

**EPISODE 24**

[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. This is a podcast where we talk to people who are making choices to lead in some messy and complicated situations, or what I like to refer to as swamp issues. I've said these many times, probably on every episode that the purpose of this podcast is twofold. One is it's a space and a container for people who have made those decisions to lead to come and share their experiences, so we can capture them on the record. The other reason is to recognize that there are people who are further back down the trail on the leadership journey, and the possibility that some of those people could pick up a few ideas from these people, and move their leadership development capacity building along.

It came to my attention a couple of weeks ago that all of the guests that I had on the show have been people who are the elders on the journey. And the question came up from two different people. How come I haven't spoken with anybody who might be those people referred to as little further back on their leadership journey? Honestly, I had never thought of that. But I knew instantly it was a good idea. So, I started scanning to see who would be candidates to have in that conversation. And I almost immediately thought of a person I know pretty damn well, and that is my daughter. So, I pitched up the idea to her if she would come on the podcast. She knows all about it. She's listened to everything. She's an editor of mine in my writing. So, she's familiar with my work and the principles that I use in my work. And surprise, surprise, she said, yes. So, it is an honor to have my daughter Annika Torseth on 10,000 Swamp Leaders.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:02:06] RT:** Annika, welcome to the show.

**[00:02:08] AT:** Thank you so much. I'm happy to be here.

**[00:02:10] RT:** All right. So, before we get into the questions that I've got, and wherever we may go in this conversation, why don't you take a little time and share with people what it is you want them to know about you right now?

**[00:02:22] AT:** Sure. So, I am currently working in a field that is pretty far removed from where I originally started in the professional workspace. I went to school originally for English with a focus on editing, which is, like you said in the top of this, what I currently do for you now, but it's not really something I do professionally anymore. It's something that I realized that I really like, and I'm really good at. But it's not something that's actually making an impact anywhere beyond what someone else is saying. And I felt like I kind of have a disposition where I want to be able to help people. And at the time, I was doing text editing in which was about as boring as it sounds, so I decided to take a bit of a right turn and focus on what I'm always consuming.

So, I was trying to think about what I like to do in my free time, what I like to read, what I like to listen to, what I end up talking about. I find that like, if you're speaking with someone that you don't know very well, what is a topic that you generally fall back on, because you're comfortable in that space. So, I was trying to think about what I tend to fall back on. And it was true crime, which is I'm aware a topic that is, it's definitely popular in my target audience. So, more like the Millennial, Gen Z region of people, and I think a lot of people on older generations get a little turned off when you start talking about serial killers. But don't worry, I won't talk about it a lot today.

So, I decided to go back to school and I studied forensic psychology. That's what I got my master's degree in and I graduated last year, last May. I now work for a nonprofit in New York City. We focus on case management. I work with people who are currently in prison at Rikers Island. And they all have serious mental illnesses. I work with them to learn more about them, focus a treatment plan, create a treatment plan for them so that once they're released back into the community, they have access to services, things like housing, benefits, mental health services, substance use services, all of which is the aim for them to stay in the community and not be rearrested. So, that is the work that I do now, and I find that it's making a bigger impact than tax entity did, for sure.

**[00:04:48] RT:** For those listeners out there. This came as a big surprise to Annika's parents that she was redirecting her career into this area. Annika, we should note that probably had no bearing on your decision to do what you're going to do, but you happen to live within shouting distance of one of the better universities to study this, right?

**[00:05:06] AT:** Definitely helped out. I am doing my research while at my text editing job, don't tell them. I found that one of the top universities is John Jay College of Community Justice. They're one of the only programs in the US that has a Forensic Psychology Master's Program. Alternative programs are mainly based in Europe and as amazing as living in Amsterdam sounded, I felt like maybe staying in the city I was in was probably the better move at the time. But you hear about professors, professors I've now had the privilege of working with and learning from, you see them, I've listened to podcasts where they're mentioned, articles that they've written, research that they've performed, is mentioned in TV, whether it's documentaries, or fiction, books, TV shows, journals, all of that. They're like the leaders of forensic psychology and what is moving the field forward. So, it was a privilege to actually be able to do it and be able to just take the subway there.

**[00:06:05] RT:** That's good. That's good. It's good for mom and dad, too, by the way. So, let's get in. I have some questions. As I was preparing for this, I thought these are questions I probably should have asked as a father a long time ago. Some of them relate to the work that I do, and the focus and you're familiar with that. So, we'll go where we go in this conversation. But it occurs to me that in this space that I'm focused on, on 10,000 Swamp leaders, where you're dealing with complex, messy situations, the conditions of the people that you're working with, live in, in some ways, their existence has been very traumatic and complex. That's what got them in Rikers Island in the first place. And now, they're trying to put some stuff together so that they can have a second chance.

