EPISODE 39

[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. This is the podcast where we talk with people, literally, nowadays, around the world, who've made a decision to choose to lead in some very difficulty and challenging environments. What we're interested in is hearing what they've learned, the stories they have, the experiences, the failures they may have had, so that we might learn from their experiences and journeys.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:44] RT: Today, I have a pleasure to introduce, I can say a bit of a colleague. I think I can get away with that. Irwin Turbitt who is a practitioner of helping and coaching individuals, and organizations, and teams in leadership, specifically, adaptive leadership, as most listeners know, that's been a sort of a mainline theme for me in this podcast. But Irwin comes to that experience with some real on the ground life experience. He was a former police commander in Northern Ireland. He was also with the Police and Crime Standards Director in the UK Government. For roughly Irwin, I think, for 15 to the last 20 years, you've been teaching both at Harvard, and also Saïd Business School in this topic of leading and leadership. So, it's really a pleasure to have you here. Welcome to the Swamp.

[00:01:30] IT: Thanks, Rick. It's good to be here. I'm happy that you called me a colleague. I'm happy we're finding time to have this conversation and challenge to try and see if we can make it interesting and even possibly useful to the people who listen.

[00:01:45] RT: Okay. So, let's get people connected to you a little bit. So, what do you want them to know about who you are, not just today, but maybe a little bit about your past that brings you into the conversation here and the world that you've decided to spend your time in?

[00:01:59] IT: I mean, we're having this conversation, essentially, with regard to what you might call people's professional lives, not excluding how they might lead in their personal lives. But my work is pretty much trying to improve people who I think of as executive leaders and trying to improve their leadership practice, primarily for the people they serve and are employed by. So, within that context, and frequently do say, I'm not so much interested in who you are, as what you do, because I don't think you're employed for who you are. You're employed for what you produce.

Now, that's become increasingly controversial. It wasn't controversial for most of my life. In fact, it was an essential part of the first part of my life, as an executive leader. Because, as you mentioned, working in Northern Ireland, that's a very contested, conflicted environment. Working in policing in Northern Ireland, you are right at the core of everything that people are disagreeing about, often very violently. So, being who you are at work was particularly challenging, because you may have political, religious, personal views, that would not be welcomed by many of the people that you were paid to police.

It's only recently become a discovery, from my perspective, that most people don't have this bifurcation, if you like, between what you might call the professional self and their personal self, and it's something that I'm working on. But it's still something that remains a challenge. I still live in Northern Ireland. It's only seven weeks, since one of my former colleagues was the subject of an armed attack. As we speak, several weeks later, he's still very seriously ill in hospital. So, while the news agenda moves on very quickly, the impact that has on your life does not. So, I still find it a struggle to share very much of myself personally. I prefer to stick to who I am professionally, and what I tried to do professionally, and what I might think I've accomplished professionally.

[00:04:00] RT: Let's go backwards a little bit to come forward and you've sort of started us on that journey a little bit by getting a little bit into your police work. But I know from the conversations we've had, and also some of the conversations you have with participants in your programs, your introduction to the work that you do now kind of came, if I'm remembering our conversations correctly, through the School of Hard Knocks initially, rather than the classroom.0 I'm thinking particularly about a particular instance, that Drumcree standoff, which I know you

speak about as a kind of case with some of your students. But for people who don't know, A, anything about that, talk a little bit about the situation, your involvement in it, and what it is that you came away with thinking about yourself as a leader, and leadership in general that may have started to form your direction and where you traveled after that?

[00:04:53] IT: So, Drumcree hasn't been problematic for 20 years this year, actually, which will be significant for me, because I think about my professional involvement in that for the first 20 years of it, was very problematic, very difficult, very dangerous. And not just for me, for the entire community, in and around the conflict in Northern Ireland as we describe it. And it was a critical event that set the tone for what's called the marching season. So, people would say things like, “If we have a good Drumcree, we'll have a good summer. If we have a bad Drumcree, we’ll have a bad summer.” What they mean by that is the marching season, which essentially kicks off this weekend. It runs pretty much from Easter through to the end of the summer.

So, this weekend starts with what would be traditionally called Republican parades around the Easter Rising, which was the rising that led to the separation of part of this island from a British route through to end of August, beginning of September, when the other community as we sometimes refer to – these are increasingly easy labels, but less helpful than they used to be. Because life become more complex, which actually is one of the things I would like to say something about, because I think the paradox is that of making progress on many of these really challenging situations, the challenge is to make them more complex, and make them more simple. That's a sort of a really countercultural idea, particularly for professionally trained managers.

