

EPISODE 26

[ANNOUNCER]

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

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. I'm Rick Torseth. And this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders, a podcast where we have conversations with people who have made decisions in their life to lead and to help others lead around difficult challenges in their lives, in their work, and in the world. And today, I have a cool pleasure to introduce John, what I'm going to say is a peer and a colleague, John Scherer.

[00:00:44] JS: Absolutely.

[00:00:45] RT: Who I met, I'm going to say about 21, 22 years ago, in another house, in another part of this county that I live in near Seattle. John Scherer has been in this business of helping leaders for a very long time. John, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:00] JS: Great to be here, Rick. Really, really good to be here with you.

[00:01:02] RT: For those listening, my aspiration to get John on was multifaceted. One is he has been in this business that I'm in for a very long time and has been a major contributor to the development of leaders around the world. He knows his stuff. And I want to give him an opportunity to share that with people. And understanding that the premise of our podcast here is, one, to give these people like John a space to tell their story on the record. And two, for younger leaders who are on this journey to hear from some wisdom keepers, and maybe they pick up some things that they can use and develop themselves.

John, I'm going to kick it off with you to start with and ask you to share with people what you want them to know about you as a lead, and then we can play with that from there. So, it's all yours.

[00:01:47] JS: Well, Rick, I loved your intro. And I love the swamp analogy. And the intro that you're having people on here who have been out use the word call to make a difference somewhere in the world. And when you say that, I thought I think that's been true throughout my whole career.

Let me give a quick overview. After graduating from Roanoke College in 1962, I went in the Navy for four years, and I was a Combat Officer in the US Navy on a Destroyer, a US Navy Destroyer, for four years. And that's where I really began to learn some basics about leadership.

Ultimately, as a Combat Officer there, I didn't care – I mean, I'm just going to say it. Who you slept with? What color your skin was. What God you talk to, or didn't talk to. That was totally irrelevant. It was really about, “Are you a member of this team? Can we count on you going forward?” That was a fabulous, fabulous kind of a melting pot experience for me as almost like a foundation.

But then I left the US Navy to go to seminary, because I come from five generations of Lutheran ministers. I'm John Jacob Sherer IV for Pete's sake. And it was a – I just wanted to find out, because this is what I thought you did in order to contribute maximally to the world.

And actually, I love seminary, because it was really fun and easy for me. And my first parish was at Cornell. I was the Lutheran chaplain and the senior pastor at the Lutheran Church in Cornell. Then, like I'd like to tell people, I was called out of the ministry into this work by my good friend, Bob Crosby, here from the northwest that we met. And Bob invited me into this work. And the minute I got into my first T group, I thought, “Okay, I'm home. I'm home.”

And so, I'm coming full circle. Maybe we could come back to it. But at the end of my – I mean, I'm 82, right? In about a week. And at the end of this cycle, I'm coming back. And I just, literally, yesterday, finished the second cohort of a spiritual leadership development intensive from clergy, from four or five different denominations from all across the country. It's online.

In a way, I'm bringing all the corporate leadership development work and the organizational change and OD stuff, I'm bring it back to people who are trying their best at a time when, boy, do we need a spirit in this country?

Let me finish my intro. 12 years ago, I gave a talk at the World Business Academy in California. A couple of books ago the title was *Work and the Human Spirit*. And after that talk, I got a call and this woman said, "John, my name [inaudible 00:04:10]. I have a training company in Krakow, Poland. I was in the audience for your talk. We have a conference coming up with the Orlen Petroleum, which is like Exxon in Eastern Europe. We got about 200 people from Russia, Poland, Eastern Europe. Would you come and give that same talk?" And I thought, "Are you kidding? A chance to go to a former communist country and talk to a bunch of oil executives about work and the human spirit?" I thought, "Man, I'd do that for free."

I mean, I didn't do it for free. But the impact was extraordinary, Rick, because after whatever years with the Nazis and whatever years under socialism, people did not bring themselves to work. When they walked out the door, it's like shields up, Scotty. I mean, you did not reveal anything. You could work side by side with somebody and not know anything about their personal life, okay?

And so, here comes this American saying you not only need to bring yourself to work. You are bringing yourself to work. What a shame to live for 40, 50, 60 years and never get to be yourself for 80% of your waking life. People were crying. I mean, grown men were crying. It was extraordinary.

She came to me and said, "I want to come and take your four-day leadership program in Seattle." So, she and a colleague came here. This is in 2007, 2008. And at the end of it, she said, "John, nobody's doing anything this deep, deep leadership development work. If I call you, will you come and do the same program for some of our clients?" And I said, "Of course."

About a month later, Siemens Corporation, and their high posts. A group of 20 of their high posts. A month or so later, DHL's executive team in Eastern Europe. And back and forth for six months. And after, she said, "Yannick, why don't you just move to Poland?" And she was kind of

joking. But I thought, “You know what? I've been single now for five or six years. My kids are grown and gone. What the heck? What a chance?” I said, “Okay.” And I think she was a little surprised, and very happy.

