EPISODE 21

[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 welcome to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. 10,000 Swamp Leaders is a podcast where I have conversations with people who have some pretty serious and significant experience in leading and working in the swamp with other people. Today is a cool day for me. I have the opportunity to have a friend and colleague, Benjamin Taylor, who sometimes resides in London and other times around the world, and I'll let him tell us where he is today.

Ben, I think we've known each other since about 2009. We've done some work together. So, people know that. For those listening, why I brought Benjamin on, we'll get into a little bit about the work here. But from a personal standpoint, I've been always impressed by your scope and wisdom of knowledge across a broad range of subjects, your curiosity and your willingness to experiment, live with clients around new ideas. I think that living on the high wire around this stuff is always a great place to be and I've learned a lot from you. I your approach to helping people.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:18] RT: **W**elcome to 10,000 Swamp Leaders.

[00:01:21] BT: Thanks, Rick. It's great to be here. And as you know, I am joining you direct from the swamp today. So, very appropriate, I think.

[00:01:28] RT: Tell people where you are right now.

[00:01:29] BT: Well, I'm in beautiful city of Novi Sad, Serbia's Second City in the northern province of Vojvodina, on the banks of the glorious River Danube, near star fortress overlooking the town that's about to host the EXIT Festival and it's a European Capital of Culture this year. So, it's pretty great place to be. I'm largely here, I'm here for many reasons, my wife's family here, but we now have a one-year old dog, Ali. We had to delay the start of this because he got in the mud on the banks of the Danube, which is a wonderful place to walk in, but extremely muddy. Therefore, I am both slightly damp and slightly got mud and sand all over me because I had to try and rinse him off before he could be brought back into the house. Well, I had some rinsing off back in the house, which of course, he then shook himself dry in the living room. So that's been fun.

[00:02:20] RT: It'll be useful for you to know that you're probably the first person in the history of 10,000, Swamp Leaders to bring a swamp creature to the show. So, I appreciate that. From a kind of professional context, tell people what you think they need to know in order to have what we're going to talk about following on sort of locate itself?

[00:02:37] BT: Okay. I think the story of when we first met is quite a nice way of introducing that. You were friends with Dennis Verne, who I know has been on the show already. In fact, he was a fan of yours as well as a friend, from the course you did together, the MSC in Coaching, and Consulting Change. Dennis and I just started a new business and network-based consultancy, called RedQuadrant in the UK, which I now still run. Then this is going off to do another thing. We had, at the time, it felt to us like a really landmark opportunity to deliver a project piece of work. RedQuadrant works almost exclusively in the public sector, and this was for London libraries for all of the 33 public libraries in the City of London.

As part of this gig, and in a way, some of the times we get to experiment is we almost put in the extra bits that we really, really, really want to do, and probably don't end up charging the client for them as part of the whole project package. So, what we did was a very, very cut down, one-day scenario planning thing on the on the model. All mistakes are undoubtedly ours collectively, and not his but on the model, I believe of Rafael Ramirez from Oxford Brookes University, and you flew in from the States and I flew in actually from a holiday in Greece.

I cut short early to run a London libraries scenario planning events. It's true. It was the first time that I'd ever done that. I'm not sure about the ethics of experimenting live on clients. But there's got to be a first time, hasn't it. So, you're the expert, and me and Dennis with the supporting cast, and we do lots of public sector work. I have a passion, not just an obsession, for system's complexity and cybernetics, and that's probably enough to get us going, I guess.

[00:04:15] RT: Yeah, it is. I want to get into the some of the details of some of the elements that you just described. But help me understand because I don't think I actually know the answer to this question. What is it that drew you to working in public service organizations. And for those who do not live in the UK as listeners, you might expand a little bit to define what that is and their context as well. But what brought you into this work and hold you here?

[00:04:37] BT: So, public service before I forget, is my way of just talking about the institutes of the public sector, and all kinds of other organizations, community, voluntary sector, social sector, and even businesses that provide public services. So, I like to say public service as an umbrella. The public sector sounds a little bit 1970s, five-year industrial plan to me. That's what we do. What got me into working in public services was very bad career planning, basically, and the desire for challenge and stimulation and variety, if I'm being generous.

So, I came out of university into a charity job in London, very, very interesting, very challenging, very, very, very badly paid in a very expensive part of London, with a charity that I just heard last month went bust, due to international things and challenges to its business model, Rally International that used to send people all over the world on expeditions to build their character. I couldn't live on that salary. So, I ended up moonlighting and being a temp for an advice center in Chelsea in London. Most people know Chelsea, I guess. It was in a wonderful Old Town Hall in Chelsea, and it was much better paid, and relatively easy compared to the complexity of the job that I had at Rally.

