EPISODE 40

[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]

[00:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. It's Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we talk to guests and people who are functioning in the world either as leaders and looking for an opportunity to have impact or people who are looking to develop some capacity to lead, and they may pick up some ideas about how to go about that practice.

Today is the first time in the history of 10,000 Swamp Leaders, Benjamin, that I've had a guest return for a second go. I don't know if that means Benjamin didn't pick up on the clues that maybe he only wants to be here once, but he's back again. First of all, let me just say, Benjamin Taylor is a colleague, a friend. We've worked together for several years. How he finds himself back here, and I'm going to give him a chance to frame this more broadly than I'm about to do, is because he posted a couple of items on Medium of which he's quite prolific. So we put a plug-in for your Medium page, as well. We'll put that in the show notes around the work of adaptive leadership and consultancy.

Benjamin knew that I spent a lot of time in the depth of leadership. I thought his ideas, A, were provocative but provocative because they're relevant. So I wanted to give some space for he and I to discuss this a little because I think they'll be useful to people. So, Benjamin, I've kind of given them a rough outline here. But why don't you share with people, again, a little bit about who you are? Then you can get into a little bit about these two topics that you raised in your Medium page, and then we'll go from there.

[00:01:44] BT: That's great. Thanks, Rick. I am honored to be back again. I didn't realize I was breaking new ground for you in that way. What do I do? I am a consultant, and I work across UK

public services with RedQuadrant, a network consultancy and the thing – and the social enterprise called the Public Service Transformation Academy. We try and do ourselves out of a job and create the capacity and capability, so we're not needed anymore. Everybody says that, but we do try and do it genuinely.

I'm really deeply interested myself in consultancy, intervention, leadership, things that make a difference in organizational life and then the impacts that organizations have on human beings, inside and outside them. So I do various capability-building training. I'm involved in networks and organizations. I offer a thing called the RedQuadrant tool shed, where people meet with me in small cohorts. It's kind of meta consulting, and we'll help them to build a bigger tool shed of ways of intervening to achieve the kinds of things I was just talking about; better organizations, better experiences for people inside and outside. I feel like I was waffling a bit there. Does that make sense?

[00:02:55] RT: No, it does make sense and I'm familiar with. The thing that's always been useful for me in being around you is the diversity of ways in which you go about helping people in organizations. You said something here that I'd like to come back to somewhere in our conversation, which is the impact that organizations have on human beings. That's not always a positive consequence. I know that part of your work is meant to help illustrate and illuminate that, so they can be more effective in that.

But let's get into a little bit about how we got into this second episode here, which is you have a Medium page. You post quite regularly on it. Back in January, I think January 4th, a long time ago now, you posted a piece about what's wrong with adaptive leadership. Then soon thereafter, you talked about the problem with consultancy. So let's take them in turn. I'll let you make your decisions about how you want to present your ideas here. Then we'll just get into the swamp here and wrestle with them a little bit if that's okay.

[00:03:48] BT: No, that's great. That's great. I think I tagged you in to the first post about adaptive leadership. I post on my own blog and LinkedIn, as well as Medium, trying to get engagement. I often do get engagement because I know that in the real world, that adaptive leadership is one of your things that you're really one of the top experts now in the world in and using very effectively.

I also know that you're open to this kind of conversation and criticism. But I was a little bit, "Oh, I'm going out publicly with the post that starts there's a problem with adaptive leadership, and my friend, Rick does, this." So I wanted to at least put it out there. So it wasn't some horrible shock to you a couple of weeks later or something like that. I also know that on this podcast, you're very adaptive and very open and very flexible about all the different ways that people try and help people to lead.

I guess the core of what I was trying to say, as you know, Rick, I love and respect adaptive leadership, actually, as well. I don't have the depth that you do. But we've worked together and introducing people to the ideas and so on. I think the core distinctions, tools, I think there's loads of value in the adaptive leadership toolkit, which is what it is, I think. I think it's more of a toolkit, more of an approach of perspectives and pieces than it is a system. There's good and bad in that, I would say.