So, what is it that you've learned about the complexity of working with people like this, their backgrounds, how you go about helping them that surprises you, and what are you learn about how you put solutions together in this complex, messy situation that they're facing?

**[00:07:03] AT:** Right. So, I think the biggest issue of Rikers, there's really too many to name. So, I'm not actually going to start off there. But I think one of the bigger issues that the system was having with Rikers, back in the '90s was that they were discharging people with mental illnesses from the city jails, in the middle of the night, with only \$1.50, and two tokens for the bus, without any psychiatric medication that they were probably already having while incarcerated, and without any treatment referrals.

So, that became a class action lawsuit against the city actually, and it's now referred to as Brad H. It settled in 2003 and that ensured that the city has to provide mental health services, not only while individuals are incarcerated, but when they're released. So, that means they have to provide discharge planning services, including mental health care, case management, and assistance to accessing public benefits and housing. So, because of Brad H., that created the nonprofit where I work at, and that's where we get our funding.

This wasn't a thing. This wasn't like a capacity that was held in 20 plus years ago. It's kind of still a learning field. It's pretty young, I think, talking about mental health is still pretty young. It used to be so taboo. In places it still is. And I find that a lot of times when you speak with inmates ranging in age, mental health is still – it's difficult for people to ask for help. It's always been difficult for people to ask for mental health. But I think, especially in a world where being tough is highly regarded and almost necessary as an act of survival.

**[00:08:53] RT:** In the prison, you're talking about?

**[00:08:55] AT:** In the prison system. Yeah. So, I think it's challenging for people to initially admit that they may need services, and to then accept the services. It's been interesting. Sometimes I think when I originally went into the role, I thought, older inmates would maybe be a bit more standoffish towards mental health services with younger inmates, maybe being more open to it. But I've often found that it's the inverse. I believe, depending on the capacity, also, the charges make a pretty big impact. How many times someone's been arrested? How many times they've been incarcerated? Have they been sentenced? Have they been convicted in the past? Do they have a felony charge? Do they have a misdemeanor charge? It all makes an impact on their mental status in the prison, just in general, without even introducing a mental health issue.

I mean, it's a big thought to consider when you're going into a conversation with someone who's incarcerated now. Rikers is a jail, it's not a prison. So, they're awaiting sentencing or to be released, and it's a lot of weight, to hold on to person, and then to be able to try to have a conversation with them about mental health and telling them that you're there to help, can be a really challenging space for people to accept.

So, I think building trust has been a really big part of my communication with clients, because they're not really willing to trust a lot, and it's really difficult to ask someone for help that you don't trust. So, I think that's been like the biggest foundation that we've had to work through.

**[00:10:36] RT:** Okay, so we're going to come back to building trust here, what you've learned about that in a second. But I think for people who are listening, it's important to make this sharp and this distinction about these swamp issues, which, generally speaking, a lot of times, particularly in the podcast, has had to do with people who are working on projects that are complex and messy in the external world. Climate change, social justice, various things like that. There's another kind of messy, wicked, swampy issue, which is the social complexity of people's lives and how it interfaces with their world that they live in. And those can be as equally complex as dealing with climate change, for example.

So, I'm sharpening that distinction, because it's in some parts, the world that you're working in, is in that side of this complexity. So, having difficult conversations is an earmark for knowing you're in that kind of space, and I'm suspecting that most of the conversations you have could somehow be connected as in the box of difficult conversations. Go back now, and tell us what you've learned in the time you've been there about how you build trust with these people so that they're willing to work with you to get the help they need.

**[00:11:47] AT:** Right. So, I think building trust in a friendship, say, so outside of the prison system, you're just making friends with someone, you share common stories. So, you share a little bit about what's vulnerable with me, you share a little bit what's vulnerable about you, and we build off of that, need for trust that way. It's pretty different in a prison system. I have not ever been incarcerated. I don't ever plan to be incarcerated, knock on wood. I don't think it will be happening. But I don't have many similar experiences to a lot of the people I'm working with.

Most of the people I'm working with, it's not everybody, for sure you hear lately, different stories, but a lot of them didn't get a lot of opportunities to start off anywhere and now they're in jail.