I ended up getting a job at Shepherds Bush Advice Center in the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham, and then they just moved to an executive system. So, I applied for and managed to get an even better paid job, which was still 30%, less than some of my university compatriots had got for their first gig, working as the advisor to the leader of the council. This was the first ever time we'd had executive leaders rather than a committee system and local

government in the UK. I did get quite hooked on local government. But I also had that scope, I could do all kinds of things, I could do play space, leadership support. I mean, I was a very junior committee clerk in many ways, but I felt like I was an advisor. I felt like I had the ear of the executive leader and I was supporting him to get his policy reports through and preparing him for council meetings and a really wide range, and a really nice insight into the core of a council, and councils are fascinating because they deliver 1,111 customer facing services, from picking up bins to taking children into care, sadly.

They're at the apex of so much of what actually happens in public services. I studied some politics at university, and I quickly felt that the policy and legislation and all that kind of stuff was important in a way but so distant from the impacts, from the actual work on the ground. So, I guess I've always been attracted to the swamp, Rick, one way or another. Local government has that brilliant thing where you can get quite intellectual sometimes, and I'm capable of getting fancy over intellectual about most things, but it turns out into a real thing. It has real impact on people's lives, if you see what I mean.

We still do local government. We do cross public service work, but it gives that range. And that's the other thing. I studied this famous degree policy, politics, philosophy and economics, because I didn't really want to narrow down. I'm terrible at making those kinds of narrowing choices, if you see what I mean. The work I do, allows me to have a really great range of different things that I have to think about.

[00:07:58] RT: Okay, so people out there listening, who may not spend any time in their work, either in house or outside as advisors in government or anything like that. From your perspective, how is public service organizations different than, say, private sector organizations and how are they somewhat similar?

[00:08:17] BT: They are different and that you hope that, ultimately, they answer to the people, the populace, the electorate, and your central and local government that is quite vivid. What that means, of course, is answering to and working with politicians on a day to day basis. But the election is never far away. The possibility of being judged in public and they also have a much broader scope as I've alluded to, notwithstanding a few outlying cases. They do two things that

they set the context and lots and lots of people's lives, from roads, to sewage, to bins. Bins and dog poo on pavements, and cycling on pavements are always kind of the biggest local issue.

So, it's the mundane, but it does make a difference. But they also do those crises things, looked after children, children are at risk, adults with care needs, and so on. So, that's a difference, and that's why I was involved in some of the kind of bringing in of private sector thinking into particularly local government and public services in general in the realms of 2000-ish. A bank would never dream of doing 1,111 processes. It's just not economic. However, the big similarity, Rick, is that they are organizations. And for me, there's something very fundamental and still surprisingly challenging to human beings, about working effectively in organization. So, there's that range. I think the most vivid thing though, is that people feel that ownership and people feel a sense that public services are answerable to them, if you see what I mean, which they really should be, at the end of the day.

[00:10:02] RT: Okay, so I want to bring his current here and then get into some of the influences that you, I know use, in the work that you do. But again, I think this might help locate that work, given some reality. So, since you and I met, I was just thinking about this. I was putting together some notes for our conversation. We had a global crisis, financial crisis. You had Brexit. We've all had COVID and the pandemic, and every one of those were a significant blow to public services. So, as we sit here today, in June 2022, what is the condition of public services and delivering these 1,001 or whatever number it is of pathways to help further constituents?

[00:10:43] BT: That statistic is just a bit of data from the government error in local government in the UK, but it's quite vivid. They have this wonderful schema. They had a list of lists and all the processes but you get the idea. I mean, it's stretched very thin Rick. In the UK, there are a large number of simultaneous crises. I think, the biggest impact or has been not the global financial crisis itself, but the period of austerity imposed by the post 2010 governments, which, in a sense, still continues, and governments still continue in a sense. And then Brexit just created the culture war, demoralized us, changed our position in the world drastically.

So, there is – if you look at hospital waiting times, if you look at the state of the ambulance service, if you look at some of our infrastructure, our capability to maintain our infrastructure, perhaps most critically, and if you look at the number of people doing most of the on the ground

delivery work, it is in crisis. And yet, interestingly, the clients I work with, again, I don't work, I probably work less than 50% with local government these days, but still a big chunk. About a third of them are okay, because they have enough tax base to pay for basic needs. About a third are on the brink, and about a third are really just making their finances year to year, because they have no – they legally have to set a balanced budget every single year. Unlike health services, unlike education, unlike businesses, they're not allowed to make a loss as it were on the revenue budget.