But my critique, fundamentally, is that adaptive leadership seems, in the way I've experienced it, to be framed as an alternative, some other concept of leadership. It seems to be the alternative, as so many things run themselves as. But I think it's more genuine in this case to kind of top-down directive leadership based on authority of structures and then basically hierarchies. Because it presents itself as a alternative to that, I think a lot of things flow from that. I'll just try and list three, and then see if I'm making sense and get back to you to have a proper conversation if that's okay.

So those are that I think it works great for the margins for people who are real change leaders, not right there in the top of the hierarchy or knowing that their hierarchical position is not sensing that it's somehow becoming a barrier for them. I think it works very poorly, as I've seen it when people try to adapt it as their primary main leadership approach across their area of authority or across the whole organization, mostly because of misinterpretations but also because of that kind of opposition is.

The third point, I guess, I'm making is that there's always a risk because of the way we take on ideas and the way ideas are marketed and understood. There's always a risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. So I think that it's really an intriguing one because I think you do

need a theory of management. I think adaptive leadership isn't that. So is it actually helping good people in bad systems to make a difference? If so, that's great. But the real goal is to change the bad systems, isn't it? Yes. So that's the starting point. I threw out quite a few things there. Apologies for such a brain dump.

[00:07:17] RT: No, I think it's useful. I think it's a good starting point to map the terrain here. I think for people who may not be as informed on adaptive leadership as you and I are, maybe to sharpen this one distinction that you're starting with, which is this distinction that they make in the work, I make in the work, you've made in the work between leading and authority. That distinction is that authority has certain functional attributes, values to the organization around providing direction, providing safety, making sure systems and business processes work well.

Leading, on the other hand, is a choice in an activity and can come in theory from anywhere in the system. So in the optimum world are people who have authority are also choosing to lead in measured ways or in opportune times and using their authority in the same ways in those times. That may or may not happen as often as we like, but that's the theory of it.

I think your distinction about, one, that adaptive leadership is not a system is really important distinction. I would like to play with a little bit here because I think that a lot of people who are somewhat educated in adaptive leadership don't necessarily have that distinction. I don't mean this in too pejorative a way. But I think it is pejorative to some degree, which is there's a lot of true believers out there about adaptive leadership as the main way in which to get forward with leading.

I also want to discuss in more detail your comment about the need for theory of management because I think that is a piece that's missing in this discussion as well, which is I know from your perspective has a high degree of utility to it. If there's an absence of it, there's all sorts of issues there.

Then the third thing that I want to touch on here and I want you to touch on is I know that you also have a lot of exposure and done a lot of work around systems through the work of Barry Oshry and other resources and influences as well. I think that that's another piece that we ought

to tease out here because I think that's, for us and for the people listening, another point of intervening and making organizations healthy. So we're broadening lenses and moves here.

Talk a little bit about what you have witnessed, experienced that's led you to these points of view about adaptive leadership and what you think maybe what the causes are? But also, as you look at it and you're trying to put yourself out of business, you're trying to build capacity of people, what's the counterbalance of some of this stuff?

[00:09:52] BT: So let me zero in on one hopefully really clear and practical point about where I believe I've seen people trying genuinely to do adaptive leadership and it going wrong, which I think illustrates a bit of this bigger picture that we're getting out. I guess the nub of it is that I've seen leaders with authority abdicate the responsibilities of their authority. You articulated a nice clear way that distinction between authority and leadership, authority setting structure and safety, and direction and leadership coming from anywhere in the system and being a choice and activity. I think that's something that I can stand by. But I don't think that's the way that adaptive leadership is always taken, if that makes sense.

To be really practical, because some of the adaptive leadership strategies designed, I would say, the vibe to me is for kind of frustrated people in fairly large bureaucratic organizations who know that in their context, them being them and the organization being what it is, the hierarchy in the bureaucracy isn't going to get it done, isn't going to do the work that they see. As leader, they need to motivate. It doesn't work in other contexts for other people.