I had been involved in policing that since I think 1985, or something like that. It’s always been really tricky. It wasn't something anybody looked forward to. I mean, most people look forward to the summer, time for less work, and some time away from work. One of the things I like to tell people is I didn't have any summer holidays from 1975 until 2003. So, it shows you just how overwhelmingly engaging this type of work is. Very stressful, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, in every way you can think of. We've developed a very unhelpful narrative about it, which was to say that there's no good outcome here. The best we can do is the least worst option and this never stopped very comfortably with me at all. It's not the sort of thing would

make you leap up out of bed in the morning, filled with enthusiasm, produce the least worst option today.

That was pretty realistic, though, given the circumstances. Anybody who wants to go further, there's lots to find very easily these days, you just Google it. But I think like most people, it's really, most people who will listen to this. I thought the job was to become more technically competent. So, let's just call it very simply a problem of public disorder. And therefore, that's clearly the priority for the polices to turn disorder into order. And the way to do that is become ever more technically competent, of what you might call policing of disorder.

While I was becoming increasingly apprehensive about this, because it seemed no matter how good we got, we weren't making any progress. In fact, even when we were good, technically, the outcome was terrible. And that's something again, we might want to explore a little bit about the difference between many of the Western management ideas we hold firmly to, which were developed to deal with the production of products inside the factory, compared to trying to change the behavior of people outside of any sort of controlled environment.

So, it was while I was struggling with this, and becoming increasingly incompetent, that I was introduced, first of all, to the idea that not all problems are the same. You can have problems that can be solved like a jigsaw, you can have a crisis, which needs to be survived. And then, there's this third category of problem, which is the real turning point, the real insight for me, what's called a wicked problem, which is a strange word. But I think of it as a complex problem, a collective problem, and a challenge, perhaps more than a problem. So, something that perhaps can be resolved, but can never be finally solved.

That then opens up my route into discovery in adaptive leadership, because the theory then says, if it's a crisis, the work of the leader is to command people. Fight, flight, stay down, runaway, standstill, that sort of thing. If you think about a physical crisis, and something like social disturbance or unrest. Many see this playing out in Paris right now, for example. So, there's nothing unique about this in terms of my work. If the problem is the sort of problem we know and love a complicated problem, then it's about designing or using the existing process that fixes the problem. So, we've had a couple of problems with our Zoom connection. But we fixed that now. Once it's fixed, it's fixed. It won't need resolved time and time again.

When you come to these complex collective challenges, then it's the work of adaptive leadership. That's what the theory told me, guy called Keith Grint, and then that takes me to the work of Ron Heifetz. I was introduced to these ideas 23 years ago, and it seemed to me that this was interesting because I hadn't thought about it like this before. But it certainly opened up a possibility for me that I may not have reached my boundary of my competence. It was just my boundary of my technical competence had been reached. There was a new challenge, which was to say, could I develop any adaptive capacity, any competence in the practice of leading adaptively, and that seems like something worth trying. So, that's a little bit of how I got to thinking that something might be possible, something perhaps a little bit more generative than the least worst option.

[00:10:38] RT: So, you met Keith Grint, either in person or through writing. And he provides this distinction of wicked problems, technical problems. For those who start down this road, if they started with Keith Grint, it wouldn't be long before they ran into Ron Heifetz, or vice versa. Twins separated at birth in some ways.

So now, you're starting to see a different way to view the world, and perhaps a different way to use yourself than building technical competence. So, what did you do once you became aware that there was another way to perhaps look at these situations? Because at the same time, knowing how to do things through an adaptive leadership capacity, is also a kind of capacity. So, how did you begin to go about understanding this work in more detail so that you could use it in your work? What surprised you about the work that kept you engaged?

[00:11:32] IT: I was taught the idea that I've just outlined by Keith Grint on a master's program at Warwick business school in the UK. There's a master's program in public administration, which I'd never heard of. I'd looked at Master's for Business Administration perspectives many times, but still very little connection between the work I was trying to do, and the work that MBAs were seemed to be designed for. And then, I discovered this Master's in Public Administration, went and started a conversation with a guy called John Bennington, who established this program. That conversation continues. I mean, it's not as frequent now. The fact that the man is involved in other work.

His passion was that ideas are only useful if they're put into practice. They're interesting, in the classroom, for sure if they're well taught, but they only add value outside the classroom if proven to practice. Just resonated with me very strongly because I had left school at 16. So, a lot of my academic education had taken place, after I joined the police alongside my police work. So, I would go and perform my day job, if you like, and then I'd come home and study in the evening. Police are also good enough to allow me some time off on what was called day release, to go on attend academic institutions.