The interesting thing is, I was working – I do a lot of capability development, a thing that Dennis and I believed in from the start and still do, is doing ourselves out of job, giving people our skills, as much as we can, as much as they're useful to them. I was doing action learning set based delivery of translation skills to one of our clients during the tail end of the heavy period of the pandemic. We met together every, I think three or four weeks. And there were weeks when there weren't that many people there. They hadn't done the pre-work, they'd been pulled on to emergency staffing of vaccination centers and things like that. You could just see that they were really, really exhausted. You just thought, "Yeah, that's understandable and really, really tough."

And then I'd come back four weeks later, and most people would be there and they'd done the reading, they'd apply the thing, and they got some ideas. They seem to have this limitless supply of energy. It's not limitless. That's the trick. That's the problem. But there still is a real spirit to try to really shape people's lives and communities in places for the better. So, that's what keeps me in it. I mean, there's been a lot of times when I've wanted to just turn my back on public service work. The timing has been terrible. We set up a consultancy and public services in 2009. As you say, I set up a public service transformation academy, not for profit partnership in 2016. Just before one of the little-known things about the Brexit vote is that there was six months with almost no work in public services afterwards, as everybody froze and panicked and tried to work out what was going to happen. Lots of reasons. It's over determined that nobody should work in public services from the consultants to the employees, but they still do, Rick.

[00:14:06] RT: You still do. You still do.

[00:14:08] BT: I still do, also. I still do. Yes, I do.

[00:14:12] RT: So, over this tumult, how have you adapted? How have you found your way? What's changed in how you do what you do? What have you learned from these schools of hard knocks, so to speak, that inform you, both personally, as a man and as a husband, and as a leader of an organization? What's different now than that you've looked at and say, "This has helped me in these ways."

[00:14:37] BT: Yeah. I mean, the lesson I'm constantly refusing to learn, Rick, is to better prioritize and cut things out. Cut out the difficult and the unprofitable and so on. But that lesson is definitely available for the taking. I mean, I have learned a lot about the power of dogged determination, and what works and what doesn't work with these clients, and that some of the ideas, some of the stuff we were trying to do in 2009 was ahead of the wave and people are getting it now. It's not because of us. A little bit of it is, and I love those little bits, when I see somebody using an idea that I think they've genuinely actually got from me, it would've been my original idea, it will be something I was sharing, or a version, my version of it.

So, people are ever more aware that the task of working in public services and in those organizations is truly complex. That it's important to not follow very narrow, industrialized, command and control theory, ex-management type approaches, or maybe come back to command and control later as an epithet. But they need to be adaptive, they need to be creating learning, they need to be multi skilled, and able to be agile and change. I've learned that change happens. There's a famous change management story that I'll tell if it's okay. As you know, I was over in your part of the world not so long ago in Victoria, British Columbia, working with systems change agency that I'm lucky enough to work with.

I was reminded of this story. So, the story is that there are three moose hunters, and they hire one of those planes that lands on water, to take them out into the wilderness to go moose hunting. The plane drops them off and they say, "See you back this time on Friday." And he says, "Good luck", and takes off. So, they camp out in the woods, and they avoid the bears. And they managed to shoot several moose, let's say three moose now, how many moose is appropriate? The plane comes back and lands on the lake and taxis to the shore. They say, "We're going to load up these three moose." The pilot says, "We'll never be able to take off with those. They're far too heavy." But they say, "No, nonsense, nonsense. The pilot last year said that and we took off." He says, "Well, if you're absolutely sure." So, they load up these very

heavy moose and pull the plane right to the shoreline, get up the maximum speed and they're taxiing across the water, get up enough speed and just rise above the tips of the trees, and then there's just a bigger tree and they bang into it and the plane flips slightly, and the pilot loses control and they spin into the trees and they crash horribly, and they're all thrown into the air. Then there's a kind of boom, boom, boom, and you just hear groaning.

One of the hunters, kind of calls out, "Mick, you okay? How you doing?" And Mick says, "Is that you John? I'm okay. I think I might have broken something, but I'm fine. Where are we? Where are we, Mick? Where did we land?" And John says, "About 20 feet further than last year." So, that's what change management is like. That's what delivering, achieving this kind of change in public services is like, in my opinion. It's a good metaphor. It's rich.

[00:17:49] RT: All right. So, let's get into what you draw in order to help. If somebody asked me, "Hey, I ran into this guy named Benjamin Taylor, he is a consultant. What do you know about him? And what do you bring to the consulting operations?" The very first thing that would come to my head would be systems. I say that because I know that you have a significant influence, had been significantly influenced by Barry Oshry's work around power and systems. Also, a body of work called Systems Leadership. Let's not lump those together for the moment. Let's keep them apart and I'll leave it to you to make whatever cross connections there are, and why you use it. But give people an understanding to start. Let's start with Barry's work. I'm more familiar with Barry's work than the Systems Leadership. So, talk why of all the things that you could have brought to bear and pay your attention to and really have to invest some time in getting to grip with about how you can help your clients with it. Why powers and systems and Oshry's work?