If you look at the adaptive leadership strategies, and I'll go – I'll just pick a few. I know over different iterations of the official publications of adaptive leadership, some of the names and a number of the kind of core strategies that are identified to have shifted a little bit. So feel free to correct me if I'm misunderstanding these. But if you put together resisting the temptation to rescue people, see who the work belongs to, and put that work in that place, give people the work that they need to do with allowing conflict to unfold, understanding that there's real value is the idea there, surfacing conflict, with regulating stress and holding steady, letting a certain amount of managing a certain amount of pressure building up with cooling things down, those are really powerful as a disrupter, as an intervener, as somebody who is kind of like confronting people with their reality. Something I value a lot in consulting and leadership.

When you get a leader with authority who's kind of half grasp those concepts, what you end up with is a lot of unproductive conflict and a lot of people being put under unacceptable and stress because they're being pushed some of the work of authority, because the leader thinks that actually it's not their role to set direction and so on. So resisting the temptation to rescue people, really important, but really nuanced. It can really end up, in my experience, in people kind of being hung out to dry. Allow conflict to unfold. That's about productive conflict that allows issues that have been held to resolve.

But I've seen, for example, a leader with two subordinates who were in a lot of conflict about a very, very critical organizational program. My view was that they needed to exercise the authority to make a decision over that conflict. But instead, they felt that they were not rescuing. They were allowing the conflict to unfold. They're regulating the right amount of stress to make stuff happen. But actually, what they were doing was they were just allowing an unproductive conflict to carry on and carry on. Does that make sense as an example?

[00:13:34] **RT:** It does make sense. Let's use your real situation here to give people another move to make if they were, let's say, where we are describing people might be when they've been exposed and started to take on some adaptive leadership understanding. So what, in your opinion, in your experience, does productive conflict look like? What resources, moves do people might need to have in order to facilitate that when that arises, so they can keep things moving forward?

[00:14:03] **BT:** It's a great question. I'll switch to another example of my leadership work for productive conflict if that's okay. So I was working with a leadership team, and we were using what we call our five core practices, which tend to go in the order of starting within a controlled, in a container, in a safe or a brave space, i.e. some facilitated sessions, where everybody knew that there were some boundaries. There was some confidentiality. There was some supports.

We introduced them to honest and productive conversations first. Then we introduced them to practices of role and task clarity work. The third thing is learning practices, learn reflective practices, which I know are very precious to you, and you're very good at introducing those.

There are a couple of others around culture shaping and setting purpose for the organization, the two of the five.

Principally, we introduce honest conversations, ways of having more constructive conversations, ways of making the emotional content of what's going on in communication between people and the reasoning that people are bringing to their communications, ways of making those explicit, surfaced, discussable part of the data that we use to work together.

That's often the starting point because often, there's a lot of avoidance in organizations. There's a lot of going along to get along. That's where that unproductive conflict can be seething and bubbling beneath the surface, having all the impacts on the relationships and the productivity and the outcomes, but never being acknowledged. Therefore, it can never be addressed. In that context, when we work with like a leadership team, and we introduce that practice, you get this like – I often describe it as like putting a match to gasoline, and you get this kind of flare up. That's why you need that little bit of control and safe space and so on.

There's an example I'm thinking of where there was a very progressive leader who was just so frustrated that his team seems to be quite locked down and quite controlled, and they never generated the innovation and the snarkiness and the change that he had hired them for. This was a pattern over many, many years. Of course, the reason for that was that he was exhibiting quite dominance and shutting down behaviors, and himself was deeply afraid of conflicts. So he was jumping in, as soon as somebody started getting a bit sparky and going, "No, we shouldn't do that." As soon as there was tension in the air, he would jump in and make everything flat, if you see what I mean.

In those circumstances, we got people into honest conversations. Suddenly, some of these issues came out. The issues themselves were like when you behave like this, it makes me feel like this, and the outcome of that is FU, I don't really want to put in any extra effort for you anymore. They were professionals. They were still working long hours and all the rest, but they lost that little bit of spark and so on. The bigger outcome of that was the leader started to see that it was his own behaviors, in this case, that were a huge part of that system. Yes.

That, for me, is a productive example of allowing conflict to unfold. I've lost what, if anywhere, where I need to go next.

