

**EPISODE 35**

[INTRO]

**[00:00:05] 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.

[EPISODE]

**[00:00:19] RT:** Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders, the podcast where we talk to leaders around the world who have made some decisions to lead, raise their hand, and address challenging situations, and figure out ways to mobilize people in and outside the organization to hit good on the missions.

Today, I have a friend, a colleague, somebody that I've known. Kit, I don't know how long we've known each other, 5, 6, 7, 8 years. Kit Lykketoft, who is the – I'm going to need a little time here just to tell people the varying things you get your hands in. You're the Director of Convention of Wonderful Copenhagen, which we'll get into. You're also the Chair of the BestCities Global Alliance Board, which is a global organization, I think out, of Singapore, if my information is correct.

You have a long history of leading, so we're going to get into all that. But before we do, welcome to the podcast. If you don't mind, just share with people whatever it is you think you want them to know about you at the start.

**[00:01:16] KL:** Right. Thank you. Thank you, Rick. What do I want people to know about me? I think it's important being a leader to have something that you burn to do. If you don't want to change the world, then it can be a little meaningless to be in a job like mine. So I'm always going after where it's burning.

**[00:01:38] RT:** Okay. Let's start with Wonderful Copenhagen, so people understand what that work is and what you're up to. Given how you just set it up, what is it about this opportunity and work you're doing that helps you change the world?

**[00:01:52] KL:** Well, Wonderful Copenhagen is the official tourism organization for Copenhagen, and my job is in the convention part of it, which means attracting large international congresses and meetings and events to the city, and make the most of the meetings and congresses that come in terms of added value for the destination.

I think it's highly important in terms of getting knowledge from all over the world to the destination and for the exchange of it. But also, I believe that there are some built in challenges that we are facing in an industry like ours, since it's also about moving people around internationally. Of course, we want to make that still happen but as sustainably as possible, so that's a big challenge.

**[00:02:46] RT:** Okay. So it's interesting to me to talk about because I know that in doing some information gathering about you before we started talking, that sustainability is an issue. So I want you to talk about how you're actually tending to that, given that people have some reluctance to travel based on their footprint.

But also, how did you manage your work inside COVID because nobody was traveling for a whole another reason then? So what have you learned about that, and how are you and your organization tending to that concern that people have? Because you also have, it strikes me, a pretty attractive option to say, "Come to Copenhagen and spend a week or so, going to a convention and seeing our city and our country."

**[00:03:25] KL:** Right. So that's a lot of questions in one, but I would say that COVID was, of course, for us, like for everybody else, a challenge. Basically, everything that we do and work for was illegal for a period of time. Borders were closed. It was illegal to be more than 10, then 50, then changing numbers, people in the same room. Once it started to open up, of course, people were reluctant to travel, which is for good reasons.

The uncertainty of it all and how the world would look on the other side was, of course, a challenge for everybody. But in particular, in this line of work, there was a lot of unknowns. For instance, many congresses either got canceled or turned online in some formats, and little did we know if that would be the case in a post-COVID situation. What we have seen is that congresses are back, and there's big amount of fatigue talking to each other online. So the large gatherings and the serendipity of things that can happen when you meet in person is very much sought for again.

I think if you think about it, I understand why. I mean, I personally needed to meet up with people also internationally again, as soon as I could. So it's a human thing. We want to be together in the same room. That said, of course, the whole Zoom situations have changed, and we're doing this on Zoom. I don't know if we have done that before. But a lot of meetings, smaller meetings, can be held online. Of course, I think the days are over, where we would travel by plane for a one-hour meeting in a different country. I think that people have learned that they don't have to do that and for many good reasons.

So I think that what we see now is that people will go traveling, but they need good reasons. There needs to be a good reason to go. Something that you get out of it, a positive footprint in terms of knowledge or other added value that can make up for footprint that you're making mission-wise.

**[00:05:56] RT:** So how have you, if you have, had to change how you do your conferences, how you present the material to make it worthwhile for people to get on that plane, given the environmental impact, as opposed to what I would have experienced in the absence of all that three years ago let's say? Have you had to do anything different in terms of content and experience for people to bring them in?

**[00:06:18] KL:** Well, now, I don't arrange congresses. I attract them to the destination. So obviously, there will be like an association or someone behind the congress that will plan the content. But what we see, there's a huge trend, particularly in North America, about the inclusion, diversity discussion. It's increasingly important to organizers that they have that covered and also in a way that they can actually say that they have thought about it and that, for instance, the speaker's list represent different perspectives. That's important.