So, I discovered I was really interested in ideas. What I didn't realize at the time was I was also interested in ideas if they worked in practice. I'm not an academic in that sense. My interest and ideas runs out pretty quickly if I don't see a route to their usefulness in practice. It turned out that John Bennington was such a guy. So, he introduced me then to adaptive leadership. He also introduced me to a third of my core, three ideas of the idea of creating public value. The creation of public value is a much more complex challenge than the creation of private value, which tends to be complicated, but much more streamlined and linear.

My question is, these are interesting, do they work in practice? To do that, you need to be willing. I didn't realize this at the time. But I realized now, on reflection, I was willing to try and do something useful. I just had run out of ability, so, this was a new potential set of abilities, that without the will, the abilities are not really very helpful. In the world of peacemaking in Northern Ireland, it's beset by people who are not willing, but claimed to be unable. So, we spend an enormous amount of time and money, building their capacity as it's called capacity building.

Well, building the capacity of people who are not willing, is really not very helpful. This applies as much in my classroom, as it does in the world of peacemaking. It applied also in my life as an executive leader, because as I think back in this, I can't recall anyone coming and telling me they weren't willing to do the work I was asking them to do. They would claim to be unable. Often, it would seem to be more coaching, mentoring, training, development, education, whatever it would be.

But as time goes on, and you get a bigger data set, if you like, you become aware of more and more people, you start to notice people who have had an awful lot of training, development, coaching, education, and so on, and they still don't seem to be able to do the work that most

other people are doing without much of that. This started to open up this really important decision for all executive leaders. There's the extent to which people are willing, and the extent to which they are able or unable. So, that sort of led me into it.

The thing then, Keith Grint says, the only way you can do this work is clumsily. That was attractive. I didn't have to go off and learn how to be a brain surgeon to do it very elegantly. It's a bit like riding a bike. I use the analogy of riding a bike. The only way you know someone's learned to ride a bike is if you see them riding a bike. It's the only way you know someone has learned to practice adaptive leadership, is if you see them practicing adaptive leadership. But just like bike riding, not many of us are good enough to ride in the Olympics, or the Tour de France or anything like that. But most of us are able to ride a bike a bit. The more we ride the bike, the better we get at it. So that's really the idea. It's like, getting people started clumsily. But they need to be willing. The big question is, how do you spot people who are willing?

[00:15:55] RT: They need to stay on the bike when it gets a little wobbly.

[00:15:58] IT: Yeah, but not alone. I mean, most of us learn to ride a bike with what we call stabilizer chair, a little extra weight is attached to the rear way. But also, you learn to ride a bike with another stabilizer, a parent, or an elder sibling, usually something like appear. So, that analogy maintains. If you see someone riding a bike in a wobbly fashion, then you go and help them. You don't stand with the fall off. It's the same with the practice of adaptive leadership. You see someone trying, but doing it a little bit more wildly than you did, then you go and stand alongside them, shoulder to shoulder, help hold them up, help encourage them forward.

[00:16:39] RT: In your writings, you talk about the knowing, doing gap. Is this what you're referring to here?

[00:16:44] IT: Yes.

[00:16:45] RT: Expand on that a little bit for people. Because I think that you're striking a note here that a lot of people, if they understand this distinction was sharper, you're going to find that they're pretty good knowers, but not very good doers. So, amplify that a little bit for people and give them a sense of what they need to do, to shift that a little bit towards the doing world.

[00:17:06] IT: I think the most concise way that I have to understand this is through a Harvard Business Review article, which is about how Navy SEALs are trained. I can't remember the author, but it'll not be hard to find. But that sort of crystallized a lot of things for me. Essentially, the guy's slogan, if you like, is in the world of executive development, there's too much education and not enough training. I see this pretty much every week, when I'm involved with very senior executive leaders who come to stay in business school at Oxford. Well, it's actually called executive education. That's actually what they get. They get executive education.

I like to describe it a little provocatively, but not that inaccurate. I don't think that having educated them, we have some sort of mystical religious belief that having improved their intellectual ability, somehow this will translate into an improve in their practical application of the leadership practice. While using that bike analogy, I don't know. I may want to be understood if you know anyone who had to study the theory of physics and motion and Newton's laws and so on, before they threw their leg over a bike and started riding their bike.

There's a really deeply embedded challenge here for business schools. I think the word training is the correct word. But the article, the Harvard Business Review article says the problem with training is that senior executives do, it is something that junior people do. Training is for practical people much further down the organizational hierarchy. Well, I'm not quite sure how we've got ourselves in that position. Because like you, I fly quite a bit and I want my pilot to be trained, as well as to be educated. I quite like him or her to have some knowledge of physics, potentially, but without the practical training of how to fly a particular aircraft. And of course, they do that in a simulator.

