me very profound. And the catalysts were never easy, which is to say that experiences of trauma, or complexity, or uncertainty, VUCA as the military calls it, right? Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. These things often induce complex responses.

And so, as I began my formal study in this topic of both change and including adult development. How do individuals make decisions, create meaning and think about purpose? This is a practice called adult development. For me, in very simple terms, there were primarily

two catalysts for human behavior change. One was crisis, right? When we encounter crisis, if I write with my right hands or I brush my teeth with my right hand and I break my wrist, then I'm forced to adapt. I'm literally forced to use my left hand. That's a very difficult process, right?

Short of that, I have to be very intentional. Either crisis or intentionality are often the catalysts for behavior change. And most often, it's crisis, unfortunately. And so, as I had many experiences both in my childhood and then professional career of seeing people exposed to crisis, I thought, "Hey, can you short-circuit that a little bit? Can you leverage intentionality to get ahead of that curve and to support effective behavior change for teams and organizations?"

And I suppose, Rick, for me, at heart, I'm probably a teacher. And I think that work has always been in my soul. To some extent, this question of behavior change, the pragmatic side of how do you take an idea and leverage it for behavior became very relevant for me. Because as you know, so many of the folks in our space do what I call edutainment, which is mostly entertainment with a little bit of education spiced in.

But when you're in a pragmatic context of dealing with messy problems, entertainment doesn't mean very much, right? It's how do you get from point A to point Z with all of those messy pieces in the middle? Pragmatic behavior change becomes really critical. And the habit-forming tendencies are part of that, of course.

[00:10:29] RT: We've been in this conversation for about 12 minutes, and you've used the word pragmatic about five times. Help us understand – Because I think I know why that's important to you. But expand on that, because that seems to be a kind of central compass point for who you are and, therefore, how you go about your work.

[00:10:53] MM: Great pick up on that. And I guess I do use that word a lot. I think it comes from my experience in history being an operator in a corporate environment. And also, being on the ground with folks who are in the mess, who are in the swamp, right? Because when you're either in that experience, as I was certainly in the disruptive technology space for about eight years, or when you're working with individuals, senior executives, or board members even, private equity, venture capital, all of these things, including in the for-profit and non-nonprofit

space, have complexity that is often invisible at first, right? And so, when you actually get in the midst of that, it can feel very isolated. It can feel lonely. It can feel like you're in a vacuum.

[00:11:39] RT: You're saying lonely in the context of somebody who's leading or managing.

[00:11:42] MM: Right, right. That's right. That's right. And so, the way through that – Unfortunately, the only way through that is through that. So, how do you begin to navigate that in a way that supports those around you to make effective decisions? I often tell my kids, "You either master your decisions, or your decisions master you." And this is a truism that I've adopted in my life, because those downstream impacts of our decisions are extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary.

I think, for me, having been an operator and having experienced the challenge of leading from the messy swamp or attempting to practice leadership from the messy swap, you realize that great theories don't mean much, right? That you actually have to do things. That you actually have to practice things in a way that have relevance, that have meaning, that have connectivity to progress in organizations. I think, for me, you're right. That is a thematic keynote in my experience. That if it's not grounded, it's not useful. If it's not connected to our behavior, it's not useful. The work of helping folks connect effective behavior to making systemic and incremental gains in the practice of leadership is, for me, a life work.

And I'll say one more thing, if you don't mind, I think that oftentimes we think of leadership or the work of organizational transformation as this kind of revelatory or mystical thing. And the reality is it's not. It's kind of like learning an instrument. There are stages of learning an instrument. But those stages are if you're committed to practice, take time. And the developmental journey on that is not overnight. We have thresholds of growth in progress. But, my gosh, that transformation is incremental. It's a two, to three, to four percent compounded return year over year if we're consistent.

One of the great examples, Warren Buffett, was at a symposium celebrating. I think it was Forbes Magazine's 100th Anniversary, and someone from the audience asked him, they said, "Warren, the stock market –" This is a few years ago. "The stock market's trading at 17,000. Where will it trade at in another hundred years?" So, 100 years from now, where will the Dow

Jones be?" And without missing a beat, he said, "Well over a million." right? And the audience laughed. They actually laughed. And yet, this is why he's the Omaha, the Sage of Omaha, right? Whatever the catchphrase is for him. Because he understands that compounded interest has this incredible exponential impact, right?

