

**EPISODE 32**

[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:** Hi, everybody, this is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders, the podcast where we talk with people who've made a decision to lead in the world purposefully to assist and help on dealing with complex wicked problems or what I call swamp issues here on the podcast. And today is no exception, although today's pretty cool day for me, because I have a friend on, a colleague, somebody I've actually done leadership work with together, friend of mine named Kurt O'Brien, who lives not far from where I used to live in the Pacific Northwest outside Seattle.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:00:54] RT:** So, Kurt, first of all, welcome to the swamp and 10,000 Swamp Leaders.

**[00:00:57] KOB:** Thanks, Rick. As you know, I'm an avid follower of 10,000 Swamp Leaders, so I have to say, it's a bit surreal and humbling to be here doing this with you today. But I'm also quite honored. So, thanks.

**[00:01:08] RT:** Yeah, I'm glad you said that, because now people who are avid followers are going to ping me and say, "Can I be on to?" And I'm going to have to say, "Yes." All right, so let me share with the listeners some of what I know about you and then I want to give you a shot to sort of amplify or build that out.

So, you are a 12-year veteran of the United States Coast Guard, as a starting point for your education. You are, and have been for quite some time, at the University of Washington as a faculty lecturer in the healthcare administration program at the University of Washington. I think it's fair to say that most of your Coast Guard post work has held well all being connected to the

health care world as a consultant, and know the roles and capacities University of Washington. You spent about 20 years doing organizational development work, so you have a pretty good sense of how organizations themselves operate and how the blood flows through that kind of system. 20 years of direct leadership experience, and now you got your hands and up to your elbows, actually helping the next generation, so leaders lead.

That's what I know about you and a few things I can't mention here on this show. So, I'm going to give you a shot to tell people what you think they need to know about you, that context, before we get into the conversation.

**[00:02:18] KOB:** Yeah, I guess I'd kind of go back to earlier in my life, the Coast Guard piece was actually a bit foundational to where I am today. I went to the Coast Guard Academy, and I was a management major, and it was while I was at the academy, that I took a class in organization development. And the instructor was a brilliant guy, he actually had us doing pro bono consulting work out in the community. One of our textbooks was actually *Flawless Consulting* by Peter Block. So, that was quite a while ago, over 30 years ago now.

It planted a seed that, hey, this would be really interesting work to do, potentially. And of course, then I went off and I got into the Coast Guard stuff. The good part about both the academy experience and Coast Guard experience is that it throws you right into leadership, right out of the gate. So, you're in the swamp, you're doing the work. That, while a great experience, I also knew I wanted to move into this world of OD, and never imagined I'd be in health care. That was not part of the plan.

After about, I guess, 1997, we moved back up here to the Seattle area from Northern California, I'm still in the Coast Guard, and I started looking around for opportunities to get out. And I was looking for an internal consulting position, and I was looking at Starbucks, and REI and a few other places, and got hired at UW Medical Center. So again, not intending to seek out healthcare at all. I thought I'd stay for about five years and stayed for 15. And also, got into the teaching at the graduate school, Master's in Healthcare Administration Program, which is basically it's like an MBA for healthcare leaders and that's what I've been doing. As you said, all my consulting clients now that I've got the independent practice going on, are in the healthcare realm.

**[00:04:14] RT:** So, you've been spending for the last quite a few years, in a classroom, with young people who have gone to school, got an undergrad degree, gone out into the world and started working and now are either to advance themselves or being suggested to that they get master's in this area of healthcare, which we should add is its own swampy dilemma in our country, the state of health care. So, they're right in the middle are going right into middle from a leadership management standpoint into the really hard stuff.

So, you know some stuff about what that generation of future leaders or in some cases, actual leaders right now are up to, and what they're bringing here. So, I'm curious, let's start with from that perspective as the guys who's oftentimes in front of the room, talking to these people and getting them mobilized to learn and grow, what are you seeing? What are you hearing? What are their concerns? What gifts are they bringing to this issue? I mean, help people understand what's coming behind them, because part of what we do this for is to provide ideas for the future generation, and you are working with those people. So where are they at? What are they up to? And what are they bringing?

