

EPISODE 43

[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. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. We are the podcast where we have conversations with individuals around the world who've made a decision to raise their hand and to choose to lead on some challenging social issues that societies face with.

Today is no exception to that. Today, my guest is Meg Zeenat Wamithi who is London-based, and she is the Founder of MindMapper, which we're going to get into in some detail here. She has quite a both personal story of value to the work that she does and also the larger impact her organization is having.

So, Meg, welcome to the podcast. Or as I like to say, welcome to the swamp. It's good to have you here.

[00:01:05] MZW: Hi, Rick. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really glad to be part of this one.

[00:01:09] RT: Good. All right. So before we get into details of the work you're doing, why don't you take whatever time you want to share with people who you are, what you think they need to know about you in order to have a context for the conversation we're going to have?

[00:01:23] MZW: Yes. That's a good point. I just want to preface it with I hate introductions, but I'll try my best to give you guys a little bit of a flavor of who I am. So my name is Meg. I am a global mental health leader and educator. As Rick said, I'm the founder and of an incredible

organization called MindMapper. MindMapper is an education company that provides young people across the world with mental health tools to live mentally healthy resources and lives. The big thing about me is I'm really passionate about three main things which is education, young people, and mental health. I feel like if you're able to define your market and the things that you're passionate about, people are able to connect with you in ways that you can't even imagine. So those are my three buzzwords and the things that I feel like represent me and get me up in the morning. So if money wasn't an issue, if time wasn't an issue, these are the core things that my heart would lean on.

A big thing that someone asked me once was what's the one thing that breaks your heart, and I think, yes, knowing that a lot of people around the world, particularly young people, don't have access to appropriate or adequate education. But also that so many young people will go through their lives not being able to access the right resources to live mentally healthy lives. So those are things that I'm really passionate about.

[00:02:41] RT: What is it that you saw in the world? What was the need that caused you to build this organization called MindMapper and the work that it does? What's the world needing that you're addressing at this point?

[00:02:56] MZW: I think it was twofold. So lived experience, I was diagnosed with severe depression, anxiety, anorexia, and paranoia at the age of 13. Here in the UK, we have the NHS, and we have a statutory service called CAMHS which is the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service. At the time, there wasn't a lot of research into what does that look like for a young person to access child services and then go into the transition of adult services.

So you'll have a lot of people maybe on the cusp of sort of 16 to 18 who have spent months on a waiting list only to get access of support and then not have adequate transitions into adult services and kind of pull through the gaps. I could clearly see that this was an issue, so accessing credible age-appropriate sort of services. But also within that, with the education, you can be that young person like me who's 13 with all of these big words attached to you and labeled but not really knowing what they mean. You're seeing all of these professionals. Your parents are talking about it. Your teachers are talking about it.

But you, as that young person, as that individual, as the human who's actually attached to these labels, not knowing what they mean, what that means for your life, but also how can you manage it in a way that suits you. So I went through, from the ages of 13 all the way to 21, not necessarily having the adequate education around what was happening to me, my brain, and my life. But also what was my life going to look like dealing with these as an adult? So I'm going to live with these for the rest of my life. What does that look like, and how does this not become something that holds me back, but actually something that I can embrace as a superpower? I can live just as much as a fulfilling life as anyone else that doesn't have mental illnesses.

I saw that as an issue, and I thought, wow, I'm accessing support and I've got a good family around me that we are able to have open conversations about this. I'm also very proactive and confident enough to talk about this. Yet I'm really struggling to navigate this system, or I'm really struggling to get the right amount of support. Can you imagine all the young people that don't have a support network, that aren't confident or proactive? Most importantly, that don't have access to the right resources or the right information to be able to take control and have dominion over those decisions that can impact whether they are able to manage this effectively or not.

Because at the end of the day, I think everyone knows that you can't be happy all the time. But you can strive to put things in your life that can make you happy. I think one of them is having the choices to be independent, but also to know what to do if you ever are in need. Physically and physical health-wise, we know if we're in need. Or there's something not going right with our physical bodies. We need to go to our GP and our doctor. We know the ideas of having a healthy diet and healthy lifestyle with exercise. But I don't think we had the same kind of toolbox and resources and literacy of what that might look like to live a mental healthy life.

That was the big thing that I thought I said if young people go through their lives knowing what to do if they need to do algebra or they know where to go or university or personal statements, and yet they don't know how to manage stress effectively, then we're doing something wrong. So I thought let's flip the education system and actually let's start putting mental health as a priority, not something that's a luxury. Like how can we actually embed this as a priority from the get-go when someone's really young to avoid them getting to the ages of burnout or stress or

being diagnosed with not having the right literacy of what these words mean or how to manage them.

[00:06:39] RT: So how old were you when all this was so to taking form in your mind, and you could see what you just described? How old were you at that point?

[00:06:47] MZW: I was 19 I believe. I was about 19 years old. I had got to university and had a relapse. After that fall, why is this still not working, this whole thing? I'm doing everything right. I've gone to the GP. I've gone to the hospital. I've self-referred to IAPT and all of these services. Yet I'm either being told that I don't need the threshold. Or I'm being told that, "I'm really sorry to hear that. You got crisis. We're going to do what we can to look after you." Or I'm being told that, "Well, I've got out of bed today. You must be okay," sort of thing. It's like, "Oh, what is going on here?"