In the same way that in the markets, he was actually being pessimistic. Average stock returns are 7.8% or 8%. He was projecting 5%, 5.5%. The idea connected to human behavior is actually similar, right? If we could see incremental gains of three, to four, to five percent and we commit to that growth over time, the compounded impacts to our organizational life, they're astounding. Absolutely astounding.

[00:14:35] RT: I want to come back to this premise you're putting forward about leadership as a practice. We need to return to that, because I agree with you about not only the importance of it, but the reality is that that's how development happens. And we want to help people think a little bit about what is the design of their leadership practice perhaps in our conversation. But before we do that, it's been my experience and it's well-documented. And you know this. And Ron's written about it. And Marty Linsky, his partner, has written about it, is that one of the biggest mistakes that leaders make is misdiagnosing the problem.

And the importance of problem diagnosis is that once you've arrived at some conclusion about what it is, you deploy resources of organizational resources, time, money, people. And if you've got it wrong, those are gone. And if you're the leader or authority figure who actually deployed those resources, your credibility's been seriously undermined inside the organization and maybe with stockholders, stakeholders outside.

My premise is that part of the reason we're culpable to that situation is that we grow up in a system where we're rewarded and recognized for knowing answers to problems. Education does that for us. Our early career jobs do it because that work tends to be pretty black and white and we can achieve goals and outcomes. But as you progress in your development in an organization and a structure to management and leading, those problems, naturally by the nature of the elevation, are messier and more complex than they were at a lower level. So, talk a little bit about the importance of, and what's involved with developing as part of your practice, the ability to diagnose a problem more accurately that we're likely predisposed to do.

[00:16:29] MM: Great question. Wow. Before we go there, if you don't mind, I'd like to posit a real quick definition of leadership, if you don't mind, because I think that will help set some context to the conversation. And you've covered this in previous podcasts. But my definition has an acronym. And I'll give it to you real simple. It's L equals FOO. Leadership equals facilitating the output of other people. And you could add a W at the end of that for the sake of the work.

What does that mean? So, you said leadership is a practice. Facilitating, by definition, is a set of behaviors. It's action, right? It's a set of behaviors that requires hopefully intentionality for, in theory, output, which is to say results. Some outcome that you can look at. And ideally, for the sake of other people in the context of the right work.

If we have that understanding of what real leadership looks like, it has nothing to do with our titles, right? In fact, it also allows us to practice this at any stage of the organization. To your question about that trajectory of diagnosis or practice, and that it's kind of akin to science tells us that icebergs are barely visible from the surface, right? If you look at the mass of ice and what part of an iceberg floats, we only see 10% of an iceberg. And 90% of that's floating out of the water. The titanic was a lived experience of this phenomenon, right?

And that's very much like human experience as well. That, oftentimes, in organizational life, we really only account for about 10% of what we see. From a developmental lens, we have to go below the surface of the water. Metaphorically speaking, we have to be rigorous in our assessment, okay?

And what does that mean from the standpoint of practice and leadership? I think it means opening the aperture, opening our sight lines, enhancing our perception, increasing our sensitivity to the noise in the system. From a pragmatic standpoint, it's a little bit like going into a doctor's office and saying, "Hey, doc, my elbow hurts." And the doctor says, "Well, let's get you right into surgery now." And you say, "Wait a second. I want a second opinion, right?" She says, "No. I've seen this before. Let's go to surgery." This would not be good. You'd have second doubts, second sets of questions around the competency of the doctor. Instead, you'd say, "Hey, let's take an X-ray first. Or how about an MRI? Or let's feel around for breaks. Let's diagnose this thing." Right?

And so, trained professionals, certainly in the technical sense, have various forms of diagnosis, right? Ways that they can investigate for further insight. What's below the surface of the water? And I think in leadership we don't do that. I agree with you. I agree with your assessment, that so much of our reward systems create kudos and competencies and provide credit for me-centric behavior.

And interestingly, I think that's the tie-in to adult development. We know that adults that make decisions based on me-centric behavior tend to miss the 90% below the water. So yet, later stage development, when we're talking about people that create meaning through a slightly wider aperture, begin to think of others in the context of the holistic and the organizational parameters, right? And so, from that standpoint, what does diagnosis look like? Well, unfortunately, I think the academics who suggest that trait theory is a way to go, I think they get it wrong. Okay? Just a quick snapshot. Trait theory says that if we look at famous leaders of all time, we can copy their traits and emulate them, and then we too can be successful leaders. That doesn't work. And I think that doesn't work because none of us live in 1863 anymore. We're not facing a civil war like Abraham Lincoln was.