**[00:05:26] KOB:** Yeah, great question, Rick. So first, I would say our program has two tracks, that has what we call the in resident track, and the executive tracks. The executive track are already kind of mid-career professionals that are looking to just further their leadership capability, if you will, and have ambitions to take their leadership careers to a higher level. So, they've got their own needs. I mean, they're in it, they're dealing with their own healthcare swamp issues on a day to day basis. And in some cases, they're just drafting here how to survive from one day to the next, while they're going through this graduate school program, especially now, healthcare, as you mentioned, is a pretty tough place to be lots of challenges.

The in resident folks is a bit different. They're earlier in their career. Some of them are right out of undergraduate. So, they're just stepping into the field themselves. A few will have some experience, most of them are gaining that experience, sometimes while they're in the program, by working part time, doing a summer internship, that kind of thing. So, if we start with that group, a lot of what we're seeing over the last few years have really been focused on equity and inclusion and health care. And how do we provide better access for underrepresented populations. So, lots of interest in that arena, and they really want to make that impact because

they've had their own personal experiences, many of them, but our cohorts, we're a team-based program, so they come in, and they get formed into teams, very diverse groups of folks.

And so, they've got their own experiences that they're bringing with them either personal or from family members, who have had not great experiences with the US healthcare system. So, they're really looking to come in and say, "I want to make an impact. I want to make a difference." So, that's one trend, one pattern that we're definitely seeing with the folks coming into the program right now.

**[00:07:23] RT:** So, when they come into the program, and you have them for a year, is that accurate? Is it one?

**[00:07:27] KOB:** Two years.

**[00:07:28] RT:** Okay, so you're working with these people for two years. What assumptions do they bring in about this work? And what is it that you're having to do at the outset to kind of get them calibrated for the two years that are ahead of them, but in the context of what's way beyond that in their work world, so that they're properly getting themselves oriented for the work of the two years you've got with him.

**[00:07:53] KOB:** I would say, on one level, for some of them, graduate schools, brand new experience, especially for those that are either right out of undergrad or not very far removed from that. So, part of it is just saying, it's a professional program, it's a very different experience than what they would have had an undergraduate, so much more self-directed, team based. There's that piece.

One of the reasons I like our programs so much, of course, I'm biased, is we really do emphasize the leadership capacity building component of the work, and we hit that piece right out of the gate. We talk about vertical development, and we talk about balancing, heat experiences, colliding perspectives and sensemaking. And that they're on this journey, this path, and over these two years, they're right in the middle of their own vertical development piece. And so, we really try to encourage a reflective building, a reflective process, exposing them to multiple frameworks and models.

Some of it, the hard-core skills around finance and accounting, for example, health care policy issues. But they get group dynamics, organizational behavior. We have a leadership series seminar that they go through that spans the entire two years. So, for me, personally, my focus is on that leadership capacity building, and an adaptive leadership is a – so I teach the org behavior classes, and an adaptive leadership is a significant framework that I try to bring into their worldview, if you will. And the whole idea of, if you're going to be working, you want to work on these messy, complex challenges, that they know they want to get involved in, but I don't think they have a real clear understanding of exactly how messy and swampy it is. So, you got to understand how do you diagnose that. How do you understand the distinction between an adaptive and a technical challenge, rather than just going in and starting to work on some kind of solution that may or may not get you very far down the road you want to get into.

I think the other challenge, Rick is, on one level, the ideals they come in with are really inspirational and then there's the reality of the world they're going to be entering into, in terms of the healthcare system, and the culture. So, it's trying to help them understand that the ideals that they have and the work they want to do, you're going to be facing some potential challenges and roadblocks in trying to move that particular work forward. So, how do you start thinking about that?