If I go for surgery, which thankfully, I haven't had to very much, but I think someone who lives in the developed world, in fact, need more of that, as I get older. I'm hoping that my surgeon will have practiced, will have been trained and practiced the procedure, not just read about it, or listen to **[inaudible 00:19:18]** or watch the YouTube video on it.

So, why would we think that training is only something or junior people in an organization? Why would we not think that the C suite, if we like, the senior executives should not also be trained to improve their leadership practice? It's just something that the more I think about, the harder it is

to come up with a good answer. So, they're over educated, under trained. Most of us in our Western developed world and the world of work. And certainly, in the world of being a leader or practicing leadership. We have much more education we can use and much less training than we need. So, that's called the knowing-doing gap.

There is again, a Harvard Business a book called, *The Knowing-Doing Gap*. But interestingly, it treats the knowing-doing gap as a puzzle, a problem to be fixed, and suggests a number of linear steps to move from knowing to doing. Whereas, I see it now, much more as one of those complex collective challenges. It's much more about the social nature of the world, rather than about the technical nature of the world. That's why I said earlier, if you see someone trying, then you should get alongside them, shoulder to shoulder and support them. That's what they need.

Notice that that's how surgeons learn, that's how pilots learn. They don't learn on their own. Training captains sit beside or behind them in a simulator, when they get into a real cockpit to fly a real plane. The training captain goes with them. They're mentored, they're supported. Same with a surgeon, first time a junior surgeon opens up a human being, the senior surgeon is right up their shoulder. She stood right behind that junior surgeon watching over their shoulder. Why do we not have a similar approach to that for the very practical skill of leading people?

[00:21:09] RT: Right. Let's go to one of your key focuses here, and you talk about public value. Help people understand what is public value? Why does it matter? And then, from your own personal perspective, what's the work you're doing to bolster that?

[00:21:26] IT: I've described this as a fork in the road for me, because I mentioned about MBAs, and then discovering this idea of a public administration, and then this really important idea of creating public value. Initially, you think, well, obviously, if you work in the public sector, if you use that label, it's about creating public value for work in the private sector, by creating private value. But there's much more fundamental differences than those labels or slogans suggest. The first is that, and going back to my life in policing, there's a big difference between producing customer satisfaction with the people you interact with personally, and serving the public. In fact, it's quite often the opposite.

So, to pick something completely, non-controversial, if you think about a situation where your neighbors are having a rather noisy celebration that you hope will end at a reasonable time, but doesn't end and continues into the dark hours of the night, the early hours of the morning. You might ring for your local police. Hopefully, your local police will turn up and bring the party to an end. That will not provide much satisfaction amongst the party goers. But it will provide, hopefully, much greater satisfaction against the friends and neighbors who live around that house.

They have got this dilemma that very often by serving the greater number of the public, we are disappointing minorities. So, there is this conflict right at the heart of the very idea of public service. Whereas you don't get that in private sector. Again, the willing and able comes into this. So, I will often use the idea of purchasing a motor vehicle as an example of this. If I go to a fancy car showroom, let's say, a Porsche garage, and look like I might be interested in buying a Porsche. I could probably get away with that just to buy. I might even manage to persuade the salesperson to give me a test drive. But of course, I'm not able to buy a Porsche. So, I'm not going to buy a Porsche. I'm going to a Volkswagen garage and by Volkswagen Golf.

Now, the salesperson in the Porsche garage has no interest in whether I was willing to buy a Porsche, and went off and bought a Lamborghini, or whether it was unable to buy a Porsche and went off and bought a Volkswagen. No interest at all. The interest is whether I buy or not buy. But notice, when we go back to my noisy party analogy, it's very important because most people who run parties police themselves. They ensure that their party ends at a sensible time, ensure that the noise level is kept at a sensible rate. So, they don't just look out for themselves. They look out for people beyond themselves. The wider public if you like.

It's quite a shock to professional public servants when you start to think that most of what you claim to be your core professional service is provided voluntarily or normally without any training, without any master's degrees, without any dedication, voluntarily for free. Just sticking with policing. Most people police themselves fairly effectively. Most of the time, many people police themselves their entire lives without any intervention. The same applies, of course, in health, education. In fact, pretty much everything we think of as a public service. That's one fundamental difference.

Most public values created by the public voluntarily for no money and without any resources provided to them, other than their will to do something for their community. Let's call it that. Maybe even their family, even if they do it for their family. If everybody looked after their own family, that would create enormous public value.