[00:17:21] RT: That's all right.

[00:17:22] BT: What was your question again?

[00:17:23] RT: I'm here for it. Well, you're answering a little bit. We're going to get to this deal about the need for theory of management here in a moment. But when you're managing and leading people, it's my experience, a lot of people are elevated into those roles because they are technically proficient at certain aspects of the business that they're in. So they have a lot of competency to actually work inside the system and get results done. So we move them up. Fair enough, that's all fine and good.

They often find themselves then in that place where they're having to manage and lead other people. The human condition that they carry with them is either a strength or weakness of some kind. So when you talk about somebody wanting to tamp down conflict because they in themselves don't handle conflict very well, that's a pretty normal condition that we see a lot in the work that we do. So I think that you're cracking something open here that is useful to people.

I'd like for you to – I'm going to link this, and I'm going to ask you to link it, actually. Then we'll go from there. So that description that you just gave strikes me as elevated level of tools and moves for good management of people in teams. So you've mentioned a little bit about this theory of management. What is your theory of management?

[00:18:38] BT: Well, that's a killer question, Rick, because I think it's really valuable. If you're thinking about leading and managing a whole organization to have an overarching theory, an idea about how the whole thing works, if that makes sense. But I am very clear that there is no neat and complete one theory that fits everything, if that makes sense.

What I have is quite a complex **[inaudible 00:19:07]**, to use a fancy phrase, of bits from different theories and different approaches, including adaptive leadership. So to be really

precise, I take from Stafford Beer's Viable Systems Model an understanding of a hidden underlying organizational logic, which we won't have time to go into in today's podcast. But the way in which a functional level, organizations can meet the complexity of their environment now and think about what they need to be in the future and adapt towards that future.

Very powerful stuff from systems leadership theory by McDonald **[inaudible 00:19:47]**, his stuff about the work of management and leadership. I try not to distinguish the two. I think there's problems with distinguishing the two, and maybe that's part of what we're talking about here as well is that you are always shaping the culture of your organization. Culture here is mostly focused on, in the example I just gave, that discretionary effort that am I willing to really bring my whole? Am I fully in an embodied passionate way really bringing my whole self to the work that I'm being asked to do for the organization? Or am I resentful? Am I frustrated? Am I tamped down by the organization?

So they talk about, and I use three main levers, that it's the people in the organization, the way they experience the behavior of their leaders, consistency, acceptability. These are gut, emotional, moral judgments that people are instinctively instantly making all the time. So the first thing is the behavior of the leaders. The second is the use of symbolism in the organization, who gets what prizes, what the executive suite looks like compared to the cubicles, who gets what parking space, who gets what development opportunities, all of that.

The third thing is people's experience of the systems and processes of the organization, which go from the mundane, like how much of a hassle is it for me to claim my expenses, and what expenses am I allowed to claim through to how do I experience the system of promotion and prioritization. There's several other aspects that I'll touch, two from Barry Oshry. No. One from Barry Oshry that I think is really valuable as well is the way we live in different worlds in organizations, whether you're a top, middle, bottom customer or helper, or the different bits of the organization that you're in shape, your way of understanding the whole organization.

I talk about we're all in different parts of the elephant. Some of us are in the sharp, pointy part of the elephant. Some of us are in the slightly dirty, smelly tail end of the elephants. That means that we will respond according to our experience. Yes. I guess I'll leave it there. Those are the kind of three. So the Viable Systems Model, the way that we're shaping the willingness and the

culture of our organization, inevitably, as leaders based on experiences and gut judgments. The way that not only are we in different worlds, based on our experiences of what life in the organization is like for us. But the interaction between those worlds has really big implications for how we work. Yes. So it's not easy to put a theory of management into a nutshell, unfortunately.

[00:22:20] RT: Yes. I think it's fair to say that if anybody who is taking their crap and managing seriously, they are obligated almost to craft a theory of management that is in part what supports the organization's values, but also how they use their management experience and the lessons they've learned. So it could be all the way down to an individual version of it, like you said, the **[inaudible 00:22:41]** sort of scenario here.