**[00:10:21] RT:** So, you bring up adaptive leadership and listeners of this podcast, are, I think, at this point, pretty clear that that's a body of work that I subscribe to, as well. And in particular, for the reason that if you are finding yourself in work that is messy and complex, where the problems tend to be more wicked than technical, then you need some moves to make that you don't have to make otherwise, you know all that. What I'm interested in is, I'm imagining, especially fresh undergrads coming in, they've just completed four years university where they get rewarded for knowing answers to most problems. The curriculum is designed in that way. And now they meet you, and you're the source of doom here. You're introducing a whole another context of problems that don't have – have great immunity to quick fix answers.

So, how do you get them on this road to understanding problem distinctions, understanding, diagnosing, in particular, even, how you help them understand that leading to choice and an activity, and how in the world are they going to use themselves to lead? They seem to be

canvass for new and cool ideas that you could actually get a fresh start on, as opposed to older folks like ourselves. But how do you get them into that game?

**[00:11:40] KOB:** Well, on one hand, it's just that constant reinforcement of leadership is a choice. It's about exercising your personal leadership. The distinction between authority and leading by choice. We talk about that quite a bit. And what's cool is we see real time examples of them doing that all the time, stepping up, and exercising their leadership. And so, when we see those examples occur, it's reinforcing. That's like, "Hey, great example of exercising your leadership." Whether it's a classroom activity, whether it's something with their student association, whether it's a story they've shared about something they've done on their job, their part time job that they might have, it's coming back and really reiterating and reemphasizing that component. So, that's a piece of it.

The other thing going on here is, we're learning from them all the time. They're challenging us, they're asking us questions. They're saying, "Hey, what about this, this thing you said over here? Hey, could you do this in a different way?" So, it causes me to step back and say, "Yeah, maybe there's another way to do this, or another way to communicate this point, or another way to give the work back to them." And I think the experiential component of it, Rick, is giving the work back to them, as opposed to you get a question instead of me answering it say, "Well, what do you all think about that? What would you do with that?" Providing them with scenarios.

I'll bring examples from my consulting work. I'll say, "Hey, here's a situation that this executive team that I'm working with is dealing with, what would you do?" So, now it causes them to try to get into it a little bit more. Another thought that came to mind, as you asked that question is, so here we are trying in this graduate school program, both of the executive level students and the resident students trying to get these points across about adaptive versus technical or leading by choice and given the work back and so forth, mobilizing people, and my clients that I work with struggle with that. And so, there's something about – I'm a fan of **[inaudible 00:13:48]** as you know, and looking at those stages of human development, and how do we really get ourselves as human beings to think in more complex ways. And I think that's a constant challenge for all of us.

So, we talk about it, and just really continue to come back to how have you diagnose this piece of work. So, let me give you an example in my own behavior class, rather than sitting there talking about organizational behavior theory, by find a bunch of clients out there in the healthcare environment of the local area, most of them if not all of them, have come through the program themselves at some point, and the students have to go be their consultant. So, that's an opportunity for them to work with a healthcare leader who's dealing with some kind of messy, complex issue, and to apply the things we're trying to teach in class or around leading change, adaptive leadership, understanding intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, for example, those types of things. Say, okay, so how can you help this person out? It's a big version of casework, anyway.

**[00:14:53] RT:** It is. With real stuff. I'm just curious, so share with us how these people are when they come back from diving into an organizational system, got complex stuff, and they're sort of carrying in some new shiny tools that they learned from Kurt O'Brien and the rest of the faculty. And they're probably all either excited to try them or a little hesitant to try them. What's that interface like? And what did they come back with? What do you see them learning?

**[00:15:19] KOB:** My experience has been that they really enjoyed the opportunity to work face to face with these leaders who are having some sticky issues. Sometimes it depends on the client, and how available they are, as we know health care is still nuts right now. So, they don't always have the access for the 10 weeks that they would like. One of the challenges, the University of Washington is on the quarter system. So, one class last 10 weeks, and that goes by in a blink of an eye. And so, you're trying to have this experience, and then finish up the assignment, do a presentation, share their findings, what they learned, and then there's a break, and they're moving on to their next set of classes.