A lot of them are from the Bronx, most of them are from New York. Most of them are New York residents already. A lot of them come from low socioeconomic status. A lot of them dropped out of high school, and a lot of them have had a lot of prior arrests. Most of them have had some arrest record when they were younger, some only in their 20s. But for a lot of people I speak to, this is not their first incarceration.

So, starting from that place, I already don't have a lot I can share that's measurably vulnerable. From there, instead, I just stay open. We have to ask a lot of difficult questions and what we call the initial assessments. It's the first time I speak with someone. They provide consent for me to continue with the assessment, by consent for me to speak with the Correctional Health Services at Rikers, their attorney, emergency contacts, all of those contents are provided. And then we continue with the assessment. Most of the questions they ask are pretty personal, something you probably want to share with someone you've just had a first conversation with.

The most difficult that I find is we do a suicide severity scale rating. So, that's basically a measure if someone has suicidal ideation. We also ask questions about homicidal ideation, ask questions about auditory and visual hallucinations. Those are all topics I wouldn't normally have even just with someone I'm trying to make as a friend. So, I just go into try to be an ear. I'm not as much a person as I am an ear, and I want to make sure that they know what they're saying is being listened to and heard. So, being able to voice that is really important. If someone expresses suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, or any hallucination, I always make sure to say, "Thank you so much for sharing that with me. I know that can be difficult to share. And I know it's difficult because you've just met me. The call started 15 minutes ago, and you're sharing that with me. So, thank you for giving me the space." And then after every time, any of those things are shared, I let them know that I'm going to be speaking to mental health services at Rikers and having someone check in on them, because I want to make sure they're okay.

So, being able to provide a space where they feel both heard, and knowing that someone is actually reaching out to other people in order to make sure they're okay, make them recognize that there's someone who cares. I'm not a parental figure, I'm not a sister, I'm not a brother, I

don't have a family tie, and I've just met them, but I am going to be offering them help. I think that acts as a good starting off place. And also, just asking questions, like personal questions. I ask about hobbies. What do you do in your free time? A lot of them have jobs within the jail. When you're not doing that, what do you like to do? Oh, you like to read? What do you like to read? What kind of music do you listen to? Hip Hop? That's awesome. Who's your favorite artist?

Being able to take notes of it so that the next time on the call, you get to go back and be like, "Hey, are you still listening to Cardi B? That's awesome. What's your favorite song right here?" So, being able to build a rapport, a relationship, and offer some support, where they may not have received in the past is really beneficial, because then I'll meet with them, depending on their charges, I meet with them every month or every two to three months, and then you just build the relationship. So, by the third call, you get on the call, like, "Hi, Mr. X, how are you doing today?" "Oh, Annika, it's so good to see you. How are you?" As opposed to the first call being like, "Who are you? What do you want?" So, I find that showing support and showing a reliability is beneficial. I say I'm going to reach out to mental health and have someone check on you and someone's mental health checks on you. You know I stay true to my word. That can build trust.

**[00:16:23] RT:** It seems to me too, a piece that you said in their early on in this description is them having an experience of being heard and not judged. You didn't say that, necessarily. But I think that's part of what you're saying, is that fair to say?

**[00:16:36] AT:** Definitely. I think whether it happened while they have had court, while they've spoken to an attorney, or just in their life prior to incarceration. It's possible, they've definitely shared experiences that were difficult for them and they were brushed off, not listened to, misrepresented. It becomes a situation if you share vulnerable sides of you so many times, and nobody listens, you're going to stop at some point. We want to make sure that we catch it before they stop, so that they can actually have a better opportunity in life once they're released.

**[00:17:12] RT:** I actually don't know the answer to this, so listeners are going to say, he's just asking us for everybody else. Actually, I can't remember. So, how long have you been working in this agency?

**[00:17:22] AT:** Only since last November.

**[00:17:24] RT:** Okay. So, over a half a year, coming closer, slowly closer to a year. What surprised you about yourself inside this work? But did the work reveal about you that you didn't know that you go, this is useful?

**[00:17:39] AT:** I think it helps you understand how you are in situations that you can't predict. I'm a big planner, which you know, and anyone who's met me actually knows friends of mine, our family knows, I like to be prepared. I like to know what's happening. Before I speak, I like to know what I'm going to do, whether it's tomorrow, next month, three years down the line, 10 years down the line, I'd like to know what I might do, and I like to have a backup plan.