I do want to say to people who are listening, who might be walking and driving, whatever, all of these references to the very resources and philosophies and principles that you're describing here we'll put together and put into the show notes, so they can get various work and Viable Systems Models, et cetera. So they can go a little further in that and not worry about trying to remember it.

So we started this conversation around adaptive leadership. I want to shift our conversation a little bit here around the consulting deal. But there is a link here I know because you're doing all of what you're describing as that consultant. But any last words you have around pros, cons, plus and minuses of adaptive leadership as an approach to leading that you haven't said yet that you'd like to get into the conversation?

[00:23:30] BT: I guess what I would say is if you're working with somebody like you, Rick, who can – this is why coaching is so useful, actually, for all leaders, but particularly for leaders who want adaptive, who understand that there's something in adaptive leadership that's really powerful for them. What the coach can do is look at what is applicable to you and your context from a theory, from a framework, from whatever we want to call it out to leadership, actually, and help you to practice it and really be honest about and experience the results and reflect on the results you're getting. So those things are really valuable.

If I was to sort of prescribe a corrective, which is incredibly arrogant because **[inaudible 00:24:17]** and a whole – anyway, I'll carry on and be just as arrogant as I can be.

[00:24:23] RT: Go for it. Go for it.

[00:24:24] BT: I would have adaptive leadership taught with an equal function, an equal focus on the importance of authority and how to be good at authority, as well as good at leadership and in their framing because he talks about it almost being a pejorative. So there almost is this rejection of authority. That's the nub of the problem for me because, as I say, I'll just go back to that point. When misapplied but it's a real temptation, it allows people to abdicate their responsibility for their authority.

[00:24:57] RT: I'm going to completely support you in this premise. I think that there's something about – I think all of us probably somewhere in our journeys from birth to present have had rough experiences by people who have authority, and that leaves a mark, oftentimes. We rarely have rough marks, experiences from people who are leading well. So I think that there is, this is a generalization, some inherent weariness about authority and what I might do if I have it.

I think that your observation about the healthy use of authority is an adult conversation that is necessary for people to actually have a chance to do the work they want to do in those positions in your organization that they've reached. So let's underscore that. I think you're spot on there.

[00:25:41] BT: Well, just to put a cap on that. I think if you use the language, which is really empowering of leadership being a choice. So I guess the counterbalance to that, if leadership is a choice, then authority is an obligation. We need to help people to take that obligation seriously.

[00:25:55] RT: Yes, yes. Good call. All right. So you and I are consultants, and you started this conversation off by saying what are your goals. The goal of your organization and the team in RedQuadrant is to put yourself out to business. All right, so you – I'm going to say for the people who haven't read your Medium page, part of the reason to read it is the titles are so provocative that you get drawn into the conversation that you're trying to provoke.

[00:26:20] BT: Oh, goodness.

[00:26:22] RT: What is the problem with consultants?

[00:26:25] BT: Well, the fantastic things about consultancy and what I've already talked about, you can bring in somebody with the extra experience or just a very different perspective who can use, hopefully, a really wide range of tools to really help you triangulate your relationship to your context, and give you some insights and tools and approaches and ways of thinking that will make you more effective in whatever you're trying to achieve. That's great, right?

Part of that comes from the fact that consultants live in different worlds. I just talked about this idea of kind of different sense making worlds. A top level manager who's just being fed performance information has a totally different experience than the organization from a frontline staff member who's dealing with all the members of public in all the demands and all the pressures.

That's where it goes wrong because consultants and consultancy is a very emotionally wearing, full of rejection, full of failure. But we generally can't go into pitches. We're being honest about any of that. So there's a double bind inherent in consultancy, which is non-discussable, and there's a world where it becomes as a business model and a business logic, where consultants can really easily get the – first of all, you can't start from authenticity. Not unless you're very lucky, gray-haired, don't really need the money anymore.