So, that can be a bit of a challenge. How to keep, in other ways, bringing them back to these concepts, these models, these frameworks, I hesitate to use the word tools, because I don't really see these as tools. I see them as frameworks and mindsets that they can hopefully find useful as they embark on their careers. Back to your question around this particular project. It's really fun to hear their presentations at the end of the quarter, and to read the papers that they have to write sharing their findings, what they've learned, and what they've tried, because they all try slightly different things and getting the feedback from their clients about, was that helpful?

Did it give them some kind of new perspective or new point of view or a new idea? Again, because these are leaders that have their own experiences. And so, for them, it's kind of an opportunity to get some free consulting advice, if you will.

So, I think for me, the challenge is always, okay, so you have this experience. Now, how do you leverage that so it doesn't just become, okay, "I finished up this class, and I'm going on to my next class."

**[00:17:01] RT:** The next class. Yeah.

**[00:17:03] KOB:** "Oh, hey, this is something I need to carry with me into my summer internship and into the next year, and then out further into my career."

**[00:17:11] RT:** Okay, you were a hybrid worker, before we got into hybrid working, because you got one foot in a classroom, and you got one foot in an organization, because you also do your own consulting. In the same sector, for the most part, but you are now the one that goes in just like the students you send into these other places. So, let's go there for a little while and talk what you're experiencing, not just in health care, per se, but in the challenges of leading in these messy issues. So, to the degree you can share without naming names, the kinds of challenges you're confronted with, that you have to help clients with, and maybe talk a little bit about what their skill set is, when you meet them, and how it's working for them or not working for them, and what you do from there to try and build that capacity that you're trying to build in the classroom.

**[00:17:58] KOB:** So, I have a range of clients that I work with. It can be everything from one on one coaching, to again, working with an executive leadership team, either at a health system, or doing much more work, because with rural health care organizations, critical access hospitals in different parts of Washington State, and they have their own unique set of issues. So, one of the things that I've been really struck by in the last, I don't know a couple years, I would say, is just the impact of the opportunity to focus more on community, however, they wanted to find community. If you're talking about a rural health care organization, they are so tight and interconnected with your community. I mean, they work with the same people that they're doing the grocery shopping with, or that somebody's kid is babysitting their younger kid. There are all



these tight connections, and somebody gets injured in the community, and they're coming into the hospital, and they're hurt badly. It's a different kind of connection, because you know that person, and you've got some kind of relationship with them.

In the rural health care arena that's quite unique, and so, that's on my mind, because I've been working more with those folks. It's not unlike, you know, our own experiences with this, Rick, in terms of, I think, as leaders, we tend to approach the problems in the way we've historically done it, throwing technical solutions at them, because we haven't thought about other ways to do it. And so, I see that in my practice, and what's been fun about the work is when you get a chance to sit down with people and say, "Hey, are you willing to consider looking at some of these challenges you're dealing with through a slightly different perspective from a different lens?" I personally haven't had a situation where they said, "Oh, hell, no, I'm not going to do that." Yeah, they want to figure out how could they make some progress and just being really upfront that there's no easy seven-step solution that's going to help you get to an endpoint on this. You got to lean into the work, and here's some frameworks and models to help you do that.

I've been experimenting. I sent you that form, that process that I've been experimenting with for the last six months or so, which is really intended to give these leadership teams a bit more structure around a process that is, in my mind, rooted in adaptive leadership principles without getting into the jargon too much. Just giving them prompts. Peter Block's community conversations, for example, it's like, "Hey, what are you dealing with? What is the actual nature of the challenge? What makes it adaptive? Why are you having such a hard time with this? Why is it not resolving itself? What are your hypotheses about that?"

And then getting them to think about who has a stake in the work, and how have they been involved or not involved in moving the work forward, and what are your opportunities to do a better job of mobilizing other people in the work. As we know, leaders can tend to take on the problems themselves and say, it's our problem to solve, instead of going out and engaging the people that are closest to the work, that are going to have different ideas and thoughts about the challenge. And so, in a deliberate way, getting them to think through not just hypothetically, but know who are the actual people? And how would you bring them together? And what is the work you would have them do if you did bring them together?