On our account, we have taken it on us that we want our destination to be as sustainable as possible when it comes to hotels, to venues, to transportation, all of that, and to make sure that the organizers bring options or sustainable options when choosing how to organize their congress. We have developed several different tools in order to help them do that. Also, of course, we can advise. But we have, for instance, a sustainability guide that can help. Because often people are actually really interested in doing it as sustainable as possible, but that's a big how, right? That's something that we, of course, can help with.

As a DMO, a destination management organization, as Wonderful Copenhagen is, we have actually – I think it is five years ago. We came out with a sustainability strategy for the destination, one of the first destinations to do that. That's sustainability in a broader sense. So how do we make sure that we spread out visitors in time and geography so that we don't get the pressure on the destination that we saw in some destinations before COVID? We want a city in balance with the citizens. So we want to make sure that we are on the same page as the people who live in the city, which is also highly important if you want to sustain your destination in a positive way. So stuff like that, we are looking into.

Then on a more specific level, we are helping our partners in the city to get certified so that they actually have the green certifications if they want one. That's a big amount of work for them, but we are happy to see more and more partners getting certified.

**[00:08:51] RT:** Okay. So before we go too much further, let's bring in the BestCities Global Alliance role that you've got because you're the chair of that. It sounds more like a network than a straight up organization. But what's involved with that work? That's my first question. What is that work about, and how is that different than what you do for Wonderful Copenhagen?

**[00:09:10] KL:** Well, it's connected to what I do for Wonderful Copenhagen because Wonderful Copenhagen is a part of this alliance, which consists of 12 cities internationally that have gotten together to do a lot of different things together such as analysis or focus on the legacy of congresses or sustainability. It could be anything.

But it's **[inaudible 00:09:34]**, of course, because most international congresses rotate between destinations. Of course, we can do a much better job if we have all the business intelligence about the congresses that comes with hosting them and then collaborate with other cities to make sure that they have the information they need once they get to host it. So it's an alliance that's about being better destinations for the congresses.

**[00:10:03] RT:** Okay. So now that people listening understand what's on your plate, let's talk about you and how you do it. So my first question here is how do you manage these two big projects for yourself? You got two big things. It's probably a job, either one for one person, and you got both of them. So how do you take care of all that stuff and deliver good services for both missions?

**[00:10:24] KL:** Good question. I, first of all, spend a lot of hours and energy on it. I would say that the BestCities Global Alliance, of course, it is a lot of work. But it's not as much work as my day job because I have around 30 people in my department, and that alone is something that takes up time and should take up time. So that's my priority whenever I am in the country to make sure that I can support them as well as possible. Because they're the ones actually doing the work, right? So I don't want me to be a roadblock in any types of ways. Quite the opposite, I should be the one removing the roadblocks for them. That's, I think, the most important part of my job.

Of course, my job involves a lot of traveling. So I'm not always at the office. Even in those cases, I try to make sure that I'm available for calls, chats, or whatever so that I can help them work as smooth as possible.

**[00:11:33] RT:** So people are listening, who are maybe not as experienced as you and wondering a little bit about the how of how you do this. So when you're in a conversation or you're talking about removing roadblocks or making life easier for people to do their job, what is it you're actually doing? How do you know there's roadblocks? What do you do when you see one? How do you actually get your hands in there and free people up to do their job?

**[00:11:55] KL:** Right. So first of all, I think there's a lot of trust involved in this. I don't micromanage, and I trust the people that I work with to come to me if there was a problem that

is too big for their plate. If they do that, I will take care of it. Of course, there will always be problems that can be better solved with a title, right? I'm just a title. Then I can sometimes use that to ease some problems that they meet on their ways.

**[00:12:25] RT:** There's a combination of authority or title. The role has the power to do this, as opposed to the individual necessarily. Then there's also leading, which is oftentimes not related to a title or a position in the organization. In our conversations in the past, I know you've got experience with doing both of those. So what have you – Let's start with your own personal definition of what is leading for you.

**[00:12:49] KL:** Leading is to create the trust, to have people follow you on a certain path. You can't lead without trust.

**[00:13:00] RT:** Take us back a little bit to when you weren't a leader, but you were a follower. So how did you develop your definition or your point of view about leading? How were you influenced? Who influenced you to help you form up your own point of view about this?

**[00:13:14] KL:** Well, first of all, I think that everybody is a little bit a leader in every job, and that's also the trust that I place in the people that I work with for them to also self-lead and to give them that freedom. So I think that that is also the way that I learned about it, that I had good leaders that actually were good at sharing the responsibilities and as well as the joy or the wins. Or you need to be sharing that and not run away with all the honor. I have had some great bosses along the way that I have learned from, and I think that that's, yeah, leading by example.