I grabbed some books and some of my stuff and I flew to Krakow, Poland. And I've been in Poland now for 12 years as a base. But it's a base for international work. And as we go forward, maybe I can say a little more about that. That's where I've been. But I can feel the pull now to come back. That's why I'm back in Seattle now. And part of it is I'm kind of scouting around and trying to get the feel of – Because I want to live in the northwest. But where exactly? That's kind of the cliffnotes.

[00:06:25] RT: Yeah, exactly. Oh, maybe we have a little conversation about living in Northwest when we're done with this recording. I got some ideas for you.

[00:06:32] JS: I would love to have that conversation.

[00:06:33] RT: And I'm going to add, because I followed your bio. You've also neglected to tell everybody, you're also guitar player.

[00:06:39] JS: And I was a magician. I still do the occasional magic show. I'm kind of a renaissance man.

[00:06:43] RT: The word that came to mind for me when I was looking at your history was a bricoleur. The French term for somebody who can make most anything beautiful out of an ensemble of pieces and parts. And I think that's representative.

[00:06:55] JS: What a lovely image. I hope that's true.

[00:06:58] RT: All right. This podcast has got a particular orientation towards leading. And I know that you have a lot of views on leading and what it means, and how you've gone about helping people develop their capacity to lead. When you say a calling, talk a little bit about what that actually was for you. What were you pulling from what was being connected to that from the

outside world that had you go, “This is where I’m headed?” And then what did you do with that when you’ve made that decision, that choice?

[00:07:26] JS: That’s a great question. I think there have been three or four moments in my life when I felt called. And of course, vocare, vocation, comes from the church side of things. But I think everybody, if they listen, can discern. I would say, discern moments when they just knew that this is the direction they should go, or this is the person they should be with, or this is the thing that they should decide to do or choose to do. Because when you decide something, comes from the same root as homicide and suicide. It needs to kill off all the options except one. So, you’re left with one.

But when you’re called, it’s completely different. It’s like almost like a magnet is drawing us in a certain direction. And we almost have to resist it. And so, that’s the energy that I encourage people. Work with NGOs, and corporate executives, and so forth. I mean, I haven’t worked really with the church much in a long time. This coming back is a small percentage.

From a leadership point of view, leaders need a lot of data. No matter what kind of organization you in, you have to have data, you have to have information. And just like all the research says, in the end, the best leaders listen to their gut, and they find data to support that feeling. I’ve been called – I’ve had that pull on me several times. When I went into the ministry, it wasn’t like, “Oh, well, I guess I’ll go to seminary.” It was like, “How can I be with people at the level of their deepest need?” was the way it came to me. And I thought, “Okay, for me, I saw my grandfather do that. So, I’m in.” And then I was called into this work of applied behavioral science by Bob Crosby. He was the voice of that call. And I’m so glad I did. And the Leos program here in Seattle for all those years.

And then I felt called to go to Eastern Europe. I mean, they had freedom. The solidarity movement in Poland that really kicked off the whole breakdown of the wall. First time that I know of. I’m a history major. First time I know of that a country in a culture went from dictatorship to democracy without a war, without a revolution. Yeah. And so, they had freedom, but they needed to learn how to turn freedom into effectiveness and focused energy, and how to create organizations that were different.

Because in Eastern Europe, people had a job. You were taught by your parents, “You got a job? That’s enough. Just be quiet. Don’t complain. If you got a job. Great. That’s all it’s important.” And here comes this American saying, “You know, there’s this thing about being called. There’s this thing about being pulled into some kind of work, not just taking a job because you have a job.” It was a little bit countercultural, what I was saying. But when people had a taste of it, they just went, “Okay. Yeah. Okay, let’s go down this road.”

And now, 12 years later – I mean, when I went there, I was like front page news. I mean, over here, my challenge was differentiation in the marketplace, because lots of people had better websites and ideas, all talking about leadership, and transformation, and stuff like that. And when I started in 1987 with this thing, and not many were out there doing this, but now everybody was.

When I got to Eastern Europe, the challenge was education, not differentiation. I would just explain to people what I did. And immediately, they would either say, “Oh, well, I want some of that.” Or, “What? What are you talking about?” It was very simple over here. And had lots of people. I kept wanting to come back, but the phone kept ringing, Rick? You know what I’m saying. Basically, the world said, “You’re still needed here, John.” So, I’ve been listening to – Yeah.

[00:10:44] RT: You’re still needed. I’m imagining people who are listening to this conversation and your descriptions of being called multiple times in the arc of your career, some people are going to say conceptually understand. But what I’m wondering is, what’s your view about people all of us being called from time to time? And what are your thoughts about how people may actually pay attention to that? Because it’s possible that they’re missing the call. And therefore, missing an alteration in the trajectory of their life.

[00:11:15] JS: Absolutely.

[00:11:16] RT: What do you think about that?