And then one thing I've been experimenting with, which has been kind of cool, it's been working quite well. I just got back from Fairbanks, Alaska, where I was working with a team of physicians and administrative leaders, and some folks on the billing and coding side, what can you accomplish in 30 days? So, you do that initial work, get them thinking about it, and some new insights came up for them in terms of understanding the challenge that they hadn't seen in that exact way before, and then putting them into groups and letting them sell facilitate with the flip chart pattern, some markers, but what can you try? What can you experiment with in the next 30 days? And it feels like it gives them something more concrete to kind of sink their teeth into. Does that get to your question a bit?

**[00:21:58] RT:** Yeah, it raises an interesting one that I wouldn't have thought of is listening to you speak. I'm thinking your time in the classroom, one, has a lot more time you can spend with your students, because they're there actually to learn is vastly different learning environment than being in a conference room or in some room with a bunch of people from a healthcare system, who are taking time away from a job, which they know means something's happening, and I'm not there, and I'm trying to juggle that in this.

So, have you had to adapt how you coach, facilitate, teach people in that world, when you're not afforded the luxury of time? And then therefore, what's the distillation process? What are you having to really get down to the nub on and say, "If I could only do a couple things, I'm working off of this, because I don't have the luxury of time to get deeper." So, how do you juggle that constraint of time and focus?

**[00:22:55] KOB:** That's always a challenge. That's always a challenge, especially when you're working with clinical folks, because if you're going to bring them together to do some work, you know you're eating into the clinical time, time they could be spending with patients. That is a challenge. I have to say, I've been pretty fortunate. Typically, I can get a group of people together for a minimum of 90 minutes up to sometimes a full day, depending on the issue and how important it is to them.

So, that's a victory when you say, "Hey" – they're coming up, say, "Hey, we got this work we need to do." "Alright, how much time do you want to devote to it?" "Oh, we're willing to give it a half a day or we're willing to give it a full day." Okay, so that tells me it's really important,

because then if they're willing to take time out from these other duties and responsibilities that they have, but it also puts the pressure on me, because now I've got to make sure it's meaningful work.

So, back to my Fairbanks folks, I was up there in July, so what I just did a couple of weeks ago, was an extension of the work that started in July. And so, I'm sitting in this room, there's about seven or eight physicians, and three or four senior leaders, executive level leaders, and at one point, this one doc says, he says, "You know, what I can't do this time around", he said, "I can't just sit here in the room with all of these folks that generate another list of things that maybe we ought to do, or we ought to try to figure out." He said, I need to make some progress. We need to do something. I thanked him for saying that, right? And it was a good reminder to me say, "Okay, I got a responsibility to help these folks move the work forward. So, how are we going to do that?" So, I talked to him at the break, and I said, "Look, I said keep me honest on that. If it feels at any point, like we're just talking in circles", and sometimes that's a risk I have is I love talking about the abstract things, keep us focused on what some progress we can make. How are we going to do that? So, actually, it was that that got me to thinking about, okay, so what can you actually do in 30 days? Who needs to be involved in that work? Who are the people outside? And staying true to the adaptive leadership principles, I guess, I would say, that framework of me not giving them the answers, them having to work on it, me providing the prompts and some frameworks and some potential models that they can use to help them think through it.

**[00:25:11] RT:** Yeah. I think it's important for people listening here, just to remind us all of ourselves, that that measure of progress or success in dealing with these complex things is making progress on it, saying 30 days, 15 days, 45 days. And that probably means that it's a kind of experiment that you ran to see if this would work inside that time, and you keep what works, you add new stuff to it, and you keep that process. So, I think that the challenge that a lot of people have is that learning track of running experiments and counting progress as a win rather than ultimately getting the big thing is not how we're educationally wired and professionally rewarded to think. And yet, the things that they're facing with in these situations, only will respond to that kind of orientation.

**[00:26:02] KOB:** Yes, spot on. In fact, just so your listeners know, I mean, we've done some work together, as you mentioned, and you are hugely influential in introducing me to a lot of Heifetz's models and principles. So, that whole idea of moving the work forward in a productive way, I get from you, Rick. So, thanks for that. The language, the words are important.