[00:18:50] BT: Great question. So, Barry Oshry and Karen Oshry, developed this theory over a period of 50, 60 years, I guess. They're retired now, but Barry pops up every now and again, very pleasantly. Barry was originally, a guy who designed experiential learning. There's a whole cool backstory to that, that's maybe for another occasion. But he designed experiential learning, where he put people into kind of archetypal situations. The original version, which lives on as the thing called the power lab, was elite middles and immigrants in a fictional society, Good Hope. And he just put them into those roles originally as an open learning experiment. He observed what happens.

I love this little niche fact about Barry, was that his PhD was on pattern recognition from kind of stratospheric spy planes. So, he is a pattern recognizer. What he saw was a series of very deep patterns in the way that human beings tend to interrelate as individuals and particularly as the groups that they become in organizations and in society. We step into predictable conditions when we're a top leader, or a middle manager, or a doer, at the bottom of the organization, or a customer, or an advisor consultant trying to help, or a dominant power group in society, or an outside of our group in society. We have instant reflex response to those conditions, and it turns out that that instant reflex response is a lousy response to the conditions.

So, for example, in the conditions of being a top in an organization, a leader, we might say, you step into multiple responsibility, and heavy accountability, and a high load of information, and so on. Our response, knowing that I'm accountable for all of this, and there's all of this going on, is to try and get our arms around it all, suck it all up in various words. That's obviously a positive feedback loop. The more you suck up, the more you have to deal with. The more you take on, the more the complexity and accountability and responsibility and so on. And then we end up being overloaded and burned out, and also isolated from our other tops and separated off into kind of silos, and we get into warfare and separation and distinction.

There's a bit of that in the story of how me and Dennis quite amicably ended up splitting up as the leaders of RedQuadrant. So, the conditions are real, the outcomes are real, the instant reflex response is real, and Barry's schema for this is not always not every time, but predictably, and with great reliability, we go into that incident response. At an individual level, there's a positive feedback loop which creates and exacerbates the conditions more and more and more until you get into a kind of overload. But at a group level, when you zoom out that perspective, the tops end up isolated doing too, more and more and more. And the bottoms end up done too, and this empowered, but in unity with each other because they can see their oppressor, they can feel the weight of the system doing to them, and the middles end up stretched and torn and separated and isolated and burnt out and ineffectual and bureaucratic, and all those things that we hear middle managers being predictably and with great reliability.

It takes a while to explain, but the power of that deep insight based on real experience, Barry has a little book called *There Is No New Paradigm Yet*, where he makes a claim that it's a

paradigmatic, it's a genuine theory of organizations. And there aren't really very many of those, Rick, as far as I can see. There's a lot of muddling through and that's cool. But real theories based on real experience that give you insights into the ways that patterns work in the main, those are rare as hen's teeth and equally valuable.

[00:22:37] RT: So, you raise an interesting question now. I hadn't thought of this until you just gave this description and I've heard you and watch you work with various material for a long time. But this top, middle, and bottom, I live outside Seattle, which means that I'm in Microsoft's backyard. Microsoft just finished two robust reports on this question of people coming back to the office and they originally thought and espouse that people will be back up to 50% of their time here by summer. Now, they're back completely off of that and they're not even sure that that will ever occur again. I haven't read the report, but I read a summary of it in the local newspaper, and one of the takeaways was that the managers want everybody back, and the people who are working from home prefer to stay home.

So, in that context, it would be the middles who are trying to get the bottoms to come back to work. I've been wondering and I'm interested in your thoughts here. I'd love to hear Barry's thoughts on this. Has the pandemic exposed the weaknesses and the fallacies of being a middle in organizations? I say that in the context of value added to the work that everybody's trying to get done.

[00:23:46] BT: Sure, sure. I mean, Microsoft is not organizations. Microsoft is a thing of its own. Yeah, I think we might see a real pattern change now because of dynamic that you're talking about, that I'm hearing all over the place as well. I mean, there's a lot of speculation we could do about this, Rick. But it's a powerful thing to apply that kind of patternicity, that kind of what are the conditions now? What is the incident reflex response? And what are the patterns that that will bring out? If you see what I mean.