I'm talking about big consultancies and about people earlier in their career, somebody like you, Rick. You can be honest about your successes, about your failures, as well as your successes because that's what people expect from somebody with your brand and your approach. But most consultants are trying to sell. They can't be honest about their failures and their stresses and their pressures. So they're bottling up a lot. They're trying to get as much money as possible out of the client one way or another.

The way that the consultancy firms tend to do that is by creating a focus that's much more on the internality of the consultancy and meeting your measures and ambition. I often use this expression because I met a consultancy partner who talks about what he looks for in

consultants is overachievers with harsh, unforgiving fathers because he knows that they'll never do enough. So they'll always be pushing themselves that little step further, right?

So then you end up gaming the system with your internal focus. You're actually extractive from your clients and your bullshit as much as is needed to get what's necessary to sort of take the goods back that present a win inside your organization. That's what generates the view of consultancy that we have out there, which is not that unjustified, which is people will borrow your watch to tell you the time. They'll come in and say to management what you've been saying for ages.

But management won't listen to it because they're in sharper suits and boots. Or they'll come in and recommend what management wants you to do anyway, but they needed a stamp of approval for some reason over the top of it.

[00:29:29] RT: Wow. People.

[00:29:33] BT: It's a messy game, Rick.

[00:29:35] RT: It's a rough and tumble world of which you and I have chosen to inhabit.

[00:29:39] BT: Yes.

[00:29:40] RT: All right. I just love that we're getting this auditorily because there's a lot of things that you said I think are not only very accurate but also well-articulated with some great visual descriptors that hang for people. If that is the world, and I would argue that most of it is that world, and those people out there who are hiring the likes of Benjamin Taylor **[inaudible 00:30:04]**, why bother with the exercise? Where's the value creation that could come from somebody on our side of the conversation? How would they know how to get to that, so they could make a good decision?

[00:30:18] BT: I've got a blog post about this as well, funnily enough. So I'll share that with you. Put the notes. I mean, I guess just knowledge is power, right? So going into a consultancy engagement with your eyes wide open to those pressures and those tensions which apply to

RedQuadrant, which works in a fairly radically different way to a significant extent, as much as they apply to the biggest kind of partnership firm.

A few things, I would start with saying understand that it's the individuals you'll be working with and the relationship with them, which is the most important. Not the organization. There's a lot wrong with how we procure consultancy, which we probably don't need to go into now. But try and engage in a real challenging, honest conversation. Rather than asking people to write impressive essays, claiming incredible success in the past. Try not to buy on price but to think about the real value you're going to get.

I would say build relationships with the individuals who are working with you to understand a bit about the pressures that are going on in their world. Even support them. How can I help you build your case for your next promotion? How can I help you look good inside your consultancy so that you're actually – Barry Oshry talks about – no. Well, I've developed something that Barry Oshry says. When you understand that you're interacting world to world, not person to person. So however good the consultant looks, they're a person from consulting world, and you're a person from client world. That gives you three levels of ability to improve your interactions.

The first is not taking things personally. So just the tactical insight, the emotional intelligence to know that you're operating world to world, instead of person to person, if that makes sense. And so understand that they're under this pressure to generate utilization and recovery and income and sell on and keep the partners happy back home, and all those things. That gives you some interpersonal improvement, insights.

The second level is tactical. So if you know that that's going on and that you're working world to world, you can start to make that explicit. You can start to ask how you can get better value from them by helping them succeed in their world. Then the third level is strategic. Is there a way that can strategically break down the barriers? What I'm talking about here is changing the incentives. So rather than just being a sitting duck as a client.

So the great that you can sometimes get or the really terrible that you can sometimes get as well because you can be explicit about the context and the way that the dynamics are working for you, for them, and between you. If you can be strategic, if you can change the incentives so

that the alignment of the individual consultants and of the consultancy is genuinely aligned with what you're trying to achieve in your organization, then you'll do really well.

For example, if you can't offer them sell on an extra budget, which is a great carrot to get good results, but it also will steer them to giving you the things that will generate the extra budget, rather than maybe what you really need. Maybe you can talk about writing a really good case study, winning awards together, promoting your work together. That's a very crude way of thinking about changing the incentives.