But you're spot on. The system rewards in a different way. The system is always not only just rewarding, but continually in my mind pushing, pushing, pushing to say, "Okay, another challenge, another barrier, short-term win, move on to the next problem, move on to the next problem." As opposed to, "Hang on a second, how can you step back, have that balcony moment, think about what's the learning opportunity here? What's your learning process?" So, also, one thing I haven't mentioned here yet, today is a lot of the work that I do with these teams is grounded in dialogue. So, I do give them some background and some orientation to dialogue skills, whether that's through crucial conversations, or even going all the way back to David Bohm's work with dialogue, and I give them some dialog agreements. And so, we always come back to those as a way to help them think about how do they need to be communicating with each other, and Peter Block's work on community-based conversations and his whole notion of asking questions, and he talks about those three criteria for a good question. It's ambiguous, it's personal, and it evokes anxiety, which is something you do really well. But that's what gets the energy going into the room.

I don't know if you've seen this. Block's got a new piece on his website, he's got these video vignettes now that he does around his community conversations and he talks about leadership. He says, "The actual task of the leader is to bring people together to have conversations with people they never talk to about topics they don't want to talk about."

**[00:27:58] RT:** They don't want to talk about, yeah.

**[00:27:59] KOB:** That's not brilliant and that's right in line with Heifetz.

**[00:28:03] RT:** As you know, one of the target groups of people that inspired me to create this podcast were people of our daughter's age, we should say to, that how we actually come to know each other isn't professionally. We trooped all over Washington and Oregon following our

daughters in a rowing boat in high school, and they both rode in the same boat. So, we got a lot of time if you've ever been to a regatta to talk about anything but boat racing.

**[00:28:29] KOB:** Yes, we did. Yes, we did.

**[00:28:31] RT:** So therefore, I know some stuff about you, but there's some stuff I probably don't know about you. And so, these are sort of the questions that I want to ask for the benefit of those people who are further behind us on the journey of leading and the idea being A, they probably could pick up some things based on what you've already said that would help them in their development. But also, I think it's sometimes useful for them to know who is the person who's got on this journey ahead of me, independent of the professional stuff that they're doing.

So, you touched on this a little bit that you got introduced to this where you ended up through org development class and the Coast Guard. But what you didn't really get too much into this, what drew you into this work? What was it about this versus you could have been talking about ships or something? So, what drew you into this work that keeps you on this journey that you've been on ever since you got out of the Coast Guard?

**[00:29:24] KOB:** Yeah, that's a great question there. Funny enough, when I went into the academy, it was with the intent to becoming an engineer. My dad's an engineer, mechanical engineer, and going through high school, you're talking with your friends, and everybody's, what are you going to do? A lot of engineering pays the most money. Well, the academy only offered seven majors, and three of those were engineering degrees. Another one was math and computer science. And then the fifth one was applied science.

So, that left government and management. I went in thinking I was going to be an engineer. And after, I guess about halfway through my sophomore year, I was faced with the choice that, okay, this engineering things is not working. I had some very deliberate feedback that it wasn't working for me in terms of my grades. So, you got two choices, you either leave, because you're going to flunk out, or you're going to switch majors. So, it was between government and management. So, I chose the management track, thinking, "Well, that'll have more relevance, when I get out of the Coast Guard at some point." Not knowing anything about this world of organization development.

I guess what drew me to it was the opportunity to help people that didn't know where to go, they didn't know what they should do as leaders with some of the challenges they were facing. So maybe a little more specific. So, we got to do a pro bono project out in the – this was a New London, Connecticut, where the academy is located with the local chapter of the American Red Cross. And I don't remember the particulars of the situation. But I was paired up with two of the guys from my class, and we're the consultants going and working with this group, and they were just hungry for anything that could help them move the work forward. I didn't have this language back then, of course, but move the work forward in some kind of way. And we were able to provide some stuff that they found useful.