Notice, though that many private sector companies have become very clever at getting us to volunteer to help them make more money. So, at the same time, as the state is claiming that citizens are not willing, and we need more taxpayer funded professionals to provide the public services, the private sector is called on the opposite direction. So pretty much everyone volunteers for Amazon. I got a delivery from Amazon yesterday evening. And of course, I did a lot of work for Amazon completely unpaid, voluntary work for Amazon, in order to give them money for a product that they delivered to me. So, it's really interesting, and just sort of putting out those couple a little examples to try and encourage people to think that the whole idea of public value is much more complex than we ever heard being discussed.

The main reason, of course, is we're discussing it from a private sector mindset, which was the mindset I had, until I was introduced to this idea, as I say, 23 years ago, and it really transformed. I saw the work I was trying to do and my role in it. So, the public servant is much more a conductor of an orchestra of citizens than an expert, delivering a service for which the recipient pays.

[00:26:22] RT: I'm just thinking, next time in Seattle, home of Amazon, I'll pass on your counsel to them.

[00:26:30] IT: I think they know it.

[00:26:31] RT: They might. They're laying off a lot of people. So, they probably are going to need more volunteers.

Let's go into this distinction you put forward, but we didn't get into yet, and that is this idea of complexity. So, it's dubious to me whether we live in a more complex time today than 20, 30, 40 years ago. My folks grew up into depression and my grandparents came across from Europe, and it's always been difficult, complex things to deal with. But you've chosen to spend a decent

amount of time helping people deal with that. So, what is it about complexity that's relevant for people here to understand, so that they have, a maybe a better perspective and orientation about how to deal with it because it is a challenge for most people?

[00:27:16] IT: I think I start with Western management, education, training and development, if you like, which, perhaps not precisely, but good enough. You can trace back to people like Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford. And the idea that all problems are fixed with a straight line. We start with a problem at one end, and we end up with a solution at the other end. The problem being how to build a motor car, the solution, invent a production line facility. I mentioned earlier, contained within a factory. So, the owners control the environment within which the work is done. Of course, that's not a situation for many people. Many people have to work in environments where they don't control it at all. So, that's one thing that might be different, and one of the things that may lead to complexity.

But the good news about making a situation more complex, is it provides many more starting points and finishing points. The good news about public value is there are many different ways in which you can create public value. There's only one way in which you can create private value and that is profit. You can have all sorts of arguments about what a great business you're running. But if you're not making a profit, you're not running a business. Whereas in the public realm, it's very different. Without getting distracted, you notice how we get ourselves into a great deal of trouble trying to apply very simple measures to the outcomes of public value. One reason, of course, is because public value tends to be intergenerational, and our timescale for measuring is not.

So, let me go back to Northern Ireland, which, of course, is pretty much presented as not even complicated, very simple. It's one side against the other. There are two sides. One side fights the other in some shape or form. Well, that means if you want to try and do something about that, and one of the things you might want to do is to get yourself between those two opposing factions, then you're in a pretty difficult position, because you could easily find yourself attacked by both factions. Of course, that's a story that many people in the police would describe, and not just Northern Ireland. Just think about turning up with any sort of a pub fight, you tend to find yourself between the two opposing factions.

Well, if there are only two factions, and you're a third faction, then you're always going to be an opposition. But if you make the situation more complex and introduce a greater number of factions, then it gives you a greater number of starting points. That means that each faction might be homogenous, although I would argue that it's not. But you need to stop somewhere, otherwise, complexity just gets demotivating and demobilizing, and you become paralyzed by analysis, which is one of the things that you observe quite a lot.

But if I think about Drumcree, for example, we talk about, let's just call it Catholics and Protestants. I don't really like that label, but it's the one that's well understood. So, let's say choose that label. But those two communities are not homogenous, because there are some Catholics who would like to remain part of the United Kingdom. And there are some Protestants who would not like to remain part of the United Kingdom. So, we've gone from two to four there. And then, you could introduce another – the actual official designations of what we call the two main communities. One is referred to as the CNR, Catholic Nationalist Republican. And the other is the PUL, Protestant Unionists Loyalists community.

Well, those are six factions. Well, if there's six factions, there are six points of entry to the problem. What I encourage people to do is not to treat those factions as homogeneous, but to start exploring those factions looking to create a new faction. Let's just call that a faction of people willing to see if there might be some work possible here. Because within each faction, there'll be a variety of people. So, what you want to do is create your own faction of people who would be willing to work. You can't do that if your analysis them against us, because the only place you're going to find people to work with are us. You're not going to get to work with people who are them. Whereas if you've got six factions, and notice haven't included the police, or the security forces, or politicians, you can easily get to eight or nine. Therefore, if you get eight or nine people who work across those different, or drawn from those different factions, you've got one of the things that the literature tells us, is a potential for coming up with new ideas, which is variety, a lack of heterogeneity, and so on.