So, in case planning doesn't work, I know what I'm going to do, and I can be resilient through it and be like, "Yup, that sucks. The first plan didn't work. That's okay." I'm not going to moan about it, I'm going to get on with it. And I think that's been really beneficial for me just throughout life, definitely in grad school. But it's really difficult in this field, because you're working with a clientele who are not predictable. Everyone I work with has a serious mental illness. Psychology is recognizably still considered a "soft science", because it's not hard and fast.

Not every person who's diagnosed schizophrenia is going to have the same. Not all of them react the same to the same medication. You can't predict what's going to happen with mental illness. And so, there's a lot of situations that I've had, we currently are not going to Rikers Island, to interview in person, though that's in the works. We're currently still doing video call. So, just like I'm doing with you right now is how I speak to clients of mine and anything can happen. I've definitely had some situations that were unexpected. You don't know how you're going to react to them and you don't know how – you have to remember that my reaction is not just my reaction, because it's shared on the camera in front of me with the client. So, making sure that you are hearing what the person is saying. But you're also at times, in control of the situation. Sometimes they're in control of the situation, but there's definitely times when you have to take it back.

**[00:19:37] RT:** Alright, so I still want to – I mean, go back to the question again, now that you've explained it. So therefore, is a planner in a plan B planner, probably on occasion, a plan C in



your back pocket, and you live in a world where it's more improvisational, because you don't know exactly what's going to happen from client to client or from one session to another. What does that taught you about yourself as somebody who's able to go with the flow and operate sometimes without a plan? What did you learn about yourself there, given you always saw yourself as “a planner”?

**[00:20:09] AT:** Yeah, it's been difficult. Honestly, I think you can only control what you can control, and I have made it my mission to be able to control all of those items. However, in a field where you can't control much of what is happening around you, you can't plan on how you're going to react to something. So, I think the first couple incidents I had that were surprises, were a learning opportunity because I had to – there's definitely the, I have to learn, fight or flight. That's kind of where it comes down to. Fight flight, or freeze. That kind of is like the third option that no one really talks about, because it's the least courageous, I think of the two. I think fleeing is sometimes beneficial, if it helps you. Fighting can be beneficial, if it helps you. Freezing is neither beneficial to you or the interaction you're currently having.

So, I definitely froze the first time any situation arose on a camera. And then I had to be like, “What am I going to do?” I'm not going to fully, I'm currently having a call with a client with a serious mental illness. So, you have to just take it by the reins. And I think what it's taught me is, there's a difference between planning ahead of time and planning in the moment, and I think it's being able to plan in the moment and stay level headed. Because if I still sound calm, while I'm internally like, “Oh, what's happening? This is stressful.” But if I sound like, “Great, thank you so much for sharing that with me, I will be speaking with you in another month. If you need to talk to me, again, you can reach out your social worker.” And then immediately making a call to someone else. I think being able to stay level headed during panic has been really beneficial for me, and I think it's also going to help in careers I'm looking for in the future. But it's definitely not something I had initially going into the job. I think I was definitely more of a freeze, and now I've been able to store my freeze for later. So, as soon as the situation is done, I can have a moment. But in this situation, I have that.

**[00:22:20] RT:** So, we have lots of teachers in life, we have formal teachers based on our educational process, you have parents, you have friends, other adults in your life coaches, et cetera. How many cases do you handle at a time, roughly?

**[00:22:33] AT:** I currently have about 38 active clients who are incarcerated, and I'm about five or so who are currently in the community.

**[00:22:43] RT:** Okay. So, it seems plausible that you could make a case that you have 43 teachers to you, is that fair to say?

**[00:22:54] AT:** Definitely. I think they also have a very big range on what they're teaching me, depending on –

**[00:23:01] RT:** Say more, what is the range? What falls in that range that you're learning from your teachers?

**[00:23:06] AT:** I think it's kind of everything about them. So, it's age base, it's charges. It's how long they're anticipated to be staying at Rikers. It's what they need, when they're released. It's what they want, when they're released. And it's how much they want to change. Because I think all of those things make an impact.

Right now, I have, not sure on the number, but quite a few, I'd say, over 10 people who currently have felony, murder charges against them. And most of those people are under the age of 25, which is pretty interesting. I am 28. So, it's very interesting, just to be speaking with someone who's in a 180-degree different life than I'm currently leading, and understanding that shaping. A lot of those people, too, are probably my most stable clients, which I think if I had been told about this position, or if I thought about this position, prior to starting, I may have thought people who are in for, who have charges against them that are A or B felonies, which are murder, attempted assault, crimes like that, I think I would have associated that with a more severe mental illness.