But I think it's those three levels of just going into it with your eyes open to we're actually operating world to world here are the things that can make a difference.

[00:33:45] RT: It strikes me – it's a really useful distinction for – well, first of all, it's a really useful distinction for me. But for people who are listening, what does it take to – I'm imagining you when you walk in to meet somebody for the first time, and you come in with this idea of world tour with these three value propositions that can come from having that distinction and then operating in these three, how do you tee that up? How do you set a stage for that to occur?

If I don't have any idea before you walked in and start talking about this, and I have you as sort of a guy who wants to get some money for me, I got to – I need you a little bit. All the things you just described that I might hire a consultant for. How do you restart the conversation with this perspective?

[00:34:29] BT: That's good question because I'm thinking mostly from the client perspective just now. As a consultant, what I'm trying to do – the tactic I usually fall back on, Rick, this is where you've asked a good coaching question, is to try and pierce the bullshit in one way or another. That's not necessarily easy for me, particularly in positions where there's authority at play, because I'm one of these rebels. I get a dry mouth, and I get tension and so on.

So I will try to surface something. It might be the ridiculousness of the tendering process, the inadequacy of a 15-minute pitch to build a relationship, when they're asking for a quarter of a million pounds worth of leader and culture transformation, for example. I will try and surface that. Make it explicit, make it discoverable, and see how they respond, if that makes sense. If

they respond by kind of shuffling their papers and going back to the formal procurement process, that's probably a sign that we're not going to be able to have the kind of – yes, we might have a transactional client-consultant relationship.

I'm not against that. I need to make money. But we're probably not going to have the kind of really collaborative relationship. That is what I really want with my clients. So that provocation and that kind of breaking through of the bubble of the undiscussable is a tactic I often use. Does that make sense?

[00:35:52] RT: It does. But let's go one step further then. So let's – for people listening, so you pierce their conversation, and they respond in – this is unusual. I've never had this before. I think I'll follow where this is going for a while. In your experience, what changes in the engagement and, more importantly, the actual work and possible outcomes that come when you're able to get through that wall and actually do something different?

[00:36:22] BT: So what changes is you get to a more authentic conversation. Now, authenticity is – what's the expression? When you can fake authenticity, that's when you've really made it. We shouldn't take ourselves too seriously with these things. I should say that the very steady and excellent guide in precisely this kind of conversation, of course, is Peter Block, who's flawless consulting is a timeless, although often feels a little bit dated now reading the book, but a timeless guide to this.

So we can really talk about – Peter Block would say one of the critical aspects that you bring out by opening up that kind of conversation is talking about the affective side of things. So we can actually talk about our emotions, our needs, mine and the clients, and what we actually really need to get out of this, but also what their concerns and fears might be, maybe what minor as well.

Another tactic that – it can be as simple as when you're going in in a fairly crisis situation, we do well in pitches in a lot of times because we genuinely express empathy with the people in the crisis situation, rather than just focusing on the technical solution that we can bring. So when the client can talk about the needs that they have and the fears that they have, the uncertainties that they have.

Because anytime they bring in a consultant, they're giving away some of their control, some of their authority. They're necessarily entering into a partly co-production space. Then the things that would be under the surface and getting in the way can actually be things that you're actively working with and hopefully productively working with.

[00:37:59] RT: This resonates with me. I don't know that you and I have ever really talked about this influence that I have in my work by Will Schutz, who was the originator of the FIRO model. But then he moved on to something called the human element. He was a very strong advocate that truth and candor and honesty was a great simplifier in all relationships of any kind.

One of his tactical moves in that work was what he would call first truth first. In that first truth first method, it's usually about me, not about you. The degree that I can start somewhere in that space, I often thought Will and Peter Block knew each other. I would have loved to have heard their conversations when they were just alone because I think that they – I think you bringing up Peter's work is really important here, not just for the flawless consultant. Also toss in his work on community as another robust conversation that has application to life and organizations as well.

Once again, you're bringing to the surface a bunch of resources for people that they might not have access to left to their own devices. So we're going to have quite the extensive show note list of resources here when this day is done.