[00:11:17] JS: Well, what happened, Rick, is when I started in 1987, I had a Dutch client **[inaudible 00:11:22]**. They make Mentos mints. And the CEO asked me – I was doing some

leadership development, workshops, seminars for his executive team, getting all the horses pulling the same direction. And he said, “John, I'd like you to spend some time with Barrett, one of my executives, and do some development with him. I think he's got potential and so on.”

And so, when I asked Barrett, “What do you want me to do with you to help you become a better leader?” He said, “John, just do me. Just do me.” And something made me say – I said, “Everything? Like, body, mind, spirit?” He said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever.” And so, I took all the pieces from my own development. I had yoga, I had running, I had my Gestalt stuff. I just put these pieces together. And he came over for four days and went through this. Went back. And the next day, I get a phone call from the CEO saying, “John, what did you do to Barrett?” And I went, “Oh, God.” He said, “I got a guy in Brazil I want to see.” He began to send his country managers to Spokane, Washington one at a time with their spouse to be with me and my little team that we were doing this with.

And so, after a few years, Etna picked it up, and 100 and some people came from Etna, from all around the world from their system. And so, I realized, “Okay, this is a thing.” Because at the time it was just – It's like I was just doing deep work with this executive kind of like doing my Gestalt therapy compacted into four days. And it was very powerful. And I thought, “Okay, this is the thing.” All right?

And so, it evolved into the five questions that are the sequence I think that in response to your question. The first question is what's confronting me? It might be a big life decision, but it might be this meeting coming up, or this phone call, or this conversation with my partner, or my spouse. Or it can be anything that's coming at me. Like, we use the metaphor of the tiger. What tigers are coming at me? And of course, the metaphor is, if you run from the tiger, you're history. If you don't face it, it's already eating you. Okay? The metaphor is why not face a tiger? At least you have a chance for a different outcome. That's question number one.

Question two is what am I bringing to this encounter? If I were to encounter the tiger, what am I bringing to that encounter? My hopes, my fears, my history. And then question three is, well, what's been running me? How am I on automatic up to now? Because the tiger – This is why it's so important, Rick. When you name a tiger, what you're saying is my defaults are not helping

me. In this particular thing, I'm not sure that my defaults are going to be good enough. And I need to know what my defaults are in order to possibly go beyond that.

The first thing you got to do is you got to know what your defaults are. That whole block of work is about my persona, my shadow, Barry Johnson's polarity, my internal polarity. These two characters are trying to help me get through life and what I need. It's not more a persona, but more shadow. Oh, my God. And now all of a sudden, we need to have – Okay, question four, what calls me? There's got to be something bigger than this internal dialogue. That is a precise question that occurs at that point.

Okay, I see what I've been doing. I see what my habits are. And I see how they've been helpful in getting me to this point. Quite often, I'm working with executives that are at the top of everything. They got the trophy house, the trophy spouse, they got everything. And they go, "John, I don't like going to work anymore. It's like my life doesn't mean anything." And so, "Okay, what calls you after all of this?" Then it's like two directions. What calls out from inside? What charisms does this person have that are calling, yearning to find expression in their life and in their work?

There's calling from two directions, Rick. And this is a key point. Everybody has charisms. Everybody has gifts. What are they? And are they getting enough? Do they have enough space? Do they have enough expression? Like an artist. Like my son, Asa, plays piano, trombone. And my daughter dances. And they've told me, if they couldn't do that, it's like life would not have any meaning. What are your gifts that just really are calling out?

And then secondly, what calls you from outside? Like, when the firefighters saw the towers hit – And I had a chance to be with some of them. I said, "What went on?" And they just said, "Didn't even think about. I put my gear on and I'm headed toward the danger zone." What kind of situations call, grab your attention? Just grab your attention without even thinking about it?

[00:15:32] RT: Is there a place for those two callings are meeting then? The internal and then the external? That's what you're striving for?

[00:15:38] JS: Absolutely. Absolutely. There's a great quote by Buechner that, "Where we need to be is where our great joy meets the world's great need." And so, when those two come together, we have what I call Tov, which goes back to the creation story in the in the book of Genesis. And the story is – It's a story, right? I tell people, "Look. Like, the Native Americans say, "I don't know if it happened this way. But the story is true." Right? I don't think it did happen this way. But that story is true in some way, that the Creator is creating things and then created the oceans and looked and saw that it was – And sometimes people say, "Good." And I go, "Yeah, the word in Hebrew is tov, mazel tov. T-O-V." And I say, "but good misses the whole point. here's a better translation."

The Creator created the oceans and looked and said, "Yes, that's what I had in mind. That's a piece of me out there in the world where you can see it. You want to learn something about me look at my ocean?" That's tov. Exactly.

When we are engaged in bringing our creative juice, our uniqueness into a situation that needs what we bring, that's where tov happens. And that's what everybody needs to have, at least some of that, in their work. That's question four.

[00:16:47] RT: The connections of the two have to happen.

[00:16:49] JS: The interface between those two.

[00:16:51] RT: Yeah. Okay.