But most of those people that I work with, I mean, some of them have higher mental illnesses, more severe mental illnesses and others, but a lot of them don't. And a lot of them when I talk to them are like, "Hey, how's it going? How are you doing today? How do you feel?" "I feel fine. I'm doing okay." They've kind of – it's almost like they're accepting what's going to happen and are less stress than someone who's in for a D felony or an E felony. And has projected release of

October, projected release of November of this year. But they're anxious to get out there, ready to leave – they're excited to leave and it comes out as anxiety and stress and concern.

So, it's just an odd balance and it's understanding how each, like you said, each client is different. They all have varying different mental illnesses. Some of them have co-occurring mental illnesses. Some of them also have substance use disorders. And then they have different charges, and they have different home lives, they have different – some of them have family that they get to speak with daily, monthly, weekly, and they have, they can go back to their parents' house and go to a friend's house, fiancé's house after, and a lot of them need help with supportive housing now, so that they don't go back to the shelter, or back to the street once they're released.

**[00:25:39] RT:** Part of what I hear you say is these people are sometimes depending on their circumstances, altering in your story about what they might be like? So therefore, I'm going to say one of the values, one of the important capacities for people who are leading is, A, check out their own version of the story that they're trying to address in the world, and the assumptions they have with it, and those assumptions may be getting them in trouble, or at least missing things as opportunities.

**[00:26:09] AT:** Definitely. I think, the number one, two, three, and four for rated reaction I get when I tell people that I work with inmates at Rikers who have mental illnesses is, “Oh, my God, that's so scary”. Or, “Oh, my God, I wouldn't even know what to do. That would stress me out.” Or, “Are all of your clients murderers?” They're all pretty negative reactions, which I can understand, because mental health has not been widely talked about for quite a long time, especially in older generations. I think Millennial and Gen Z, it's definitely more of a transparent topic. But I think with older generations, I find they're shocked and they're not scared about showing it, and it comes off, sometimes negatively judgmental. Also, Rikers is obviously a hot button topic, I mean, in New York City and across the country, as being a terrifying place. That is all you hear about is how terrifying Rikers is and the lack of services people have, which are both true. But nobody's often speaking about the individuals who are living in the terrifying climate of Rikers, and what access they have to services.

So, I think it's been eye opening for me on my side. And also, I find it beneficial to be able to talk about it to other people, this is a great platform for it, and be able to share, I honestly can't share the actual personal experiences. But to be able to share an example of what someone actually is like, who was living in Rikers, and who is expected to be at Rikers for another – they might be released tomorrow, they might be released two years from now, or they might be transferred upstate.

**[00:28:00] RT:** Okay. So, you know well, based on just being in my life, that my work is dominated by leading, and therefore by extension, and how people go about developing their capacity to lead. So, you're early in your career. I'm curious, because I've never asked you this. First of all, to what extent have you thought about leading or leadership as a capacity that you might think is valuable to have as you move along in your career? And if you haven't, that's fine. How have you thought about it? And also, then, to the extent you've thought about it, how have you thought about building it? What resources do you have to do that either in your job or outside your job?

**[00:28:47] AT:** I've definitely thought about it. I think, even if it's not something that they recognize, or can name, I think anyone who's worked a position in which they have a management corporate ladder, has probably thought about leadership in some form. Because you are being led by someone. You're likely not all on the same level. Someone is leading you and someone is leading them. And so, you get you understand, "Hey, what that person does, my manager does is really helpful. I don't like what that person does." You kind of understand, A, how you like to be led? What helps you? And then you think about it the other way, how would I have handled that situation? If I was in a manager role, or if I was in an advisor role of sobriety? How would I have handled that? What capacity when I had been able to lead that better at than how I experienced it? So, I think what I have learned from – I have kind of vague management when I was tax editing. I didn't really have a direct boss, I kind of had a, this person is who you need to speak to if you have problems, and it wasn't really like a teaching opportunity or no one really took it as a teaching opportunity, which is fine. It's pretty individualized work and I liked that.

But I also realized that from that, I already know I worked better on a team. And it was pretty solo work. So, I learned what I liked and what I didn't like, and I liked that I would have preferred

to have someone I could speak to directly as a boss, and I didn't have that then. So, then I moved to this position and I'm on a pretty small team. There are two other case managers. I have a clinical director, clinical coordinator and a program director as my superiors. It's a pretty balanced in terms of numbers, and it's taught me things that I like and things that I think I would like to do differently. But I found that I really like empathy in the workplace. I think that's kind of divisive, mainly. I think that isn't something that has been accepted maybe in older generations, just because empathy normally works in topics that are not generally accepted as workplace conversations. But I think it's really helpful for being able to listen and understand employees, who may have very different lives than you have, and helps them feel heard, and I think, improves the workplace culture, just because you feel more comfortable being yourself than just being your nine to five self, which I think can change how you interact, both with the people you work with, and your clients.