So, that's what stuck with me, that's what stayed with me is that, wow, what a cool opportunity that you can actually go in and give people some other ideas to approach these problems that they're dealing with in their organization. So, that was the impetus behind that, that drew me in.

**[00:31:34] RT:** All right, so cool. So, this leads me to another question, which I think I thought I was going to ask you, and now I'm having a whole another reason to ask it. So, what did you learn about how to help people, by helping people?

**[00:31:46] KOB:** I guess, on one level, that we all need help, that it's okay to say, “I don't know what to do”, whatever side of the equation you're on, whether you're on the leader side of the equation, or you're on my side equation, or you and I think, man, what is the next step to take? And being okay, with not knowing what that pathway looks like, and figuring out how do I go and help somebody. So, I think, maybe at some level, Rick, there's this humanizing piece that's behind that, which is that you know what, none of us should ever be expected to have all the answers to these problems, so how do we help each other with that? And maybe that's a bit back to this idea of community and that at the end of the day, we can only do that by coming together as a community.

However you define community, your community could be your team, it could be your department, it could be your organization, or it could be your physical community, and the place that you live. So, how do we start thinking about how do we help each other work together solve these challenges? And I've been thinking about this now that we're talking through, I guess,

having to verbalize it makes a difference. If I think about not just in this country, but what's going on to the world, around all the polarization. And what are the opportunities? How do we start bringing people together to have dialogue again, in arguably an environment where there's not a lot of openness to that, and we're certainly reinforcement. And what it has to remind us is that it doesn't mean that those conversations still aren't happening, because they are, but that's not what gets highlighted.

So, that's kind of a long winded, I guess, answer to your question, but I guess that's – I'm thinking about it from this bigger construct, perhaps this bigger piece of how do we as humans help each other.

**[00:33:31] RT:** Yeah. Well, we've mentioned of adaptive leadership and Heifetz and Alinsky here a few times here, but I don't know for both of us, and I think and you've brought this up. But I think it's worth in the context we just said to amplify a little bit, which is we're strong believers in community work that Peter Block has constructed and put together. Peter Block, for people who don't know who he is, he was one of the original management consultants who decided there was a better way to be a management consultant, and he sort of **[inaudible 00:34:04]** over all the conventional stuff and created some cool stuff there. And then he got bored with that and moved into the real work. I think he'd been always wanting to do community work. But he is a profound thinker of human beings in community, and I think that's what's born, the quality of the ideas that he comes up, that commitment, that heart and soul to it.

So, those listeners out there who are trying to figure out a way in their community, I think you and I would be quite comfortable referring them to Peter Block's where can community and feel like they're in good hands.

**[00:34:35] KOB:** Absolutely.

**[00:34:35] RT:** All right. A couple other questions here for you, on a personal level. What advice do you have for people coming behind you, based on what you know, based on what you learned? I mean, you must be in this business all the time in your classroom side? I'm not in that world much. But what advice do you have for people who are listening here who aren't in the class with you?

**[00:34:55] KOB:** The first thing that comes to mind as you ask that question is just be open to new learning. So, that sounds pretty tritone away. One of the things we did this year with our incoming students that we hadn't done before, was we actually asked them to reflect on in a written journal reflection, what does learning mean to you? And why have those beliefs you have about learning formed? Why do you think they formed? And what are your intentions going to be moving forward for this first year of your graduate school experience around keeping motivated to learn?

It's really cool to see, read about what they were thinking in that realm. What does learning mean to them? We also asked that question of our second-year students who were coming back from completing their summer internship. And their responses were in some ways, different than what the first-year students were conveying. Because I think, part of it was that they just had this internship experience where they're kind of in the work. And so, I guess what strikes me about it from my own experience, if we're going to really be open to having that learning mindset, that growth mindset that we've talked about is, I got to understand how am I seeing the world? What are my own assumptions? What are my own biases? How are those getting in my own way? So, spending some deliberate time in that self-awareness, that self-reflection, body of work that's required, if I want to actually be that lifelong learner.