[00:16:53] JS: And I've worked with some NGOs where the mission is doing good in the world, but they've gotten to the point where they're executives, and it's not fun anymore. There's no joy in it. They're just running a big institution. And they got into it to deal with hunger, or the environment, or something. And they're no longer doing that. They're just having meetings.

Actually, it would be better for them to take a lower position. Get back into the field or something. And quite often, they find a way to mentor people that are in the field, which allows them to, in a sense, experience something at arm's length or some way to reconnect with their own calling, internal calling. That's question four, what calls me?

And then finally, question five is, “Okay. All right. What will unleash me? What will unleash me in the world? How do I operationalize the insights that I've had so far?” And so, that's the flow of my leadership development work for 30 years, basically.

[00:17:52] RT: You're having all these guys trek to Spokane, and they're having this –

[00:17:55] JS: Now they come to Eastern Europe. We do it online in Zoom, yeah.

[00:17:59] RT: Share a little bit with people how these people return to the world having explored these five questions and derived some answers. And how did their experience with you and your team changed what they did in terms of impact in the world? Some stories there. Because it's that – As a leader, you're getting worked on through people for some impact. How did that change for them?

[00:18:20] JS: Exactly. And how many times have we done something and it's a mountaintop experience, and they go back and it's like dropping a marble in a bowl of oatmeal? Like, “Bloop!” And there's no impact at all. I don't think I'd still be doing it if that was the case. I think I would have moved on, because I don't want to have a bloop in a bowl of oatmeal.

A couple of things come to mind, Rick. The solo program, the one executive and his or her partner. I ended up calling it the EDI, the executive development intensive. Because when these people went back, they wanted their subordinates. They wanted their teams to have this experience. But it was really pricey. You can't put 10 people, eight or 10, 15,000 bucks a pop through that. They said, “John, could you do a group version?” And I'm an old Gestalt therapist. I mean, I would love to do a group version. And so, I created the LDI, the leadership development intensive, which is a group version of that program.

Let me answer your question this way. I'm thinking of two examples. One was here in Seattle, back when Blue Cross and Blue Shield. When I was working with them over time, we did a merger with them in Pierce County and stuff like that. But their entire executive team went through this four-day LDI in twos and threes. Okay? And they'll tell you, they went kicking and screaming some of them.

But my friend here, Terry Rogers, who was the COO, and whose house I'm coming to you from, he was just like, "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Put me in coach." He was just excited. And if you ask any of those eight or 10 people, the men and women in that group, they would say – And they thanked me on a regular. And this is like 15, 20 years ago. And they're still with them, Rick. They told me to even though they might have left Blue Cross, they might have left everything, the stuff that they learned in engaging those five questions, they told me, "John, I use something every day. Every day." And so, that concept of what's confronting me? What am I bringing? It becomes a new default. Now, does everybody go down that road? It's a bell curve. You get a third and a third and a third, like in the change business. A third are going to get it and go deep. A third are probably never going to get it. And a third are going to be, "Yeah, maybe." All right? I'll take it. I'll take that.

Now, the other thing is that – Let me back up. When I went to Poland, it wasn't to bring the LDI. It was to bring my organizational change, work my OD stuff, you know? The LDI was just like a hobby that I did just because it was really fun and people liked it. And it's become the tail that wags the dog. Because what happened is, because I worked with McKinsey, I worked at BCG, and I worked with PwC. In these change projects, they needed people to do my work below the waterline. I said there's changing the chart and changing the heart, right? You guys change the chart. Let us change the heart.

I've worked with all three of the big – Oh, four. Of the big four over these years. But what happened at PwC, a guy from PwC, who ran their office in Poznan, Poland really, really got it. And he got excited. He became like a – You know how it is. In fact, I told him. I said, "Go to – When people see you come down the hall, they go hide in the restroom, because they know you're going to talk about the LDI." But he got so many of the partners into the LDI in onesies and twosies that it began to create a kind of a critical mass.

And the head of PwC in Poland told me that he was at a Christmas party and he was standing back looking at like several 100 of the partners talking. And he noticed that at a couple tables, there was something different about the conversations. He just got curious. So, he walked around. This is without any – And he just heard a different level of being together and authenticity, and something was different.

And then he thought, “What the heck? Who are these people?” And he looked at me and realized that the tables that were having those conversations were full of LDI grants. And so, he said, “Okay, John. Okay, let's do this.”

And so, now PwC in Germany, and Austria, and Poland are putting all their partners through the LDI. And so, there is something that – Kurt Levine said, “Our behavior is a function of who we are multiplied by our environment.” The culture that we're in is a multiplier. It's a force multiplier. And so, doing work with individuals nine times out of 10 doesn't change anything because they go back.

My father was not a Lutheran pastor. He was a newspaperman/alcoholic, right? And he would go off to get cleaned up and come back to the family, and the Scherer family didn't change. Within a matter of weeks or months, he was the identified problem. He stepped back into that role again. So, nothing changed. But there's something about the way these five questions work inside of somebody creates such a shift in the gravitational field inside. It's like a tectonic plate shift that doesn't go back. For people that really get it, there's no going back.