So, there it is, it's there and the problem. But it's how you choose to view the problem that offers you that possibility.

[00:31:50] RT: Right. So, let's stay in this model that you've got where you've got these, let's say, you got eight factions. The way forward is to expand and create another faction. What's the work that is needed? Because you're pulling into this new faction, people who are participants in the existing factions, or at least they're going to give you some of their time and energy in this new faction. So, what is it that actually happening that causes me to give up some of my time and energy or even loyalty to my clan, and edge my way over into this undefined or new faction that I don't really know much about. I don't have any experience with, maybe no competency to do anything with. How do you do that? Then how do you keep us together so we start moving?

[00:32:35] IT: I love the way you put that, because so many people put it as either or. So, they say, what would cause someone to leave their faction and join your faction? Well, that's that either or. That's that yes or no, and that's that mechanical way of solving problems, working away through a root cause analysis or something. Looking for the root cause, fix the root cause of the problem solved. So, notice, this is not the work you would do if it's that sort of problem. And the way you describe it is incremental. Of course, that's the way it is. So, it means it's iterative or repetitive, and it's really about conversations, it's about relationships. It's not about changing the people. It's about changing the relationships between the people.

Now, if you change the relationships between the people, over time, people start to change often as well. But let's start with trying to get some sort of relationship, even people who throw rocks at each other are in a relationship, may not be a very positive, generative, supportive relationship, but they are in a relationship. So, just starting with that.

But for me, it's about leaving where you are, rather than having a vision for where you're trying to get to. So, the phrase that I use is what I call a righteous rage. I think about what was it that generated this will to try and do something different? I didn't know at the time, it's just with hindsight now, with more time for reflection, I feel like. I realized, it wasn't a vision, it was what I call a righteous rage. I didn't know where we were going. But I wasn't prepared to stay where we were.

So, as I started to explore that question, I discovered that there were other people who weren't happy with where they were, and they were dissatisfied enough to at least talk about moving from where they were. So, it is adaptive work. I mean, essentially, we haven't made this explicit

yet. But when you say, “Hi, I'm just talking about how you put the idea of adaptive leadership into the practice of adaptive leadership.” And I describe it as a compass rather than a map. So, you're navigating without a map.

The reason you're navigating without a map is because for a map to exist, someone needs to have been there before you end drawing them up, and you're following that someone else's suggestion of a route to an endpoint. Well, if we're just moving from where we are to hopefully, somewhere better, then there can't be a map. The other thing is, even if the map was accurate at some point, it doesn't mean it's going to be useful today. Just think of a physical map of Seattle. I don't know what Seattle is like, but I imagine that those Amazon warehouses that you referred to weren't on that map 10 or 15 years ago.

And then, the third feature, I talked about the difference between the value of a compass compared to a map, is if the weather is poor, if it's foggy, and you can't orientate the map to the ground, then even if the map would be useful in a clear day, it's not helpful and foggy day. Whereas a compass, always is. You can figure out your route as you go and that's the work.

I think that's what scares most people about adaptive work. Most people have grown up in a world where they've been told, “Do not move until you know where you're going.” Once you've figured out where you're going, then you must draw a single straight line from where you are, to where you need to be, and then you can mark out some times on that, and put it in the spreadsheet and culture plan. Well, I don't know anyone whose life has worked like that. So, why do they think their professional life should work like that?

[00:36:16] RT: Why start now?

[00:36:19] IT: Yes. I mean, clearly, it's the only way you can do a heart transplant operation. That's the only way you can fly an aircraft. It's the only way you can build a motor car. But it's not the only way you can develop relationships with people. There are all sorts of ways in which people develop relationships. I mean, just meeting people.

So, one of the things that I think when people say to me, how did you get to where you are today? The answer is, I don't know. I can't say how I got here. I certainly didn't have a plan to be

speaking to you on Good Friday, on the ‘23. At no point was part of my plan at any stage. But I think it's about – Tom Peters has just announced his retirement. I'm sure some people have heard of Tom Peters. He’s sometimes described as the original management guru, *In Search of Excellence*, way back, I think, in 1982, something like that. He's just announced his retirement, and he was the first person who I heard use the phrase management by wandering about. His idea was get out of your executive office, go wander about the shop floor.