[00:39:12] BT: Sorry. I have to mention another one as well because this is a reissue out just now, isn't it? I know that one of your influences is Peter Koestenbaum as well and his book with Peter Block. Well, Peter Block's book about his work really, *Confronting Our Freedom,* has just been reissued and is incredibly readable and accessible and short and fun. It left me a little bit flat because I've read so much of it. I've already kind of imbided it. But it will be a fantastic starting point for somebody who wants to get to explore the kind of things I've just been talking about, I guess.

[00:39:44] RT: Yes. Let's reframe the context for the potential listener here, which is the things we're talking about here, we sort of put them in the context of consultants working inside organizations. But I think it's fair to say that most of these things have great application in

human relationships, whether it be in families or in communities or any kind of place where people are coming together, and their intention and aspiration is to collectively produce something that's useful for others.

Because all the things you're describing are bound to come up in that sort of network of human beings that have some hierarchy, and some need to work, and some need to use power and et cetera, et cetera. So anything that helps facilitate that process is useful. I think the things that you're talking about here, all of them have application much broader than the sort of initial context that we established here in the conversation at the outset.

[00:40:34] BT: Yes, yes. Well said.

[00:40:36] RT: All right. So I hesitate to say last words with you because I think I said that last time, and here you are again. I'm quite open to it happening a third time. So any final thoughts you have based on what we've discussed here that you think you want to get in for people that maybe we didn't address?

[00:40:52] BT: One thing I want to say, Rick, I guess maybe I'll just leave it at this point. Well, it's going to become a longer point, sorry. Another reference that I often talk about is Donald Schon piece, which coined the phrase, the swampy lowlands. He draws a contrast between the high hard ground of academic affection for the abstracted scientific world, where unimportant problems can be solved perfectly. The swampy, messy, dirty lowlands, I picked up my passion for this phrase from you, I think, where you get muddy and murky and things are unclear and uncertain is where the real important problems of human endeavors are situated.

That in itself is really, really powerful. We should link to the Donald Schon piece as well. But there's a point that applies to what we've talked about about adaptive leadership and what we've talked about breaking through to authenticity. There was a fantastic tweet I saw a few weeks ago, where somebody made the really great points that there is no phrase. There's no recommendation in the self-help literature that isn't absolutely fantastic for some person in some contexts and absolutely deadly, absolutely destructive for another person in another context, right? I think that's really important.

There's a couple of great podcasts with Peter Block and with Ed Schein that I often refer to, where they're talking about early in their career, finding out that superpower of breaking through to authenticity, identifying the sleeping dogs, waking them up. There's a great Marvin Weisbord piece about this as well and bringing all of that to the surface, surfacing the conflicts and handling it and so on and so on.

Really important to say that if you really want to be able to be adaptive as a consultant and as a leader, that's just one option. The other option is to let sleeping dogs lie, to not challenge people's hidden agendas, and to let them be hidden, and to say that it's okay to work at the surface level. Because if we don't do that, however much we think that we're working in the swampy lowlands, in the complex realities of people's lives, and we are still going for the kind of different level. We're still going for the simple solution that says we know how to do this.

So if I say I always want to surface conflict, I always want to break through to authenticity, I'm always going to name the hidden agenda, then committing to something that won't be appropriate in every context.

[00:43:29] RT: Yes, it's a good call. The organization has some purpose to get some particular body of work done. Sometimes, we got to work on the work that we're in business to do, whatever that business is.

[00:43:39] BT: That's right. That's right.

[00:43:41] RT: Benjamin Taylor, thank you for this rich conversation. We kept track of the notes for listeners about the various resources that were mentioned here that we'll put together in a show note that you can go and find, including a link to RedQuadrant. So if there are some things they want to follow up with you on based on what you said here, then they're able to do that as well. So thank you, once again, for coming to the swamp. We may be back again. That would not be a bad deal at all.

[00:43:41] BT: Awesome.

[00:44:07] RT: Thank you, sir.

[00:44:08] BT: Thanks so much. Appreciate it.

[OUTRO]

[00:44:12] 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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