[00:22:58] RT: That doesn't go back. Yeah. For people listening then, you've been doing this work for a long time. Do you have a definition of what leading is? And if so, what is it for you?

[00:23:09] JS: Well, I like Ron Heifetz, who has come to Poland several times. I'm involved in what's called the Leadership Academy for Poland. I got invited. This is 40 people, highly competitive. 500 people try to get in, and the director only takes 40 people. The faculty is myself and this guy **[inaudible 00:23:27]**, and a faculty member from Harvard. And at graduation, Ron Heifetz often comes, because the guy, the director, went to – Ron was his guru. Ron has this fabulous model of the difference between authority and leadership. And this is my way of explaining it.

Now, use the waterline. Above the waterline, you have technical problems, where there's a problem, which you understand, there are solutions, which are fairly familiar to you. So, all you need in those situations is someone with expertise and authority, rank. Like, in the military. Right full rudder. All the head, two-thirds. I spent four years doing that. We didn't have a meeting.

People didn't say, "Oh, Mr. Scherer says right full rudder. Let's have a –" "No, no, no, put the rudder over and we'll talk about it later." So that's authority. And it's absolutely essential. Because if you have a meeting, every time you do something like a lot of NGOs do to try to get consensus on how much toilet paper to buy or something, you just go crazy.

You got to have the ability to exercise authority. And what's needed then is just knowing what you need to do. But below the waterline, you have situations where maybe you don't know what the problem is. Maybe it's a wicked problem, as they say. Multiple causalities, like hunger, the environment, some of these kinds of things.

And so, you don't know what the solution is. What's needed is what Heifetz calls adaptive leadership, which is completely different approach, which is to facilitate stakeholders in coming together and galvanizing their energy around discovery. It's all about learning and taking action.

For me, that contrast between use of authority – Because a lot of people when they think of leadership means getting people to do stuff. Well, there's lots of ways to get people to do stuff. So, in the military, when I said right full rudder, I got compliance. Okay? So, you can get compliance. Okay, congratulations. You've got four of these and other people have two or three of these, they'll do what you say. And that's great. Absolutely. But what if you need more than compliance? What if you need commitment? What if you need loyalty? What if you need passion? What if you need persistence? What if you need all these things that every organization needs in order to sustain itself over time? That is not going to happen with just getting compliance. And that's requires a completely different skill set, which is listening, not knowing. It's the opposite. It's the shadow of authority. It's not knowing. You see what I'm saying?

[00:25:45] RT: Yeah, I do see what you're saying. And it's been a while since we've been in conversation. I am an advocate, and a devotee, and a promoter of Ron and Marty's work. And I share your thinking here, and that maybe that's a leading question for me to you, as I think about it in this moment. Because I believe when they say leading is a choice and an activity, not a role and a position, that is a liberating concept for a lot of people.

[00:26:11] JS: Yeah. But I tell people, your name is in a box on an org chart. Congratulations. You have authority over the people that are below you. Congratulations. You may or may not have leadership. That's another conversation.

[00:26:21] RT: That's a whole another conversation. And we know that a lot of social change movements occur with people who have no authority, but raise their hand and chosen to lead. You would argue that the revolution in Poland was done by people without any authority.

[00:26:35] JS: Dock workers. Dock workers. That group just said, "Okay, enough is enough already." And the communist – I'm sorry. I gave me a whole big thing here. But it's so exciting, because it's an example of large-scale change without a war.

[00:26:47] RT: Yeah, yeah. All right. Connect dots for people then. They're out there. Maybe they're hearing this distinction between authority and leading for the first time. What's your thoughts and ideas about how people actually choose to use themselves to exercise leadership? Because that's what you're talking about. Somewhere, I'm going to go forward into a place. I don't have authority. I don't have remit. But I see something. And I want to do something about it. What's the moves they make? And what are the cautions you have? Because they can get hurt making this decision?

[00:27:17] JS: Oh, Rick, listen, I've been over there 12 years now, right? I thought I was going to be there for six months. And I've been there now all this time. It is terrifying, especially 12 years ago, because things have evolved. You got these gen-xers, the millennials moving up in the workplace. And they're now becoming middle managers and stuff. But it's terrifying when you've been in an authoritarian culture, where – Now, it's true to some extent here. And I've worked in five continents over the last 12 years doing change and leadership stuff. I don't have deep roots in these other places, but enough to see the patterns.

Eastern Europe, it's terrifying for people to initiate, change or initiate some kind of concept. In America, that's much more prevalent. In fact, that's how you get promoted quite often, is by showing initiative by, "Oh, wow! This guy came up with this. He figured out how to get – And he made it work." In Eastern Europe, boy, that's a risky thing, because people are, in their DNA, two generations, three generations. Have been trained without even being told. You don't screw

up. You don't do something that the authority is not going to like. So, you wait. I mean, it's an oversimplification. But when I'm working on a culture change initiative, and I've done a bunch of those over the years, the millennials are saying, "Hey, come on. Let's go. What the bleep are we waiting for?" And the executives in the C level, they say, "Well, we got to change things here. If we're going to stay alive, we need to change." It's the middle of the organization where you have these middle-aged people that get promoted by not making mistakes, which is true in every organization, but they have it deep in their DNA. Tell me what you want me to do, and I will do a really good job at it. And that's how I get promoted by doing what you told me better than anybody else could do it. So that's the game, right?