What this means is that every situation is unique. Every context is different. And in that sense, leadership has to be stage appropriate. It has to be context relevant. What's relevant for a senior corporate vice president of a large company, multi-billion-dollar company, is very different from what the reality of an executive at a small non-profit in a local inner-city school district needs to face. Very different dynamics, right? And so, it's really hard to say what do you look for? Because the context is different. Now, I think there are some best practices that we could talk about that, if that –

[00:20:55] RT: Yeah. Let's do that then. Because one of the goals of the podcast for me is to recognize that there are people who are younger and less experienced in this conversation than you and I might be or other people who've been on the show. But they have aspirations and goals to be effective leaders. And a lot of them have chosen to work in very complex situations.

And so, I imagine that maybe they'll happen across this conversation with you and I walking in the park and say, "What's this 10,000 Swamp Leaders thing? And who's this Max Martina?" So, I'll give it a listen.

And so, my goal here is to, hopefully at the end of their listening, they will have picked up a couple things that they could use. It strikes me that one of the things that we could help them with is in this context of a practice and in this context of developing better diagnostic skills. What can we suggest to them as, to your point, an action, or a repetitive action, or a series of actions that starts to build the diagnostic muscle so that they're more effective at it than they currently are? What can you give them that helps there?

[00:22:02] MM: Wow! That's great. I'd love to hear your answer to that, too. But I think we can learn a lot from psychology. We can learn a lot from effective practitioners of leadership. And some of those distilled lessons include – And I'll just highlight a couple maybe. We could dive into these individual. But you've talked on your podcast before about the metaphor of the balcony, right? There's actually some baseline science behind what that means.

The metaphor is, "Hey, we spend 90% of the time on the dance floor." right? Which actually limits our sight line. We can see in a six-foot radius effectively if the dance floor is crowded.

[00:22:37] RT: Dance floor could be the actual office, or the shop floor, or those places, where the work gets done.

[00:22:42] MM: That's right. Yeah, the engaged practice of behavior necessary to drive organizational life forward, right? How do we get off the dance floor? How do we take a step up to the balcony and spend some time? And again, that time is not very long. But spend some time broadening our aperture?

The science around this is partially about pattern breakage. Oftentimes, in organizational life, what we want to do is disrupt the traditional flow of movement. We actually create disruptions in our pattern behavior. And what that does for both ourselves as in the metaphor of getting on the balcony as well as people around us is that it causes them to see something new.

And I love these conversations, because what we realize is that leadership is multi-disciplinary. There's actually application here to the philosophy of aesthetics. If you take any philosophy classes, aesthetics is one of the branches of philosophy. And there's this great debate across philosophers around the science of creativity. How does creativity actually happen? I know this sounds tangential. But let's talk about that real quickly. It's the proverbial Newton having the apple fall on his head, okay? That insight, right? That insight is powerful that he had around gravity. That story didn't actually happen.

But the premise is behind the science of creativity and insight is actually, first, create some mastery. Create some practice mastery. If you're an artist, then master line drawing. If you're a musician, become excellent at the trumpet, right? Because that allows you the opportunity to begin to explore new territory. Develop a sense of mastery. That would be one lesson from this, right?

Second is have the problem in mind. What is the concern and challenge that you're actually faced with? You're actually absorbing the question, the same kinds of questions that keep us awake at night, right? That's actually an important part of the process of creativity. We call that incubation.

Neurologically speaking, there's a period of incubation that our brains have to go through where we're not directly confronting the problem. And typically, if you've ever had this experience where you're in a conversation and you think of something you want to say and then you forget moments later. And the harder you try to remember what you were going to say, the harder it is to remember.

And then the second you incubate and distance yourself from that thought, you say, "Oh, I remember. I remember what I was going to say." right? This actually happens in our experience.

And the metaphor to leadership is actually very similar, which is to say be in the work. Absorb the work. Understand the context. Wrestle with the questions, right? Incubate. That's the balcony. Then getting to the balcony. Allow that time as a practice, a physical practice of separation, to create insight. And this does happen, by the way, when we're intentional about it.

[00:25:27] RT: I think that, for a lot of people, they're going to understand this dance floor balcony as a premise. And I can easily imagine them going, "Okay, great. I go to work. I'm there eight hours a day," whether nowadays it's like we are right now on Zoom or in-person, which is an increasing consideration for people. What's my strategy for actually putting myself on the balcony?