One of the things we might say, although, there's a surge of union activity in the US and in the UK at the moment, albeit, that's not for office workers. One of the things we might say is that that working from home might lead to a kind of atomization, and a separation and a breakdown of that sense of unity, and we, amongst the doers, the workers, the workers at the bottom. But I certainly think that there's an argument. The simple way of saying this is that the middle

managers aren't needed and that was a good bit of visibility of how the system works, and trust and the right kind of capabilities, and bringing back in some things the middle managers are going to be needed for in a minute. But the team members, the doers, the bottoms in various language can do the work themselves. The problem there is who's going to be able to see and manage the emergent properties of the natural reactions of all the doers to their perspective on the work that needs to be done in the system. Do you see what I mean?

[00:25:23] RT: I do see, I do see, yeah. Just for clarification, for people listening, because I know we're throwing a lot of stuff at them with Oshry's work here. But there are attributes and attractions for each of these groupings here, tops, middles, bottoms, customers, meaning that it's not particularly pejorative model, it is a model that gives people with they understand and different moves to make than they would if they don't understand it. So, let's hold that.

[00:25:47] BT: Let me be clear, it's a transactional model, not just a hierarchical model. So, at any given moment, and this is probably important in the dynamic I'm talking about. We sometimes see ourselves, we sometimes are taught with responsibility for a whole thing with sometimes a boss and being done too. Your hierarchical position in the organization will bring a set of those patterns. But the chief executive will be a customer, when they ask their executive assistant team to do something for them. You transfer through all of the – you experience all of these in a single day, if you see what I mean. But you're right about that. It gives you a way of seeing it. The most important point is that what's in there is a pattern break and what's in there is three levels of insight.

One is to say, I can see that what's happening is systemic. I don't therefore have to take it personally. I can see this as an ask, somebody for something, and they respond in a certain kind of way. I can say, "Ah, this is an interaction between the different worlds of middle and top or whatever it may be, not just person to person." That means I can be tactical. I can help to understand their condition in their world, and alleviate it to get what I need in my world, and I can be strategic. I can try and change the shaping of the way, we as groups, as teams, as world interact as roles. I can change the way the bottoms interact with the middles to get out of those really negative cycles, if that makes any sense.

[00:27:11] RT: It does. I wanted to take you into systems leadership here in a moment. But I'm also reminded again, and I'm unfamiliar with the educational process in UK, in the level of detail I am here. But it struck me as I got older that and even more so today than in the past, we're doing a disservice to our youth, and that we do very little systems teaching about systems in our educational process. So, Barry's work also strikes me as useful because for a lot of people, and you must have seen this way more than I have because of your work in it. They begin to see systems for the first time in their life, much less of professional life.

[00:27:48] BT: Yeah, absolutely.

[00:27:50] RT: And the benefit of them understanding systems from your perspective is what, once they start to understand it.

[00:27:57] BT: That schema that I gave, and it goes, it's really useful. You can give yourself the freedom. It's almost like from the first-person perspective, I can say, "Whoa, this thing that's happening to me is something that is happening in a systemic way." So, that gives me a freedom to consider it differently. I can also say, so the thing that's happening, that the other person that's involved in this interaction is part of the system and is systemically influenced also. And therefore, this is, in a sense, just like empathy or emotional intelligence. I can actually understand what's going on in their world for them, in their part of the system, and that will empower me to work with them in a more productive way. It could be manipulative, by the way, almost all of these systems learning can be used for evil as well as good, unfortunately. It might not lead there as often, but it certainly does sometimes.

And then I can also take the perspective of looking at a whole system, understanding something as a system and go, "Okay. I mean, are there changes that we can make, to the interaction patterns here, that will be better for me, better for everyone, better for the world, et cetera, et cetera." So, I think the more people understand systems thinking perspectives, the more options they have. You said I used a great phrase a minute ago, Rick, that they have options available to them that they wouldn't otherwise have, I think was what you said and that's what it's all about for me, absolutely.

[00:29:24] RT: Okay. Let's bring this concept of systems leadership into the conversation. As I said a little bit ago, I'll leave it to you to help people understand if there's connective tissue between these two points of view. But given the framing of what systems leadership is first and then we can go there.

[00:29:40] BT: Okay, so systems leadership is many, many, many, many things. Barry calls his work systems leadership at times. There is a whole movement about which I will be – I speak sometimes called systems leadership, which spans a whole range of things. There's an article on my blog, where I'm trying to kind of give a classic quadrant framework, almost, of the different approaches to systems leadership. Some of that is leaders who are good systems thinkers. Some of it is making the thing that you're trying to lead work more like a system, like an integrated, purposeful system. Some of it is using systems thinking to incubate new possibilities for how the system could work entirely. There's a whole range.