Every change initiative, it's not about the top and the bottom. It's about the middle. They are the guardians of the old way of doing things. And so, that's where this distinction between authority and leadership is absolutely crucial. Because they're waiting for the authority to tell them what to do thinking that, in a sense, everything's a technical problem. Rather than an adaptive situation. So, the firms, the organizations, they just make a lot of technical decisions and try to make technical decisions faster than everybody else, which is one strategy. Ultimately, they run into something that cannot be handled that way, and they fall back and they lose market share, and then blah, blah, blah. At some point, somebody says, "Guys, this isn't working."

What happens when people do the LDI is they experienced this internally. They've been trying to live their life as an individual. Not like a company. But they've been living their life trying not to make a mistake. Trying to be a good boy or good girl, whatever the deal is. And finding out that the shadow inside of them personally, which is either usually like Putin or Trump lately. Those two have been very popular shadow characters, but it's somebody that they're afraid of. They're afraid of their own power. And so, in the LDI, they embrace this thing internally, and they learn to manage internally how much of that – You don't want to turn into Putin. Or maybe you don't want to turn into Trump or whatever. But what are those two characters really good at that you need some of every now and then? And that's what they step into. And that's how they discover the difference between authority and adaptive leadership.

[00:30:34] RT: So, your work with these people in whatever the design is, where there's pairs, individuals, or in the group, is helping them first begin to, A, become more aware through the

five questions. And also sounds like helping them develop a track of adaptation from where they are to where they're going to go.

[00:30:54] JS: You put your finger right on it. We start by asking them to bring a tiger situation to the LDI. In our pre-work conversation, we help them develop, what is the situation right now that you don't know what to do?

Instantly, they're no longer in a technical world. Now, they don't know that.

[00:31:13] RT: They don't know that. Yeah.

[00:31:15] JS: They don't know that yet. Okay. Some of them don't know that. Most of them don't know that. They're trying really hard to use their expertise and their authority to get people to do something, and it's not working. But they don't know what to do. So, they try to get smarter. They try to get – They try to make themselves have more expertise, or maybe have more authority. They go to leadership programs that teach them tips and techniques on how to motivate people, and they get all this BS techniques. And adaptive leadership is not about techniques. You can get compliance, but you can't get commitment. Yeah.

[00:31:45] RT: And to be fair to people, I think my experience is, and I'm sure it's your experience, in a way, even in our country, or even in the developed democratic world, our systems reward and recognize people for knowing answers to problems. And we do a lousy job of helping them make distinctions between what you're calling adaptive challenges or wicked problems and technical problems. So, it's very common to see really smart people see every problem is a technical problem. And then, they deploy their resources, time, money and reputation and goes flat. That problem definition is an important aspect here as well.

[00:32:20] JS: Yeah, if someone finds himself solving the same problem over and over and over again, then you know you're not in a technical world, you're in an adaptive world. And so, the tiger is so important to bring into the experience, because it's an admission. And everybody in the room, it has a tiger. So, we're all failing. I mean, you don't say that in that language. But everybody in the room is facing something that they don't know what to do about. If they did, they'd be doing it. And it wouldn't be a tiger anymore. The fact that we're all in this room –

And also, I tell them, “Look, the staff in here, all the facilitators, we’re in this with you.” Because I've been training my co facilitators. If you're in the room, you're in the program. Each of us is bringing a tiger also. We're modeling, being experts. I've been doing this for 50 – I’m 82. I've been doing this for 50 years or something. And I'm still learning. And I think it's an inspiration to some people to see this old guy who's talking very openly about a tiger that he's facing, and he's leading the program.

[00:33:15] RT: Yep. I think it’s important for people to know there's an endless list of tigers in our lives.

[00:33:19] JS: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. Exactly. Because the world is an adaptive place. Not a technical place. Ultimately, the technical stuff is in response to an adapt – Once you figure out what the adaptive issues are and you do the learning and discovery, that is a lot of technical stuff you need to roll out. But you got to flip that.

[00:33:39] RT: Alright. Since you brought Ron up, let me ask you a question that he's fond of asking. A point of view he has, let's put it that way, which is we learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes. Share with people, what are a couple failures that stick with you that you've learned from this changed how you do what you do in the world or who you are as a person?

[00:33:58] JS: Okay, one is personal and one is professional. Which one do you want first?

[00:34:01] RT: Let's go personal.

[00:34:02] JS: Okay. In 1987, when I did this first EDI with Bert from Holland, and it turned into a thing, and then it turned into the LDI. And then I realized that this really worked, and I wanted to have more impact, which meant having more facilitators, right? There's no way for me to be in every single LDI and have this thing grow, right? And so, I began to train and certify facilitators to do this work.