**[00:36:25] RT:** So, since you've hoisted it up on the balcony with that piece, let me throw a balcony question at you that you're quite familiar with. We know where it comes from. It's from a guy who says we learn more from our leadership failures, and we do our successes. So, what have you learned from your leadership failures?

**[00:36:43] KOB:** Oh, man, the road is littered with them, right? One thing that for me personally, is I can tend to get caught up in the models and the frameworks and the theories, because that's fun, and it can prevent me from getting more specific and diving into the actual work that needs to be conducted. An example of that would even be with that story I shared about the doc up in Fairbanks who said, "Hang on a minute, I can't just create another list of use kind of nice things to have. We got to do something." So, that's always a constant challenge for me is to make sure that I'm bringing it back down to the ground level, to the dance floor as it were, and engaging in the actual work and not just staying up here in the theories and the models and the



frameworks, which is fun to talk about, and so on and so forth, but no driving it down. So, that's one piece.

The other piece is the constant reminder and learning I've given the work back to the people on the work. I remember – so, here's another academy story, you didn't ask for this, but you're going to get it. While you're at the academy, you're also thrust into leadership roles. And so, I was a junior and the juniors are responsible for training the freshmen throughout their first year in the Academy. So, I had a role that for this particular semester, I guess it was, I was in charge of the freshmen in my company, if you were in charge, right? So, there's very much this authority model, right? And something had happened where they weren't doing something that was expected from this particular duty to they had. Some heat from the company officer, which was a lieutenant.

I reacted as a 20-year-old would react and said, my ego was bruised because this was reflecting poorly on me. And so, I kind of lowered the boom on these freshmen. I still think about that story. Because while I got compliance, at the end of the day, in terms of what needed to be done, I certainly didn't win over any hearts or minds. So, always kind of there in the back of my mind, as a leader, when you have authority, you can always do things to get that compliance. But if it's not bringing the hearts and minds along with it, then so what?

**[00:38:57] RT:** Important amplified distinction the difference between leading and authority.

**[00:39:01] KOB:** Yeah, absolutely.

**[00:39:02] RT:** Not the same. All right, so here we go. We're coming to the end here. So, when you look ahead, I'm really interested and you answer this question, because I don't know what you're going to say here. I've never thought to ask you this. When you look ahead, what's the future for you? What are you looking forward to?

**[00:39:16] KOB:** I want to do more community work. And I've been working in organizations for a long time, either internal in those organizations, or now as an independent. So, I want to get more into doing the community level work. For example, there's an organization here in the Seattle called Vietnam Health Clinics. And I just happen to meet just recently a few people that

work in that organization, and they actually take students that send them over to Vietnam and help provide some basic health care in the villages. I was talking with them about what's the opportunity as the students go over to give them some grounding, some foundational work and thinking of their role as also leading. So, there's potential interest there. I don't know what that journey looks like, Rick. I've been thinking about this for a number of years. But that's really where I want to start taking the next 10, 12 whatever years, is start opening up and trying to get more deliberately involved in some community level work.

**[00:40:15] RT:** That sounds really awesome. And I will say, we are on the eve of Thanksgiving in the United States. It's tomorrow. I'm in the UK and it's not Thanksgiving here tomorrow. But I am – as we always are, reflective about what we're thankful for. So, I'm going to say right off the gate that I'm thankful for the relationship we have because we've done work together, we've swapped thoughts and ideas together for a long time. This podcast is another version of that exploration that we've been on together. So, thank you and Happy Thanksgiving to you, to Kelly, to Mikayla, to Thomas, and the dog who I don't remember his name.

**[00:40:54] KOB:** There's two now. Hudson and Finley.

**[00:40:58] RT:** So, have a good Thanksgiving and thanks for spending your Thanksgiving Eve in the swamp with me. I much appreciate it.

**[00:41:03] KOB:** Thanks Rick and right back at you. I really appreciate the opportunity and my best to you and Teresa and Annika and grateful for our friendship.

**[00:41:12] RT:** Okay, take care, man.

[OUTRO]

**[00:41:16] ANNOUNCER:** Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

[END]