**[00:13:55] RT:** So is it a fair perspective to say that part of your job is to grow future leaders?

**[00:14:01] KL:** Well, I'm not sure I would put it that way. I would say not to grow future leaders but to grow independent people. If they want to be leaders, then they can, of course, be that, if they have the experience and the will to do it. I'm not growing leaders. No.

**[00:14:18] RT:** Okay, cool.

**[00:14:19] KL:** I'm growing people.

**[00:14:20] RT:** Growing people. I like it. What have you learned about yourself on this journey, in your work career, in leading, in being in different organizations? What have you learned about who you are that you didn't know, unless it came through the work that you did and revealed itself?

**[00:14:37] KL:** I have learned, and I think that's the most important learning that I need to engage, to have fun, to be able to do my job. If I'm not engaged, and that is both in the actual job that I do, but also in the people that I work with. If I'm not engaged, then it's not for me. I need to feel that connection and that we are in something together.

**[00:15:01] RT:** Well, you talked about the burning to do something important, the burning to make an impact. Where does that come from?

**[00:15:07] KL:** I don't know. I don't know.

**[00:15:09] RT:** You do. Have you always had it?

**[00:15:11] KL:** Yeah, I think so. I mean, even in school, if something didn't interest me, then I never became good at it, right? It's just you need to have yourself along in everything.

**[00:15:24] RT:** To what extent has the journey from position – So you're in this organization called MindLab, and I believe that's a quasi-government organization. Is that fair?

**[00:15:34] KL:** Yeah.

**[00:15:35] RT:** So you're there for a good long time. What is it about – What did you learn there and working in that kind of organizational system of government, as opposed to, say, a private sector, something that's a little less formalized, bureaucratic, that has followed you and influenced you in the work that you do today?

**[00:15:54] KL:** Well, I learned that there is no harm done in wanting to be the best in the world, and that was their ambition. At MindLab, we wanted to be the best in the world at what we did,

which was using design-driven methods and citizen engagement to develop political reforms within government, so engaging with the end user, basically.

That was new back then, and we really all – Everybody at MindLab wanted that. We wanted the same thing. So it was a place without elbows or anything, but we are in this together, and we want to make this happen, and we want to be really, really good at it. That was a great learning because it's so much more fun to be ambitious and to be in it together than the opposite, right? So this is something that I've taken from that time.

**[00:16:50] RT:** So I'm curious. You're in that experience. You're doing that. You're having all the fun. You're making impact. What lured you out of that fun, cool place to where you went next? What was the possibility that you saw that you couldn't get a MindLab, given you're having an enjoyable time doing good work?

**[00:17:05] KL:** Well, every place change, right? I had a year as a visiting scholar in New York at Parsons New School. When I came back, the place wasn't the same for me. A lot of people had stopped, and it's also about people. So that changed. Also, sometimes you need a change, right? I felt that it could be fun to do something completely different and use what I learned during those times, those processes of engagement in another setting.

**[00:17:34] RT:** Okay. So your organization and you in specific are responsible for going out into the world and getting large gatherings of people to come and hold their congress in your city. What's your strategy for doing that? I mean, that's a macro selling job, and a lot of people out there are trying to figure out how do they mobilize people to take action and do something that they want to do? You're taking it at a very high level. So what have you learned that you can pass on to people, but how you engage people and bring them along to decide let's go to Copenhagen and do our deal there?

**[00:18:09] KL:** Well, you're right. It is a selling job. I wouldn't say it's a selling job and like people traditionally imagine the selling job like it's relation sales. So it's all about network, but it's also about – I think that that's also a learning that I had quite early on in MindLab. If you share what you know, then it's not a competition. Then it's like growing the cake. So the more



that we can share what we know at this destination about anything, basically, the more good relations we have, and the more knowledge we get back.

That's not a traditional way of selling, especially in a highly competitive world, which the competition is fierce for these congresses. It's also good business for the destinations that get them. So creating and sharing knowledge, I think that's very important.

**[00:19:06] RT:** So talk then about – I assume that you're also having to do a good deal of work inside your own community because you mentioned this earlier on about having them on board with you to have all these strangers come into their city for a week or so. So what's the work you have to do to manage the relationships internally in the community so that they see this as the opportunity it is, as opposed to a nuisance?