And I think that from a pragmatic standpoint, to answer the question you asked me, because this comes up frequently, is I do think that there's a physical aspect, too. Sometimes you literally need to extract yourself physically from the dynamic of the situation you're working on, whether it's in your team or whatever. You need to get away from it. You could take a walk around the building. You could journal. You could write.

I think, oftentimes, it's useful to have thought partners that are not part of the organization who don't know what the work is, but you trust them, and you trust their point of view, and they're good listeners. And they're willing to hear you out. And then maybe provide you with some thoughts and ideas.

Because what you're talking about is, at the end of the day, the work still gets done on the dance floor. You must return to that place of work and mobilize your team, and get going, and make some progress on the things you're working on.

I think another question that you and I have talked around or talked about, and I know Ron talks about it, and I use it in everything I do, is the leaders – The person who's choosing to lead, the question to ask themselves, "What's my contribution to the mess I'm trying to solve?" What's my blind spots? What are the things I'm assuming that are just not so?

And I think that for somebody out there who's thinking about, "Where do I go do?" Those are decent places to begin to do that extraction that you're talking about and get some grip on it as well.

[00:27:11] MM: It's great. And I might add one more point, which is actually part of the balcony work, but it feels risky. And that is we often don't spend enough time with the detractors in the system. We often don't spend enough time with opposition, right?

The folks that have different perspectives within the organization or society, if it's a cultural movement, for example, we tend to be homogeneous in our thinking. Unfortunately, without getting into the trenches to really leverage understanding and to create conversation where that understanding is revealed and transferred, we're not doing it.

I remember, one of my mentors was consulting years ago to the prime minister of an African government. And there was a riot in the street. There was a potential for civil unrest. And there were some massive protests building in the community. And it got so bad that the protesters were basically slamming on the palace gates. And my mentor was asked by this prime minister, "What do we do?" And he said, "You need to go down to the gates and talk to the protesters." And the prime minister said, "But I might be hurt." And my mentor said, "Well, that's the price we pay for understanding perspectives we need to understand." He didn't go down. And my mentor did. My mentor walked down to the front of the palace gates and said, "Talk. Let us talk."

And so, we don't do that. We don't do that for many reasons. Fear of reprisal. Because it's difficult to have those conversations. Because it's risky. And yet, therein lies so much of the effective diagnosis.

[00:28:40] RT: I would also add one of the other parts is I'm not sure I can handle the conversation I'm about to have. That inside me, I'm not set up well enough to deal with this level of intensity.

All right. Knowing that we're going to do this, we've had this thing scheduled for about 10 days. I walked into a grocery store over the weekend that you're very familiar with here on Bainbridge Island. And as I'm walking out of the grocery store, a big guy is coming towards me and he's got a T-shirt on. And it says on the T-shirt, "Against all authority." And I just started laughing. And I said, "Oh, brother, that is so far off base."

All right. Therefore, that's my segue to I think another important distinction. We have limited time to be able to get into this thing called adaptive leadership. I do want to cover a couple really fundamental pieces here. You've covered the diagnosing and all that. There is a massive difference around what leadership is in the context of adaptive leadership and the work that Ron

and Marty did. And it's juxtaposed against this concept of authority. And they have very specific distinctions of that as well.

For those people who are not quite as far along on adaptive leadership road as you and I are, let's begin by just making clear what those distinctions are. What's the difference between authority and leading? And why, why, why, why do we need both of them?

[00:30:08] MM: Yeah, great. Well, I've seen t-shirts like that before, too, but harkens back maybe to the movements in the 60s and 70s where bucking authority was sort of the – That was the norm, right?

[00:30:19] RT: Yeah. I might add, he did look like a 60s hippie but yeah, I didn't wanna put that in.

[00:30:25] MM: Well, it's great, though. Because there's actually a lot of value in counterculture movements and those kinds of revolutions, so to speak. But let's take ourselves, for example, right?

The human condition for us on this earth is pretty consistent, in the sense that when we're all born, as mammals, as species, human beings, homo sapiens, we are fundamentally dependent upon adults for survival, literally, for years. At least a couple of years physically, right?