Additionally, I think transparency is really big for me and I think that can be seen in a couple of ways. I don't mean, like oversharing. I don't think that's great, because it kind of alters the manager to employee dynamic. But I think transparency, when it comes to financial conversations is really beneficial, especially with people on your same level. I think that's something that women struggle with primarily. I noticed that my friends and I didn't really talk about it. It was pretty taboo until about two years ago, kind of around the pandemic time is, "Hey, we're in pretty similar roles. How much money do you make?" A lot of times women won't share that with each other, especially because it's competitive.

You're like, you may be in competition with someone who's in the same role. But you're like, I don't know how much money you make. Say, I make 64,000 and I'm talking to you, you make 82,000. We have the same job. We have worked for our same companies for the same amount of time. Am I being lowballed? Should I be asking for more money? I think transparency in that topic is really influential, because I think a lot of times, it's used by companies, if you're not going to ask for more money, we're not going to give you more money. But as soon as you recognize how good you are at your role, and you recognize that other people around you are getting paid for that, and how good they are at their job, you're like, "What the hell am I doing? I'm going to ask for more money. I deserve more money."

So, I think that's really beneficial. I think transparency about mental health. I think tech companies are pretty good at this. They have mental health days, as opposed to, if they're not sick days, they're not PTO, their mental health days, or they're understanding that if you're in the hospital, for a broken leg, you can't come into work. You're in pain, you can't physically make it in. Your brain doesn't really get "broken". But there's definitely days when you're like, I don't feel good. I'm stressed out. I'm anxious. I can't really pinpoint why. And I don't feel that very happy. I don't feel good right now. A lot of that has to do with work life balance, which I think is another really big part of transparency is making sure you're not in a job that is your whole life. I think that's kind of was instilled in a lot – people in older generations, and I think definitely for us a bit, us in terms of Millennials, that's like, find what you love to do and you'll never work a day in your life.

It's kind of like the mentality that we're all taught, but it's like, I don't want my whole job to be my whole life. I want to be able to go to work, nine to five. Well, once I clock out at five, I'm not stressing out about how many emails I have in my inbox. And if I do, I want to be able to take a mental health day, because my mental health is how I do my job so well, nine to five.

**[00:34:25] RT:** Okay. I think, the metaphor I use about people on the trail of leading those up ahead, there needs to be a cycle. The people behind need to be able to have a platform and a place to share their perspective about the journey, because the journey needs to keep improving and it's done through the dialogue between everybody who's part of that journey. So, you're contributing to that. What kind of setbacks have you had and what have you learned from your setbacks about yourself?

**[00:34:54] AT:** I think setbacks are interesting, because I think I don't focus a lot on my setbacks. Whether that as positive or negative, because I like to have a plan, and I like to be able to do my best to predict if I'm going to have a setback. With this job, like I've said, it's pretty difficult, and what sticks out to me most is when I interviewed for this role, I asked, what's going to be the biggest challenge for me in this role. Someone said, "You don't know what you don't know", which is never wrong, but it's also true. I think about it almost every time I have this job, because I'll come up, there'll be a situation with a client, whether it's over video call at Rikers, whether the client is in person, whether it's on the phone, and I'll get asked, like, I don't know.

As you know, for quite a long time throughout high school, and a lot of college struggled with the phrase, I don't know, because I don't know normally equates to I need help, and I did not enjoy having to ask for help, because I saw it as a weakness, and I like to have a plan. So, it comes full circle. I mean, I'm in a situation where normally, once every day, and once every two days, I say the phrase, "You know what? I don't know." And then I have to reach out whether it's a colleague, a supervisor, or a clinical director, who's a psychologist. "I don't know. Let me ask someone who does know. And now I know for the future. But tomorrow, I'm not going to know something else again."

I think my biggest setback has been myself, because I had to grow. I think I thought in this role, it'd be a transitional growth, you know, I just learn more, and I garner that, and I can use that in future roles. But it's not like a progression thing. It's like, I don't know what the hell that is, I have to ask for help, which is a vulnerability trait that I struggle with, and it's something I have to handle every 24 to 48 hours. So, it's been a learning process and it's also been a bit of a humbling process. Because it's not a role where I thought I was like, I'll be helping other people. I'm helping myself a lot too, because I'm learning how to be more vulnerable in situations where I know that I need help in order to help other people.