**[00:19:30] KL:** So I think that there are different segments in that question. Of course, there are the city partners who directly benefit from the business that come to the city. But, of course, there are also citizens and their knowledge environment. So to a university with a very skilled professor, for instance, within a certain field, it can be an enormous benefit to be hosting a congress that is international. It can give a boost to the field of knowledge. It can give a boost to some research at the hospitals. There are so many added benefits from it. I think that part of the community that you're talking about certainly has an interest in this.

I think on the citizen side, it's not the meetings and congresses that they experience, as much as the more leisure-driven tourists that they see on the streets.

**[00:20:28] RT:** When a congress comes to city, roughly how many people are you talking about? Is there a size that's sort of generally in this bracket?

**[00:20:35] KL:** No. Congresses can be of all sizes, like from 50, 100 people, to several thousands of people that come in. So some of them are quite big.

**[00:20:47] RT:** All right. As you and I were talking before we started recording, there are people behind us in this journey of leading. So if you had – What ideas or what thoughts, what point of views do you have that you could share with people who are younger in the journey of leading,

lessons learned, ideas about what they might want to attend to, resources they might want to pick up that you think would be helpful for them to build some of their capacity to lead?

**[00:21:14] KL:** Well, I think it's quite important, if you want to be a leader, to give it a thought what type of leader you want to be. I mean, if you think that you are like a better person because you're the leader, then you got it wrong, right? It's not about that. It's not about being smarter or better or anything down that road. It's about being the facilitator of everyone else. You should see yourself as a tool for the people that you lead.

Then, of course, as I mentioned, create the – Now, I say create because it can't be created. But you have to establish trust to be able to actually have people follow you anywhere.

**[00:21:59] RT:** Right. So let's talk about that a little bit then. If it's not creating, what do you know about establishing trust? When you got this role, you walked into an organization, and they didn't really know you very well. So you're starting from scratch on the trust side. What do you know about walking into a space like that with a bunch of people you got to work with, and what do you know about establishing trust and building it?

**[00:22:22] KL:** I know that it takes time. It's not a given. It's not something that you're given, just because you pass the doorstep. It's about taking a genuine interest in not only what people do but also who they are. It takes time to get to know each other. That goes, of course, both ways.

**[00:22:43] RT:** Okay. So here's a question I ask everybody. We tend to learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes. So when you look back on your leadership journey, what are a couple of failures or non-successes, however, you want to wordsmith it, that you've learned something from that you could pass on to people who are listening to our conversation?

**[00:23:04] KL:** Right now, I'm just in that space of being a new leader in an unknown field. I think that when I started this job, there was just so much complexity and stuff to learn and do that I think I got a little overwhelmed in the beginning. That also meant that it took extra time to actually get to know people. Maybe I would do it the other way around, like start with the people and not postpone the feeling of you have to know everything at the first day because you can't

anyway. A lot of learnings will take time, but it's important to establish that good relationship from the very beginning.

**[00:23:46] RT:** Okay. So what is it that I haven't asked you that I should ask you about all of this, that you think is important for people to know?

**[00:23:55] KL:** I don't know, Rick. I think it's – The most important point is that work together and not just lead. Be a co-creator. Make use of all the good knowledge that there are in a group of people and between people. I think that's important for – It will always create a better result if you put together your forces, instead of micromanaging. Don't micromanage.

**[00:24:25] RT:** It takes more time to give people the time to do that work than to tell them what to do, right? You have to figure out this is going to take longer. So we have to live with that kind of timeline.

**[00:24:34] KL:** Yeah, of course. But also, what's the most important? How fast it's done or how well it's done? I'm not sure, I think. To me, it's always been important to not have the solution from the outset. You need to listen and get all the input that is needed.

**[00:24:52] RT:** Okay. So last question, when you look ahead, what's out in the future that is starting to capture your attention when you look down the road? Where do you want to be in 5, 10 years?

**[00:25:03] KL:** Oh, you know what? I never operated with 5, 10 years' timelines.

**[00:25:08] RT:** What's a timeline that works for you?

**[00:25:10] KL:** Well, I think that a couple of years might be a decent timeline for me. Right now, I'm in this industry, just getting back on its feet after a very challenging period of time. I'm still very curious to see what is going to happen and how that will transform. I am still wanting to be part of that, so that's my immediate plan.

**[00:25:37] RT:** Great. All right. So Kit, thank you for spending time with us and sharing your stories about leading in your point of view. It's been a pleasure to see you again. It's been a long time since we saw each other due to COVID. So it's good to just see your face online, even if it's not quite yet in person. Thanks for being here.

**[00:25:54] KL:** Yeah, likewise. Thank you.

[OUTRO]

**[00:25:58] 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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