The thing that got me into this is a thing called Systems Leadership Theory by MacDonald, which follows on from the work of Elliott Jaques. I was introduced to this by Peter Cooper, an Australian chap who you and I have worked with the times. What's great about that, is that there are very few that talks about the rarity of there being a true paradigmatic approach. Systems leadership theory, is a very solid theory back way of understanding how a justified hierarchy can add value to an organization, the way in which a hierarchy can be effective. Therefore, in the connection of all of these things, Rick, is twofold. Powerful ways of seeing and deep underlying patterns to organizational life.

The other thing I'm passionate about is the viable systems model, which seems to me to be the fundamental functions and interactions of what an organization needs to exist. But Systems Leadership Theory, as a set of practices and tools, is very much about getting the right person with the right capabilities at the right time and the right skills, the right mental capabilities, and so on, in the right role, with the right scope, with clarity of what their boundaries are. The fundamental thing of this for me, is Elliott Jaques has a definition of work, as the exercise of discretion over time to achieve a purpose within boundaries in there as well.

So, the exercise of discretion within boundaries to achieve a purpose, overtime, something like that. And that's such a powerful concept. Because what he's saying, what we're saying there is

without boundaries, you're unboundaried, you're uncertain, you don't actually have any clarity of what you can and can't, should and shouldn't do. Without exercising discretion, you're just being a robot, you're just a pair of hands, you're not actually doing human work. So, the point is that the size of that discretion and the shape of that discretion, and the end goal of that discretion, is something that you need to have a process of knowing, of working out, of clarifying in organizations. And honestly, Rick, this is where I want to recuperate command and control. Because command and control trips off the tongue. There's a way of putting down, belittling hierarchical management, quite rightly, in many ways.

What it means is bad, centralizing. I know best I will have all the answers, and I will tell you what to do management. The origins of command and control, I think there are in the US Navy, were maximizing discretion to the frontline, consistent with coherence of the whole entity, of the whole organization, that the whole system and that's what Systems Leadership Theory is about. It's about giving everybody the opportunity to work at their peak, by having them all within an overall sense of purpose and an overall set of work to be done, giving them all the discretion that just turns them alive, that really fits them, but also stretches them and challenges them. That's an incredibly empowering, great thing.

But what's also good about it is that I see so many clients now, where command and control, even in the negative this directive micromanaging thing would be, in some ways an improvement because it will be a coherent theory of managements. What I see is people muddling through, failing to give clear role and task clarity, because they associate most of the work of management with negative, bad, evil micromanagement. And therefore, people muddle through, that they're insecure. They're not giving people clarity. They're not really giving people freedom, because people go off and try and exercise what they think is freedom and then discover that they've upset somebody, discover they've done something wrong. Do you see what I mean?

[00:34:29] RT: I do.

[00:34:29] BT: Because they didn't know what they were supposed to do. So, what's great in Systems Leadership Theory, again, getting that underlying pattern of organization, but actually, it's about, hang on a second, you need some discipline and some rigor and some consistent

practices that tell people really what their job is. So, that's a really powerful thing to do, if you see what I mean.

[00:34:52] RT: Yeah, it also seems to me that there's a certain kind of sense of making for the workers to actually have great clarity on what their job is, because they can enter a better place to know, how they're being productive, they can see their productivity, they can go home at the end of the day or the week and know that they're having a contribution to the larger system, without having to guess whether or not it matters, because everything above them is a little fuzzy or a lot of its fuzzy, in the absence of systems leadership, or Barry's work and things of that nature.

[00:35:19] BT: That's right. That's absolutely right. Yeah. And because the accountabilities are clear for the people in the hierarchy to create those clear accountabilities for the people below them, then the hierarchy, when it functions in that way that's envisaged, actually adds value. But the core things don't depend on it being a strict formal hierarchy. But the tools are based on that assumption.

[00:35:42] RT: Okay. So, what I will say for people who are listening, Benjamin, let's make sure that you provide me with a couple of links to some of these resources you referring to that we can put in the show notes for the podcast. And then people can find a little bit more on Barry's work, they can find some stuff on systems leadership. And we'll also put your connection points in the show notes as well for them to follow up on if they want.

Let's bridge a little bit here now, because I want to get your – I mean, you've been around the block a long time now, and I hate to say that, that's the nature of where we are in our life, man. So, sort of a regular question in the episodes here. I'm just curious, what's your definition of leading?

[00:36:19] BT: Oh, boy. I'm not very keen on definitions, Rick, which in systems leadership is a huge failure. There's one definition of it, which is assemble, maintain and develop group of people with a purpose over time. That's not bad. But I would probably want to and I haven't done this work. But I'd probably want to rejig that. You can see the value in that, that's very hierarchical. I would want to say something like, create the conditions for groups. See, it's not

necessarily one consistent group anymore, either. Because RedQuadrant is a network consultancy, different people come in for different projects, and so on. But create the conditions for sets of people over time to do purposeful and valuable work. That's the kind of thing that I'm interested in.