Compare that to most mammals, like a whale, or a giraffe, right? A giraffe can walk within 17 minutes of its birth. And yet, humans take years. We develop these very complex relationships to authority, right? We need them. They help us survive. They nourish us. They protect us. They guide us. And yet somewhere along our adolescence, or if we aren't fortunate enough to have loving parents, we encounter something that looks very different from that, right? Authorities end up abusing us or hurting us. We begin to learn that perhaps we can't trust all authorities.

And therein lies the complexity that we have as species with this idea of power, power dynamics, authority dynamics. And some of us, we become afraid of authority. We bow down to it. And some of us do the opposite. We rebel against it. Classic teenage rebellion. Coming of age tales, right?

Humans have this inbuilt complexity to these authority dynamics. And so, the really critical thing for leadership is to have healthy relationships to authority, right? To respect authority enough for the services that it provides, but not so much that we can't actually move through difficult challenges. Because the reality about authority is that, when the challenge gets messy, authorities have no additional clarity around how to solve problems. Because the sole function of authority is to guide direct and protect. And that works really well in times of stability. It works really well if you're a member of a pack, or a tribe, or a pack. Like, wolves, for example, travel in packs. Wolves have done and had common behaviors for thousands of years. It's worked very well, right? Until humans came along and threatened their existence. Those behaviors of stability and authority work really well for the most part. But the problem is, when you introduce complexity, something drastically different, right?

[00:32:47] RT: All right. Let's pause there and go there. But let's just back up a second and dig a little deeper into direction, protection and organizing. Getting the systems right. Help people understand so they can see – Because I think, a way that I talk about this often is that the organizational chart is a map of authority. It's not a map of leading. Because a lot of position descriptions in the org chart have very explicit descriptions of what the levels of authority are for that position in that system, which is to say that if you inhabit it and you leave today and I step in tomorrow, I inherit a certain amount of formalized authority based on the position description. And it's in line with those elements that you just described. Where are we going? What's the design of the way in which we're going to get there? And to what degree do I have to protect the system and the people so that they can do work?

Now, you and I both know, I can accrue some informal authority based on how I treat people, either poorly or to their benefit. But as you're saying, there is a limit to that especially when you run face into complex, messy problems. But in the work of adaptive leadership, I think one of the great contributions that Ron and Marty realize, and I know that they weren't necessarily the originators of this, was to be able to separate for people so they had a better way to take action on this distinction between, "To what degree do I have authority in the system? And to what degree do I get the lead in the system?"

[00:34:20] MM: Right. Yeah. Wow!

[00:34:22] RT: Because what we – What I'm going to say before you say it is, therefore, if that's the case, if you're a listener, what is leading? And leading, really fundamentally, begins in my world is a choice and an activity, rather than a role in a position.

[00:34:35] MM: Well said.

[00:34:36] RT: We see a lot of social change that begins with people who have really no authority but have chosen to raise their hand. And they're trying to get people to come along with this idea that they're putting forward. Now, we've seen it for good. And we've seen it for bad. But we often see it from a position in a person for whom inside whatever that organizational culture they live in, they don't seem to have the requisite authority to be doing what they're doing. But there they are.

[00:35:03] MM: Right.

[00:35:04] RT: So, help people then harmonize the utility and value of authority that they have in the organization with leading given that they're not the same.

[00:35:17] MM: Maybe we'll use a few different words. But let me add to that, that I think as you pointed out, every job description is a form of authority. Wherever you find that job description in the organization. You can be the janitor and you have authority over the grounds of the school and the cleanliness of the of the facilities, right? So, you have that authority.

And the challenge with this is that if we don't provide those services well, typically, societies or employers will say we're going to remove that authority from you. You're fired. You didn't keep the facilities clean, right?

And so, I think, fundamentally, it's important to say that this distinction, as you pointing it out, between authority and leadership, is foundational in explaining how so often we find folks in positions of authority that we call leaders that don't do anything that looks like leading. And how someone like a Greta Thunberg on the Global Ecological Movement, who's – What? She's 12-

years-old? I mean, exceeding her authority and doing incredible things to create movements and to inspire others toward a change of consciousness.

This idea, that in some ways, leadership is distinct from authority. I've been using these terms lately, that leadership is really about distributed agency. What does that mean? Agency is the idea that we have the potential and the capacity to impact others. To make decisions that are independent. Potentially, to make decisions that impact other people, right?