Well, I think that's more useful. Get out of wherever it is, wherever your comfort zone is, and go wander about. So, I want to know how to make progress in a problem that involves Catholics Nationalists Republicans, Protestant Unionists Loyalists, sitting in my police chief's office, having meetings with police colleagues, is necessary, for sure. But it's not sufficient. I'm going to have to get out and find some people from those factions to talk to. The more variety I get, the more likely I am to see some possible set of connections between people who are not currently connected. At least not currently connected positively or generatively.

I think it's another Tom Peters thingy, I think about what he called coffee pot mornings or something, where you just turn up, and he's talking about this executive leader in an organization. But I think the pattern of behavior, not the specifics, the pattern of behavior, just turning up and having coffee with people. American presidents have this phrase of doing a brush past. Well, those brush pasts don't happen accidentally. Sometimes there's weeks, months of diplomatic negotiations going to the present brushing past and the current US president is going to be in Belfast on Tuesday. No doubt, there'll be a brush past.

The idea that I might just sort of wander down into Belfast City Centre, and have to brush past Joe Biden on Tuesday. It's not going to happen. But it's that idea of an informal encounter. That's easily deniable, plausible deniability. So, all of these phrases and skills. What I'm saying is, look up, look out. Be interested in what's happening, not just in your area of technical expertise. Of course, if you're early on in your career, you need to become technically competent. But once you become technically competent, then you need to give up some of that.

It's terrifying. The evidence for this is strongest in the private sector with regard to finance directors, who become chief executives, because they find that being a finance director is more technical than being a chief executive. Numbers are things that many of us are afraid of. So,

having a good finance director makes everybody breathe easy in the boardroom. But when that same person becomes chief executive, many of those people discover that on a technical knowledge they thought was vital, it is no longer helpful.

So, they hire a new finance director. That person doesn't get to their job because the Chief Exec is madly still in the world of being a finance director. If they're spending time doing that, then they're not spending as much time as they should be in being the chief executive. So, it's not necessary. But it's common, that as you move up, your job becomes more about getting the work done. And the most challenging thing is getting the work done that used to be really good to yourself. Because when the people who are not doing that work are not in your view, doing it as well as us to do it, it's very difficult not to rush down from your exalted executive perch, and go get out of the way, let me show you how to do that.

As soon as you do that, you're taking so much damage, and the ripple effect of that is so much damage. So, that's the real challenge. Moving from being the person who used to do the technical work really well, to being the person who's now responsible for getting the work done, and that's much more relational and adaptive than it is tactical and linear, I think. So, that's why the complexity, the clumsiness, all of that stuff is to be embraced. It's not an excuse, of course, for being lazy. But it's to be embraced as a way of getting the work done.

[00:41:17] RT: You just mentioned this a bit ago, most people don't know this, so let's be explicit. You and I are having this conversation on Good Friday, April 7th, I think is today, and it is the anniversary of the Good Friday accords of which you were probably very much present and witness to. That's a long time ago. So, let's maybe close with you putting in context, people's read on what that was supposed to do, what's actually unfolded, where it stands now, because it strikes me that it's a pretty decent little case example of what you've been talking about through the conversation today.

So, for those who may not know much about the accord to start with, why don't you just give a little history of their agreement? And then what in your view has transpired since then, relative to what they hoped for would be the case in the agreement? How's that sit in this world of adaptive development?

[00:42:14] IT: Well, I mean, creating some context is tricky. I used to have a boss who is very good at this sort of thing, and he would often start talks by saying it's impossible to explain anything about the work we're trying to do without giving some sense of Irish history. And given that we're pressed for time, I'm going to start with the recent history, starting with the Flight of the Earls, which I think was either 1640 or 1640. That's one of the challenges. One of the phrases that I use is that one of the problems with my part of the world is there is no history. It's still current events. People still talk about events that are in the past using the present tense. So, the past still very much informs the present.

But let's just try and talk about what some people refer to as the troubles. I say that simply because as I sit here today, a lot of the media is talking about the Good Friday Agreement as being the agreement that brought the troubles turn down. So, let's do choose that is the framing. Because the troubles and the ideas that we've been talking about our crisis. When people are killing each other, that's usually a crisis. So, you have to survive. You can't accomplish anything, if you don't survive, and three and a half thousand people didn't survive. Three hundred of my former colleagues didn't survive at that stage. Policing in Northern Ireland was the most dangerous, decent job in the world.

So, when you're in a crisis like that, the work is the work of command. It's the work of ordering people to do stuff in order that as many people as possible survive. That makes it easy to say, that phrase of the least worst option comes to be thought of as a good thing. If nobody has been killed today, that's a good thing. But of course, that's below the line. Nobody's flourishing, they're just surviving.