And up until about a year ago, it's great. We now have 42 people in 12 countries. 42 people in 12 countries that are in the pipeline in some way. They're either certified or on their way to being certified to lead this program, which is very, very difficult. I tell people when they come in, don't come in this track to get certified come in to deepen and develop yourself. If you come in here to get certified, I'm not going to be particularly interested, because you're going to be guessing what's on the test. I don't want that. I want you to just to deepen yourself. And at some point, we might both agree that you're ready. All right? And that worked great. And it fed my whole – Because I'm not really good at technical stuff. But I think I'm fairly good because of whatever at the adapter level. And now, we're at the point where the network cannot go any farther with me at the center of the hub. It's like a hub and spoke model. And I've been trying for the last year to get them to create something without me in the middle. I mean, I'm going to not be around at some point. I'd rather do it by choice rather than by death. And it's been very, very difficult, because I have trained. You understand what I'm saying? I have trained the organization to be dependent on me. And even though I don't want that, nobody wants that. This is like any organizational change situation, where the organization or the team has not been able to create change.

And quite often, I come in, and I have to help the boss realize that they are creating the environment, which is making the thing they're bringing me in hard or impossible to do. So, that's a personal example of how my inability – Even though I see it, I'm still trapped inside of all of my paradigms. And I'm now in the process, and I think I'm doing it fairly well, of surrendering. My leadership right now is creating space, empty space.

And so, my shadow character used to be Dick Cheney. Using power from a self-righteous place, which is a stretch for me. Just, “Here. I want it this way.” Right full rudder. I don't care what you think. And then it became Donald Trump, because he's so handy for so many things. I've learned a lot from him. Now, it's not about building a cult, which is what he was about, is about.

And my shadow character now is the useless has been. I was watching a football game, actually soccer, and English announcers. And this announcer said – This is like two years ago. He was talking about one of the players and he said, “Isn't a shame what happened to so and so? He used to be really good. And he's out there on the pitch. Now, he's taking up a spot that

should be somebody younger and faster,” and it just what boom. And I went, “Oh, my God! That's my new shadow character.” To be the useless has been.

Now I'm in the process of stepping into my shadow. Not the superstar. Indiana Yoda is my persona. Adventurous, smart, bright one. No, no, no. Now what my organization needs for me is to step off the pitch. That's what leadership looks like now. That's a personal example. Was that an okay example of what –

[00:37:25] RT: Yes. That's a very good example.

[00:37:27] JS: Okay. Now, from a consulting point of view, I think I've had four or five failures, I think. I would call them failures. In a couple of cases, I don't think the client would call it a failure, but they didn't know what they didn't get. You understand what I'm saying?

[00:37:40] RT: Yeah. Aha. I do.

[00:37:42] JS: They would say, “No, John. That was good. That was very helpful.” And inside, I'm going, “You have no idea what should have been possible for you that you didn't get.” But there have been two or three cases that were just plain out failures. And one of them fairly recent. And the problem was that the C level didn't sponsor me, our work, the changing, the heart. They had me come in and do a thing at the C level. And they all went, “Oh, this is great.” And then they just went back to being whatever they were being. They did not want to go through the LDI. And I've had a policy up to now that I don't work in a change initiative unless the C level goes through the LDI. Because they don't know how to do what we're talking about right now.

[00:38:22] RT: Yep. And they won't support it.

[00:38:24] JS: Their defaults are going to ruin everything that they're hiring me to do. And they don't know that they're doing it. And in this case, I thought I had leverage. I thought I had trust, respect and so on from the C level. And two months into the project, the CEO just left. Didn't tell anybody. He you just left.

Basically, long story short, OD can't do what it needs to do without sponsorship from the top. I mean, the energy and the ideas and the creativity. Kurt said nothing about them without them, right? Okay. The C level never bought that. They're still in an emergency top down mode. They're making plenty of money. So, what's the problem? So that's an example of me thinking I had more impact than I did, and thinking that I had sponsorship that I didn't really have.

[00:39:07] RT: Yeah. I think it's useful for listeners to know you've been a consultant for a long time. And we can still make mistakes. Like, in contracting, social, technical, still make a mistake.

[00:39:15] JS: Exactly. Misreading. Misreading. This is one of the biggest companies in Poland. They've maxed out their market share. They couldn't grow any more. And so, they bought a company in a nearby country, right? And the whole European financial world was watching this company, because they want to be like a large name company in America and around the world in Eastern Europe. That was their mission. So, everybody was watching it. And I let my excitement about the possibility of having that kind of impact, because they were going to now take four or five other countries. And I had a couple of friends of the C level. And they said, "John, if you can help us with this when you're going to have your retirement plan." And in the back of my mind, I think, I thought, "Wouldn't it be great if we could help them do this first country, and then they go to Romania, and then they go to The Czech Republic, and then they go here, and they go here?" Well, wouldn't that be great to be able to create a company that that really exercises leadership this way? Didn't happen. And that was me being seduced.