[00:37:10] RT: I'd say, let's do a little exercise when we're done here. Let's hammer out at least a working premise of it and we can start from there. So, you just mentioned this. You're doing all that work out in the world, but you have a very interesting design of the organization of RedQuadrant to get the work done. So, I know that that is also a reflection of your style of work, but also your beliefs, mostly about how people work well together. There are some aspects of how you RedQuadrant deliver your services to your clients, that is probably beneficial to people as well as the topical stuff that you bring to the conversation when you're working with clients. So, what's your philosophy about how you've designed this group of people and how they work? And what have you learned from that? Because it's a little different than what most people would assume a consultancy looks like.

[00:37:59] BT: Yeah, sure. So, we don't employ any consultants, per se. Everybody is an independent expert contractor. In a sense, Rick, beyond that, as far as the client is concerned, very often, and in theory, it shouldn't be, it's no different from a consultancy team. So, you get a team, you get experts, they're working to an agreed methodology that you've signed off on or bought, and so on and that's that. And we contract with everybody very strictly for the projects and for the work packages for the work that they have to do and deliver. That's it. We don't contract beyond that, except we try and maintain relationships as people and keep them up to date and ask them to keep us up to date, and so on, between gigs, as it were.

In a sense, that was a reaction. Myself and our colleague, Dennis, had both worked in big partnership firms, and felt there was a lot of problems with that. I mean, great experiences, we both learned a hell of a lot. But ultimately, we moved on, partly because we didn't think they were client or consultant centric, their partner centric, good for making partners money. And I might have thought of that before I set up a business trying to do the opposite. But I didn't. Partly because there's a lot of professional facade required there, which is, there's always sales and there's always bullshit in business, in some ways, to some extent, but it's a bit more – there's a necessary element of living in bad faith, which is, not particularly worse than many

other jobs. I'm not saying this is some horrible evil, but which is there, an internal competition, and very ruthless job cuts and all the kind of things that come with big business.

We'd also both work for business process outsources where they need transformation consultants, but only in order to sell the gig, and only in order to kind of take on the managed service and do the early – do the mapping and transformation and stuff. So, there's a reaction there, Rick, which is like RedQuadrant is not going to be like them, which isn't particularly fully mature or totally healthy, but it's been relatively success, if you see what I mean. I think the bottom line there is that we aspire to, and we always manage it, be really adult to adult in our relationships within the business. That's a step away from one aspect of hierarchy, which is taking responsibility for, and absolutely creating the conditions for somebody else. It becomes always a negotiation. Hopefully a good faith, even sided negotiation. I'm sure we've twisted people's arms to gigs they didn't want to do and so on, and fallen short at times. But adult battle is the fundamental mantra there. There's a part of me, Rick, which says, that's me avoiding responsibility and I think that's partly true. But it's also a worthwhile thing to go forward, do you see what I mean, to contract with people as individual adults.

[00:40:48] RT: Yeah, and I'm going to say as one of those people you've contracted with, there's something graceful and elegant about the focus on the work and the client, and how we're going to it done, and clear markers about how we want to travel that road, where the beginning is the middle and the end. So, I think your model allows people such as myself, to focus on the work and where you can actually do your best stuff and not have to use personal time and energy to figure out what else is going on in the organization, I need to know about, that doesn't really affect me. But I better be politically savvy, because it could come back to bite me otherwise,

[00:41:21] BT: Good. That's very generous of you, but also plausible. So, I'm pleased to hear it.

[00:41:25] RT: All right, so we're coming down to the close here. There is one question I ask everybody, and you're not going to get away with not answering this one. So again, with your vast experience, there's a working premise here, not the truth, that we tend to remember and learn more from our failures than we do our successes. So, since this is a leadership leading

conversation, can you share with people what you might term in your own opinion, a failure of your leadership and what you'll learn from it?

[00:41:54] BT: Yeah, an obvious one is, in the early days of RedQuadrant, we believed that everybody should act in this very independent adult way. It's no accident, by the way, that we've ended up with more mid to late career, relatively independent in themselves, people as consultants. Because if you're a very junior consultant, and you're charging a low day rate, and therefore you can't afford space between gigs, and you're living day to day, it might be much better to fit in a big consultancy, where you're giving your bread and butter, somebody's taking responsibility for selling you out, and you might trade off something in exchange for that.