**[00:37:25] RT:** So, this is wonderful. We should tell listeners here, Annika's mother, my wife, Teresa is not here. She's away for the weekend. She does not know we're recording this podcast. We're going to surprise her with it, which is not the first reason we did this podcast, but it's sort of an interesting benefit. To what degree do you now think you're more mentally and emotionally agile? Because you've been challenged to come to a place where you're more comfortable with saying, "I don't know", which I think gives more freedom, because you can share work and challenges and people are more likely to come to you and say, I don't know, where they didn't know, they're bearing witness to the good side of that by somebody like you modeling it? To what extent do you feel any different or more comfortable or confident based on having I don't know, be an okay place to live for time to time every day, sometimes?

**[00:38:20] AT:** I honestly think it's really beneficial. There's probably quite a lot of people who struggle with saying, I don't know, and they struggle with it, because it makes you sound like you weren't prepared, you weren't ready for the situation, you didn't practice enough for the situation, you weren't ready enough for this situation. So oftentimes, I find that when I say I don't

know, someone's like, a little surprised, and it's sometimes not surprised, because I don't know the item. It's surprise, because I'm saying that I don't know.

Because I find a lot of time that in situations where you don't know something, you're kind of like, shooting in the dark and that can only have positive effects. You're like, "Well, that worked out pretty well. I didn't know what I was doing. But it worked out pretty well." Then you hear about other people and you're like, "I did not know what I was doing and I bombed." Everyone in the room was aware that I did not know what I was doing. I could have fixed that. I could've handled that differently in the past, and now I've learned from that. So, you have the benefit of learning from your mistakes. But it doesn't help what happened in the past either.

**[00:39:24] RT:** Right, can't clean up the past.

**[00:39:26] AT:** Yeah, exactly. So, I think it's hard. I'm still not like fully comfortable in the lane of saying, I don't know, but I think like senate is green, because you get to learn something. You're opening yourself up to learning something that you did not know before, which will help you moving forward. But I definitely still have challenges.

**[00:39:47] RT:** Where inside your job right now, have you focused and found places to lead?

**[00:39:53] AT:** I mean, waiting is difficult in our role where everyone's kind of a cog in the system, not in a bad way. I think cog in the system gets kind of a bad blow. The mental health, social work prison field, it's not exactly like the high-flying tech career that other people in my age range have. It's definitely a bit more of the short end of the stick group, just based on resources. I mean, money is definitely not as lucrative as in the high-flying tech world. But it's also a lot of people are in the same chain. All social workers, there's not like a social worker, right? I'm an associate social worker, you're a social worker, everyone's on the same level. I'm a case manager, I work with other case managers. We don't have anyone on our team who's like a senior case manager, everyone's pretty case manager, program director, clinical director. Everyone's got a level.

I think it makes it difficult to individually lead because it's everyone is so team based. I'm not working with just one social worker, and that social worker, and I can really rise to the top. I'm



working with, like 12 different social workers. I'm leaning on case managers that I work with. They're leaning on me. There's no one of us who is coming out top or higher than the other. But I think that's actually beneficial. Because if you don't work well, on a team, you can't actually lead people, because you don't know how teams work. I think if you don't work well, as a team, you don't work well on a team, you can't be a leader of a team, you don't know what works, you don't know what doesn't work, you don't know how to speak to people on a team, because you only know how to speak as an individual, and individuals make up a team, but they don't work the same as a singular person.

So, I think that this is an awesome job for me, I'm learning a lot. It's not my end goal job. I mean, it's taught me a lot, it's still teaching me a lot, and I'm going to be doing it for a little while. But I think when I move on into a different role, within the same field, I'll have better opportunities to lead, but I'll be leading from learning what it's been like to be a cog in the system, and knowing what it's like to be a part of a greater team.

**[00:42:12] RT:** Okay. I put this into context of leadership and leading, because that's this world they live in. What questions do you have of me about this, of leading?

**[00:42:23] AT:** Well, to circle back to what you said at the very top of this, in which you haven't had a lot of younger people who aren't well qualified leaders yet, or aren't exactly in the space where they've been leading a lot yet. What do you think young leaders do today, that's been more beneficial and has a bigger impact than maybe older generational leaders who are currently trying to lead to that?