The Good Friday Agreement, I think, enabled people to have the possibility of thriving, not just surviving. I think that was certainly its intention. I think in the lead up to that, there was lots and lots of approaches. And probably one of my favorite definitions for the Good Friday Agreement, which was 1998, I think, is that right? Twenty-five years ago, is that right? Was that there was a previous attempt at a peace deal in 1974, and one of the people involved in that was also involved in the 1998 deal. In the 1974 date, it was described as the **[inaudible 00:44:38]** agreement. He described the Good Friday Agreement as **[inaudible 00:44:41]** for slow learners.

So, in terms of our framing here, what's interesting is the technical details of those two agreements are not radically different. Now, of course, some people would argue that if you want, I could argue that too. But for the purpose of our conversation, the tactical details are not radically different. What was different was the adaptive work, the relational work. And so, there were no relations that would hold the weight of the technical work that needed to be done. By 1998, there was. One of the reasons was because that righteous rage, if you like, that I referred to, people weren't making any progress, and they were getting fed up with that. They didn't quite know where they were going to get to. Yes, people still had a vision crudely, if you like, one come and do wander with me and party United Kingdom. The other community didn't.

But was there much progress been made at that? And if so, at what cost? And all those sorts of things. And then, the value of the outsider. I mean, this is one of the great joys of doing the sort of work we do is, when you approach a problem that you're not involved in as an outsider, you see it differently from people who are deeply immersed in it. So, George Mitchell talks, a US senator, and he started to see possibilities, let's call them adaptive possibilities, conversational possibilities that led to that.

But of course, the actual agreement wasn't agreed until the very last minute. In fact, it's questionable if it was ever fully agreed. But that's what these agreements always are. There was a phrase around that said nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. But, I think, it's also true to say that nothing was ever fully agreed. But most of it was sort of agreed.

There's a phrase, actually, it’s an article today. I haven't yet read, written by an Irish journalist that often has pretty good commentary. Can't remember the phrase, but the sense of this phrase is about agreeing what you can live with, rather than demanding that you can't live without or something like that. Not that clumsy idea. It's making progress. It's helping to resolve, resolve issues constantly.

I'll just finish by saying another way of describing the Good Friday Agreement, which I think is more widely relevant. If you like, the difference between technical and adaptive, in a way, is that one community said, to have read the lines of the agreement, what the agreement actually said. The other committee said, to have read between the lines of the agreement, what it didn't

actually say, but what it may not have excluded. In other words, where was the space for maneuver.

That's always what you're looking for, is if you're working in a Six Sigma area of technical expertise, there is no room for maneuver. It was the only place you can look to make progress on any of these complex collective challenges define some room for maneuver, and then try to enlarge that room. Try to bring more people into that room, and then try and get more agreement from the people in that room. At the same time, recognizing if you're thinking about the Good Friday Agreement, that when they leave that room, they have to go and sell this to their communities, and it has to be more widely spread. And as you probably know then, there was a referendum and both parts of the island. And the Good Friday Agreement was democratically approved by huge majorities in both parts of the island.

So, it was something that was negotiated very clumsily, very difficultly too many long hours, and as I speak with some people just earlier this week who are physically involved in the room where it happened, the phrase become popular now through the Hamilton musical, being in the room where it happened. And those days, of course, you could still smoke in the room where it happened, and pipe smokers, and cigarette smokers, and it was literally the smoke-filled rooms through the night where this agreement was eventually agreed, and then was subsequently ratified by the population at large.

But it's not a done date in the sense that the car driven off the production line is a finished product that's now saleable or profit to a customer. It's ongoing work and will be ongoing work. Just like our health is, just like our education is, just like any relationship in our lives are. So, adaptive work is work that needs to be constantly revisited and read on and proved, until you get to the stage where you might be riding your bike well enough to enter, at least, if not win the Tour de France. But you'll notice that it's a tiny, tiny, tiny percentage of bicycle riders that are ever good enough even to enter the Tour de France.

For most of us, just riding a bike, good enough for what we want to do, good enough. It definitely requires a lot of hard work, but it's work well worth doing. So, to encourage people to get started, find some friends to support you, and support each other, and just keep going.

[00:49:41] RT: So, Irwin Turbitt, I just wanted to say on behalf of a lot of people who I know who know you and probably a lot of people who don't know you until they listen to this. I just appreciate that you've made a decision to support people in clumsily learning how to, actually live, ride bikes, do work, do the important stuff, and be with them shoulder to shoulder as they develop their ability to do that work under pressure. So, thanks so much for that. Given that it's Good Friday also, Happy Easter to you, as well, my friend.

[00:50:12] IT: Thank you very much. Same to you, Rick. Thank you. Appreciate your time.

[OUTRO]

[00:50:18] 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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