And if that's distributed at any layer of the organization, then that means, as you say, Rick, that each of us can provide the services of leadership, whether we're a janitor or a superintendent of school. And that analogy holds true. Because if we think about something that's very relevant in today's society, teen suicide prevention. You think about, "Who has a bigger impact?" Well, a superintendent might be able to marshal resources and create programs district-wide. But a janitor is on the front lines. And here's a child crying in the bathroom, right? Think about the impact of a janitor in the context of leadership for preventing suicide of teenagers, right? Context matters. Location matters. Distributed agency is really about how do we intervene in systems to create upside. Change, movement. Yeah.

[00:37:29] RT: Right. Let's work with this then. 10,000 Swamp Leaders is also, to use your word, a pragmatic conversation. Trying to help people of any age who are choosing to lead to be more effective. It also strikes me that somebody with some decent amount of authority in your organization a willingness to lead. And to follow your description of distributing, the first place to go to work is agency of the next level of people that report to me. To free them and permission them to take more leadership into their hands. To make choices. And to create a space where it's safe to fail. Because you're going to fail oftentimes when you're leading.

And also, therefore, a space that says no matter what the outcome was, let's collectively or individually gather one-on-one or as a group and find out what worked. What didn't work? And how can we all benefit from this? So we can grow the agency of the culture of the organization of leading.

In your experience with Cambridge Leadership Associates, working with organizations for whom this is a goal, what have you learned about how to do that kind of work so that it works? And

also, what have you learned about how it doesn't work and maybe in part because you misdiagnosed how it worked?

[00:38:53] MM: Yeah. Wow! Great question. And I'm thinking about that in the context of some clients and some pragmatic examples, because I think that helps us illustrate the ideas that we're thinking about here.

[00:39:04] RT: And, Max, when you give an example, obviously not naming your organization, start with the challenge that they were facing that brought you into the conversation in the first place. What was going on for them that said, "Maybe, just maybe, these guys at CLA can help us. Because we can't help ourselves right now."

[00:39:21] MM: Sure. Well, a very obvious – There's many, right? I could talk about public utility districts in energy distribution. We could talk about the UN, agency in the UN that helps children in East Asian countries with resource distribution. We could talk about, "This is the fantastic person that I have to be able to see a lot of patterns across organizations."

Let's talk about a non-profit that's local to Seattle that works with homeless youth, okay? Here's an organization that is resource-constrained. Certainly, in the Covid context, operating in unprecedented times. And homeless youth, it turns out, in the northwest is a big problem. Kids under age who literally have no home, right?

And so, how do you both help them create stability so that they can learn and become functioning members of society? But also, how do you help leadership teams create the context that helps the organization do that at scale?

There's an example, right? And I think so much of what you've just said is so true. I would call that in shorthand the work of leadership in part is about creating a powerful holding environment. What does that mean? A powerful holding environment?

A holding environment – Let's use a metaphor of a pressure cooker. And you're familiar with us talking about this, right? But a pressure cooker is an amazing device. It can cook a roast in a

fifth of the time. And it works by literally forcing the heat into the fibers of the meat if you're cooking a roast, right?

And so, to do that, you have to have a steel vessel that is secure. If the heat and pressure get too high – This is a risk. The pressure cooker, the instant pot, could actually explode, right? The metaphor here in organizational life is that the holding environment, and typically in the senior leadership team, board of advisors, board of directors, that holding environment needs to support the ability to handle the heat, right?

What does that mean? It means that can we deal with the tension, stresses, pressures of change and loss in a way that doesn't isolate people that contains the risk and the threat and that helps organizations continue to thrive? We get into another adaptive leadership concept called zone of productive disequilibrium. What is that point in the organization where you can raise the heat high enough to get people to do the work? Remember, we talked about crisis as a catalyst for behavior change, right? But not so high that you threaten the system.

And in this case, with the local nonprofit that I'm thinking about, the organization already had an extraordinary amount of heat, resource-constrained, mission-critical, life-saving responses. And the exhaustion was unbelievable, right?

In that case, creating a holding environment where people could lower the heat became absolutely critical, right? Some of that is how do you support team dynamics so that we can have real conversations that don't explode? This sound small incremental, and yet they're absolutely crucial to supporting wide-scale change. Because if the senior leadership team can do it, then they can distribute that agency to their direct reports in many cases.

Another example for that team is, with senior leadership driving effective change, how do you then broaden that mission to the participants in the programs, right? And so, there's incremental pieces that are part of that work, too. It's unique to every context. It's unique to every organization.