**[00:42:50] RT:** You're not supposed to ask me hard questions. That's a good question. First of all, I wouldn't – the answer I'm going to share is based on more factions and segments than it is universal across generations. I think it also depends on the work that you're doing, also drives a lot of this. So, I think that what I've noticed in the last 15 years, is how many initiatives in the world get started by younger people, where they actually create momentum and movement, based on them making the decision, they're going to lead on this issue, even though they didn't have any kind of positional or organizational authority to do that.

I make that distinction over and over again, because it's a real distinction, which is there's a difference between authority and leading in an organization. They're not the same. You describe a little bit about this hierarchy, and I would say, the hierarchy or the organizational chart, is a map of authority, not a map of leading. So, leadership, therefore can come from any place in the system and most social change comes from people who have little authority, but raise your hand and decide to lead. I think the big difference is, is today, if I was of your generation, I have a lot more role models of my peers, who are in action, to lead on things that matter in the world than I saw when I was your age to do that.

So, I think that that bodes well for the future. Because if we pay attention to those people, and to the lessons they're learning about the consequences of that, because you can get hurt doing that. There's a lot of rich ground that you can re-till, and pick up stuff from those people. So, you look at the social change agents that we're familiar with. I think the most common one is Greta. She started leading this issue when she was 15, 16 years old, and most everybody knows who she is these days. She's created quite a movement. She hasn't pleased everybody. I don't think that's her goal. But she really had zero authority when she started in that world. And here she is now, drawing attention to a lot of people, who have a lot of formal authority.

What's interesting to me is how she leverages those opportunities with those people who have authority and therefore some resources to put into play, the things that she's trying to get done. And so, we'll see how that shakes out. She's clearly got advisors and learning opportunities for herself. But I think that, that you live in a richer terrain of people, including yourself, but people who are willing to take some chances and so, I'm going to speak to this and see if I can get some people with me and create a movement make and some progress on it, and we never saw that, to any great extent, not like we're seeing it now. That gives me hope for the future.

So, coming down, kind of to the end here. I mention this as a father, not just a guy doing his podcast, although I asked this question to everybody. When you look ahead, what's in your future that captures your attention, that draws you in? This could be anything, but sort of contextually in the world of the podcasts and leadership, but feel free to go where you want to go with the answer to this.

**[00:46:05] AT:** I laugh, because my initial thought was, does he want my three-year, five-year, or 10-year plan? But that's just a planner speaking. So, I'll just give you the general future plan.

I'm currently in the application process with a jurisdiction within the Department of Justice, which I'll just keep it that for now.

**[00:46:26] RT:** The Federal Department of Justice.

**[00:46:27] AT:** The Federal Department of Justice of these great States of America. That's one. So, I am working towards that, that would be kind of my holy grail position. Of course, I have a backup plan, because who would I be without one. But in that vein, I'd be working with either group of people or a type of activity that is big, it's huge, it's impactful to the nation. It's impactful to thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, and I'd be learning from people who are leaders, whether that's, like you said, in an organizational model, or its peers of mine, because they'll have come similar to the inmates that I am currently working with, though, all come from different avenues of life.

They're going to have come from very similar backgrounds to me. They will have come from – there will be people who have prior policing experience, political experience, psychology experience, crime scene experience. It's all going to be a big range. But it all points in the same direction and I think being able to learn in a field that's not only impactful to thousands of people, but also impactful to how I'm learning within the unit that I am with, is going to be greatly beneficial to how I lead, whether it's people who are organizationally below me in the future, or it's going to be how I'm interacting with citizens. Because I think that is all representative of – it's representative of the country, but it's also representative of who I am, and what I stand for, and what I believe in. I want to make sure that comes across and how I'm communicating both to people who are teammates of mine, and who are leaders of mine, who I'm leading, but also going interacting with as a citizen of the US, and how that's being heard.

**[00:48:35] RT:** Great. All right. So, let's bring this baby to a close. It's been a pleasure talking with you. I've learned some things as an interviewer and as a father. So, thank you for being and 10,000 Swamp Leaders.

**[00:48:49] AT:** Thank you for having me. It's been awesome.

**[00:48:51] RT:** We look forward to the surprise that your mother has when she finds out that you've come in to the swamp with your father. So, on that note, thank you very much for your time, and we will be talking again quite soon, I'm sure.

**[00:49:04] AT:** Thank you so much for having me. I had so much fun.

**[00:49:07] RT:** Great, thank you.

[OUTRO]

**[00:49:11] 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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