[00:40:11] RT: Seduced. Yeah, yeah.

[00:40:14] JS: By the status and the, "Wouldn't it be great to have my name attached to that? Oh, that's embarrassing to say, but that's my shadow."

[00:40:19] RT: Alright. So, we're kind of coming to the close here. So, I have a couple last questions for you.

[00:40:24] JS: Well, time flies when you're having fun, Rick.

[00:40:26] RT: It does. What am I not asking you that is useful to know that I just wouldn't know to ask? What should I be asking?

[00:40:33] JS: Well, what's your audience? Like, give me a kind of a – Tell me who we're talking to right now. In general, who is it out there listening to this?

[00:40:39] RT: Yeah, I think the people that are inclined to be listening are people who, A, have a keen interest in leading and trying to figure out how they can build their capacity without necessarily having to spend all the time of taking a course. And I'm going to say to the listeners, we will put John's information on his programs in the show notes. So, you'll be able to follow up on that. But they are looking to figure out how they build their capacity to do this job better than what they're doing now. So, that's probably a good way to view who the audience is.”

[00:41:08] JS: Okay. I would say continue to improve at the technical level. Read books. Go to workshops. Find out what other people are doing. And follow your heart. Follow your gut. When you see somebody saying something or doing something that grabs you, go down that road. Explore it. Learn it. Add it to your repertoire. Create this library of really smart, good stuff above the waterline, okay? That's absolutely necessary, and it's not sufficient. So, get all the tips and techniques that you can get. Get all the info and all that stuff. And then there's still more to do. And that's inside of you. Because everything that you know is going to get translated, is being translated right now through who you are as a human being.

So, if you don't do something like the LDI, get into some kind of deep work on yourself, that has leadership as kind of an unintended consequence or unintended consequence. So, even though you may go to programs and the leadership that they're trying to teach you to be like somebody, be like Jesus, or be like Buddha, or be like Steve Jobs or something, the essence, which is essence behind my work, is you don't need to change yourself. You need to come home to yourself.

[00:42:18] RT: Good distinction.

[00:42:18] JS: This changes everything. You need to work on getting all the stuff, all the skill and techniques, and then you need to come home to yourself and tell the truth about who you

are and who you aren't. And get into development actually becoming more of who you are, which probably means exploring your shadow, and not just learning how to show off more effectively.

[00:42:37] RT: Okay. I'm saying this out loud to you in the podcast, when we gather the information that people can look out for the show notes, let's make sure we grab the resources for the shadow work, because that's a strong influence in your work. And I think we want to give people that option to be able to understand that.

All right, my last question is you're 82 years young. And if people can't see you, they don't know how vibrant and alive you are for 82. You're showing up like a 42-year-old for me. So, it ain't over. The rodeo is not over for you. So, when you look ahead, what's the future for you?

[00:43:11] JS: It's a great question. The stool has three legs over my last, say – Well, since I went to Eastern Europe and started doing work. And by the way, COVID has been fabulous in a strange way, because I gave a keynote in Singapore for 500 people. I did one for people in Madrid. I did one for people in Scotland, all these places sitting at my dining room table. I didn't have to bang around in airports. Ask me the question again. This is a part of being 82.

[00:43:36] RT: Yeah, so what's in your future?

[00:43:37] JS: There you go. Okay. I have three legs in the stool. One was LDI, which I'm now handing off to the network, right? I'm letting go of that. The OD work, I don't want to do another od project. I want to help people do OD projects. I'm in a kind of a train the trainer mode, right? And so, I find myself not being interested in certain things that I've been scanning for 40, 50 years, right? I'm only scanning for things that might help my network of friends and colleagues do the work. So, I'm in a teaching mode there.

And I think my future is on this third leg of the stool, which is online things. I have 100 and some videos that I've produced over the years, 4, 5, 10-minute chunks for clients and things like that. And people have told me, "John, you need to find a way to monetize those things and make them into packages or something like that." I'm kind of waiting for the right person to show up. Maybe she had shown up and we'll see. But that's my focus, is that I just want to teach. I just

want to share what I have as long as – I'd like to pass on what I have to pass on before I pass on.

And I feel lucky. I feel lucky, Rick, based on what you just said about how I look. My trainer, like my physical trainer, in Poland, Pavel. Because I'm doing this high-intensity interval training three times a week. He told me I'm working with guys that are 40, 45 years old and they can't do the workout that you're doing. So, I'm really trying hard to stay vertical and useful. Those are my two – That's my mission from here on out.

[00:45:00] RT: I've Think you're nailing it. John Scherer, thank you very much for coming into the swamp and having this conversation. We will post all the relevant links to John's resources in the show notes so you can follow up on your own and check John and his work and his team's workout. Thanks very much for this, John.

[00:45:18] JS: Great being with you, Rick. I'm so happy to be a part of what you're doing in the world.

[00:45:21] RT: Thank you very much.

[OUTRO]

[00:45:26] 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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