In our case, in particular, it was the people working in the operations team, because we brought in some great people, mostly, fairly early career people. We didn't take that responsibility for giving them the clarity, for looking after them a bit, because they actually needed it at that stage in their lives, and the famous story is we literally had somebody at one point in tears, asking us for a proper line manager. So, there's your middle managers coming back and rearing their heads, again, Rick. Certain people do need that.

That was really good, because that was a turnaround for me in this rather idealistic kind of belief that everything could be free and everything could be self-organizing. And yes, it can, but with a huge overhead and a huge cost. So, that got me into this much more pragmatic space, of a kind of idealism and I'm going to have to use – I've told this story before, but I'm going to have to use it. The idealism is this concept of total football, which goes back to the Dutch team of the 1970s and IX Amsterdam before that.

[00:43:35] RT: Dennis is still having his influence on you, man.

[00:43:37] BT: Dennis is still influencing us, isn't he? Absolutely, absolutely. That was a team – the myth is, that that was his team where every player could play in every position. And therefore, the football team, soccer team, on the pitch was just this beautifully organic, shifting whole, working like a slime mold and finding the best ways through and playing in this fantastic, adaptive way. There's a number of things wrong, both with the myth, and with the reality. It was a team built around a few superstar players, but more to the points, every player there had drills,

had played extensively in lots of different positions on the pitch. And therefore, they could have doubts, because they understood how to slot in at different roles, if you see what I mean. And they were also capable of doing that, by the way. Not everybody is, and not at any given moment are they capable of it.

So, the shift from this extreme, this total football on the one hand, and there's the lumpen British 4-4-2 formation, four defenders, four midfielders and two strikers of the time that I grew up in as a kind of football, soccer fan. Those are the extremes, where the left back can only play and left defense and occasionally go down the wing a little bit and the striker is absolutely useless at tackling and probably passing as well, but just hangs around the goal trying to score, and then total football. The point is, both of those are viable things with the right people in the right roles, and most organizations are a mix of a bit of both of those, dealing with all the underlying organizational dynamics. This just something that I learned about, I think, trying to be really clear eyed about that, and trying to bring, "Okay, so this these are the players you got, these are the formation options that are available, this is the kind of solution that might fit in this context." Does that make sense?

[00:45:35] RT: It does make sense. It also strikes me that this is the loopback to various work and powering systems and middles when you have healthy middles, and can see this dynamic and know how to adjust the players on the field, so to speak, as best they can inside the constraints that they've got, with the talent they got.

[00:45:53] BT: Yup, yup. Well, yeah, and as you get agile organizations in this belief that you can be completely self-organizing and working in flux, and then you get this little interesting thing called an agile coach. And what does the agile coach do? The agile coach pays attention to the personal needs of the people in the team and might advise them on their relationships with others and might help to sort out a little bit of an effective structure and look at the emergent properties and so on. Before you know it, you're going to reinvent the manager.

[00:46:22] RT: All right, so last question here. As I mentioned to you before we started recording, and people listening to this know that part of my reason for having these conversations is the understanding that there are people behind this on this trail that we travel, who are trying to learn how to lead, manage, use their authority, influence, et cetera. So, the

point of the podcast is to hopefully, if they're listening, they pick up a couple ideas that they could use and expedite their journey. So, what advice, this is your advising time, based on wisdom experience, what couple things you could share with them sort of, in your role as a wisdom keeper, passing it on and elder to the younger?

[00:47:00] BT: That's the sounds funny to me, Rick.

[00:47:02] RT: I know.

[00:47:02] BT: But on the other hand, I do worry that this has been quite a theoretical conversation, which I just enjoy. Most of my time is on the goal face trying to make basic things happen in change projects. So, for people interested in leadership, I would say, we're always, I guess, giving advice to an earlier version of ourselves in these contexts. So, I probably can't escape that. I would say, get deeply into perspectives. Don't be a Jack. Don't just dot around between them. Get deeply into really understanding a few concepts of leadership at a time. But never get just locked into that perspective. Always understand that there are other ways of seeing it and that those other ways have some validity, and the interesting thing is to look into that validity.

[00:47:49] RT: Great, thank you very much. All right, before I say our goodbyes here, I just want to remind people we will put links to systems leadership, power and systems. Probably a few other things that Benjamin has, that we'll find useful here. But put those in the show notes. You can find those when you're done listening to the episode. Benjamin, thank you very much for making time on your holiday, so to speak out of the UK and getting –

[00:48:12] BT: It's all the holiday, Rick.

[00:48:13] RT: – out of the river and washing the dog. It's been wonderful to have you here and appreciate it very much.

[00:48:18] BT: Thanks. It's been fun.

[00:48:19] RT: Okay. Thank you.

[OUTRO]

[00:48:22] 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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