[00:42:43] RT: Yeah. And I think in your description, to make it explicit for people, is that holding that container, that holder space that you're describing, is an act of authority. There are people

for whom they can construct that. And therefore, part of the reason they're doing that is to make sure that it's going to be safe for people to have these conversations and explore the challenges they're facing so that they can actually make progress on this issue without it either blowing up or losing the heed and nothing happens.

I think your example is a wonderful example of this dynamic dance that takes place between the people and authority who are also choosing to lead and give other people an opportunity to lead. But by doing the things that you said, create the container, make sure it's safe, invite people in, structure the process so they're able to actually deal with this stuff in a proper and healthy way. I'm guessing, all for the point of figuring out what can we do better more effectively to serve these youth?

[00:43:46] MM: I agree. I agree with you, Rick. I think that largely creating an effective holding environment is an act of authority. But I think it's certainly an act of leadership as well. And it doesn't always require authority. While titles and social constructs are important, I've also seen cases where folks at lower levels of authority and organizations actually work upwards to create dynamics where senior leaders open up. They share the context. They support mission and vision and values. These sound like soft skills. But they're very tangible.

And those micro and multitudinous interventions that we can have even if we're younger in our organizational trajectory to influence the broader context, they're actually meaningful. It may feel slow in some cases, right. But it's meaningful.

And I had a personal experience with this with a disruptive product company. I was deploying electronic solutions for water conservation. We were competing against multi-billion-dollar chemical conglomerates. And making traction in that was a battle that felt never-ending, right? And what you began to realize is that change is incremental. It's little. It happens over time.

Not what we always want to hear in an instant gratification, get it now society, right? But, I mean, look at the women's suffrage movement. That took 90 years to come to fruition in 1921. Some of this takes time, right? The bigger the problem, sometimes it takes more time.

[00:45:11] RT: Yeah, I think it's important that, as you say, social change, these kinds of complex issues, I think the progress that's made is dependent on chalking up lots of small wins cumulatively. And suddenly the system tips. It seems suddenly. But really, it was never sudden. It took a long time.

I want to turn the tables here a little bit in the time we have left. And, yeah, I don't know if it's enough. But we're going to talk about. You've had lots of experience in the role of leading even before you had the opportunity at Cambridge Leadership Associate to directly apply some of the principles of leading that you've learned both at Harvard and other places. Therefore, you're a seasoned leader.

As you said, and I agree with, we learn a lot more from our failures when we do our successes. One of the base questions in this podcast is to ask each guest to share an example or two of the leadership failure that you've had, and what you personally learned from it, and how it personally informed how you operate in the future?

[00:46:15] MM: Yeah. Great. Well, I have about 400 examples that I'm happy to share, too. But as you say, we may only have time for one or two. Yeah, I think there's a couple that I could point to that are significant in my learning, that at the time are very painful. But in retrospect, you say, "Thank God, I learned that." And I learned it in a context where I survived to fight another day.

One of those – And I might reference my corporate life here. Let me back up. They fall under two common themes. And so, there's actually multiple mistakes in each bucket. The first is identifying what the work is.

[00:46:50] RT: I tell you what. I tell you what. Let's save those for the end. Tell the story first. And then make the connection to this.

[00:46:56] MM: Yeah, sure. I mentioned this technology company that was applying electronic solutions for water conservation in industrial applications. And we were competing against chemical conglomerates. This organization was run by the head of this family portfolio of

companies. And this was an individual who, really, for lack of better words, was very headstrong in his approach to organizational life.

And I was young enough in my career that I actually still bowed down to authority a little too much. And so, multiple instances of really not moving the ball forward because I deferred to decisions made by a senior authority, which actually slowed the organizational growth down. These could be seen in hiring misdecisions, decisions on go to market strategy. This is a for-profit context, right? Missed decisions both in timing and application around product development and design. I mean, a lot of missdecisions. And in many cases, because I assumed incorrectly that this individual with more experience, more authority, knew the market, knew what they were talking about, right? Actually, I was closer to the market. I was closer to the problem. I had less authority. But I had a greater clarity on the context of the issue and the challenge. I can count four or five of those issues related to not moving fast enough. Not pushing hard enough.

[00:48:22] RT: And what did you learn about yourself? Forget him for the moment. Because I'm guessing there's some similarity to this situation that happened back in time big time. So what did Max learn about himself? And when you come up against that again, what's different now? Start with the person.

[00:48:41] RT: It's really awkward talking about yourself. But this is linked certainly to my childhood. And for context here, I'm the third of four kids. Second born male. My father, first generation Italian-American. Very loud, right? In an Italian family, you speak first and apologize later, right? The loudest voice wins, right? You address things as they surface, right?

My wife's family, from an English background, does the opposite. We sweep things – She sweeps things under the rugs, right? Very different. And my childhood was marked by just a very extreme authority figure, right?

And so, my response to that, rather than to rebel, was to actually bow down to that and to provide a sense of deference overly so, right? Which inhibited the movements that I took in my own life at many stages of my career and even personal life.

I think you get hit upside the head enough to realize that, "Hey, something's not right here. Something's not working well. I know that this is wrong." Whether it's a boss, or an executive decision for a strategy meeting. And you don't speak up.

I've learned over the last you know 15 years that speaking up is a very powerful and important thing to do. And of course, it comes with risk, right? But part of my background is an actor. I did a lot of Shakespearean acting at one stage. And you can't hide when you're on the stage, right?

These things in my own personal life I think have culminated in this idea that I can have a healthy dialogue that might threaten authority, but that can serve to provide movement for the organization of the mission.

[00:50:20] RT: We're almost at the end here. So, I'm going to give you a chance to share your counsel and advice. If we imagine that there are people who are listening here who are a little further back on the road of leading than you and I are and they're listening and they're wondering, "What can they do to move themselves along in their practice? What's a couple of pieces of advice that you have for those people that could help them stay the course and keep moving in their journey of leading?

[00:50:50] MM: Maybe two. I'll offer two. One is explore and discover your HBU. HBU is an acronym. Yeah, HBU. It's an acronym that I use for highest and best use. It's actually a term in real estate, right? Imagine a single three-bedroom house in a downtown urban core, right? If a developer is going to come along and rip that out, they're not going to build another house. They're going to build a high-rise, right? Because the value of that property is different, right? We call that highest and best use.

That requires an element of self-discovery, right? And so, for those of us that are post-college, or have gone to college, or in college, or in our first career, which, by the way, is often a brutal experience. Discovering ourselves in the context of a professional environment. Getting and accumulating data around our highest and best use, right? The skill sets, the passions, the interests that help us show up in a way that creates meaning for other people. That's a really fundamental and kind of self-centric requirement for effective leadership, I believe. Know thyself

is the famous Greek English translation of the Greek "nosce te ipsum", right? Which is know thy self. Understand your highest and best use.

And that's not a one and done thing. I think understanding my highest and best use as an educator of adults, right? As a person who reconciles and builds bridges for people, that was a 20-year process. I always felt it and knew it. But had to collect data, right?

[00:52:15] RT: You dare use the word was like it's all in the past tense. I think we're still interesting, man.

[00:52:19] MM: For sure. For sure. No question. Yeah, absolutely. And then if I think there's a second set of ideas that I would suggest for folks is – And maybe, dare say, this is a secret to life. I don't know. But this fine line balance between being highly intentional in our lives and yielding enough to allow the universe to open up in unique ways. Folks that are overly ambitious or excessively intentional often miss opportunities, right? Folks that are too passive actually don't deploy enough intentionality to pursue their interests and their dreams.

That is to say, become intentional with your decisions. Make good decisions. But if they're not good decisions, then at least make them intentional. Don't be passively deciding things in your life that impact how you show up in the world. Because when we're intentional, Rick, as you know, this developmental journey becomes more apparent to us. We see the progress that we make. And typically, we make more progress relative to where we want to go.

Discover your HBU. Become intentional with how you show up. And that includes, for those of us later in later stages of our career, becoming intentional is also an act of leadership, right? We may not always get it right. But if we're intentional, then at least we've made an informed decision. And that's always better than a misinformed decision in my mind.

[00:53:40] RT: All right. Well, hey. We are at the end. Although, we barely scratch the surface of a lot of stuff that I think we both view as important thoughts and ideas about how to lead. There's, in all likelihood, a part two lurking out there just so you know.

In the meantime, between part one and part two, thank you for making time to come into the swamp and share your thoughts and ideas. And we look forward to part two.

[00:54:07] MM: Rick, truly a pleasure. And as you can tell by my enthusiasm and excitement, I love these conversations. And I love that you're creating a platform to have them. Thanks for having me.

[00:54:16] RT: You are welcome. And make it a good day.

[00:54:19] MM: Take care.

[00:54:20] RT: Take care.

[OUTRO]

[00:54:23] 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.

[END]