So, yes, I was 19 when all of these kind of questions and all of these ideas and problems I started to identify. I think it was really at the age of like sort of 2021 where I said, "If I don't do it, who will," sort of thing. Sometimes, when you see issues in the world, or you see things that you want to be able to help or you want to be able to fix, sometimes you can't afford to wait for other people to solve them for you. Sometimes, actually, you have the power, and you have the strength and also the expertise to be able to support with solving that problem, right?

I knew because I had already been able to acknowledge it, and I knew that because I was confident enough to speak about it. All it needed was to be in the right rooms to share the problems that I could see and, hopefully, the right people could help me fix this.

[00:08:10] RT: Okay. So I want to come back to that because I imagine people who are listening want to understand how did you get yourself mobilized to actually take on this idea of creating an entity that would address this at some kind of scale beyond just yourself. So let's come back to that. But I do want to pick up. You're sitting there at age 21. You're having these insights. What moves did you make to actually begin to address this in ways that you thought were consistent with the needs you have and therefore probably would be helpful to other people? What did you actually get yourself in action to do to get started?

[00:08:46] MZW: There were two big ones. One was sharing my story. So simple, it was like – obviously, I say simple, but it took me seven years from the point of when I was diagnosed at 13 to ever share my story publicly, outside of the doors of my house, or sort of my immediate friends and family. So that was a big thing. On World Mental Health Day, I think it was 2017, '18, I decided to write a post about everything. So the fact that why I'm taking time out or why I had kind of dropped off the face of the Earth really, I just didn't feel – life was already hard as it is, navigating all the transition and changes as a young adult.

Then to have to leave your house with a mask on, and not feel like you can be vulnerable or not be okay, and feel like you have to be perfect all the time and that you have to be high-achieving and productive all the time, it's exhausting. It's not for anyone else. It's not for you. It's for other people around you. So I thought the only reason I feel stigmatized is because I'm stigmatizing myself. Actually, if I own this narrative of the fact that I'm not okay, and it's okay not to be okay, actually that's a burden off my shoulders, right? I can now be free to shop on days where I'm actually 2 out of 10 or 1 out of 10.

That was a big thing, feeling confident enough to be vulnerable to put the ugly side of yourself out, the bit that's not refined, not the highlights, not the wins. But something that potentially may make you look weaker than you are. Actually, that was the strongest thing I've ever done. I think that's the most confident and the favorite thing I've ever done in my life, and that kick-started everything. It kick-started a movement where everyone was using the hashtags and people were sharing, people that have been in my lives, people that hadn't, strangers. Everyone was jumping on that day to talk about their own mental health. It was just so validating.

Then the second part of it was at university, I was the head of communication, one of the vice presidents of a think tank. It's the largest think tank that is student-run and student-led in Europe. One of the things that our senior team had to do was have a strategic program that looked at mental health or homelessness, things around sustainability but also around ex-service members, so ex-military. There was just a pool.

I knew speaking to everyone else and after me sharing my story and everyone else from the teams all sharing their stories of being university students with mental health problems, I knew that this was an opportunity. So I said, "If it's okay with everyone, I really want us to do

something for mental health because I think my university, we really need it, being at a Russell Group, like high-achieving university, where everyone's go, go, go, and that you have to be thinking about entering the corporate world or entering higher education, further education, so a post-grad, that you have to be on top of your game.

Actually, everyone's walking around with masks. So I thought, "Cool. We're going to do something in our project. We're going to start a campaign. We're going to write a policy paper, and we're going to lobby parliament because this is actually something that needs to be changed." Those people age 18 to 25 are most at risk of falling through the cracks and are also the highest representative. Suicide rates at that point in the years of 2016 to 2019, it was young people age 18 to 25. Because they're considered adults, that group are not adults. They are young adults. They're a completely separate group, and there's not enough research at that time about them.

That was the big thing. I surrounded myself with like-minded people that were passionate and started something so simple. Not a company, a campaign and something that we were already doing which was amazing, which was policy papers and research. We all came together because it was something that was passionate and on a mission to make a change which is, honestly, just to raise awareness

[00:12:32] RT: So if my research on you is accurate somewhere, and this may have been the time, you ended up actually speaking to parliament, was this in part consequence of the choices and the actions that you took? What was that like to go there and do that?

[00:12:48] MZW: Yes. So I think the first part was when I ended up being invited to chair the APPG, so all parliamentary group for young people and universities. So it's two meetings. This was when – I think I was 21. So imagine me being able to speak to all of the university chancellors in the UK. So that includes England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. I just couldn't believe it. I was like, "What?" How did we go from this being something that I hid for ages to our research and the findings being something that's being consulted with the people that matter?

So the principles and vice chancellors of universities that have the power, they've got the agency to make these decisions. That was a big thing because that was the first time we were able to present our research and our policy paper but also our recommendations. It was an incredible place to be in because we recognized that, actually, this was a unanimous issue. It wasn't just something that was happening in my university. It wasn't just happening to me. This was happening in all universities.

To think that my university was one of the ones that was doing the best, I just couldn't imagine all the other universities that weren't even trying to tackle this or what that were only at the beginning of their journey in trying to solve student mental health. How were their students doing? Yes, it was really heartbreaking because it reminded me that kind of, especially with mental health, it's not democratic enough. It really is a part of the lack of. Depending on where you go, depending on what postcode you live in, that's what actually determines what level of adequate support that you get.

That's just not fair, right? It shouldn't be done to that. It should be that everyone, no matter where you come from, your background, how much you earn, what school you go to, what university you go to, that you have access to the same basic level of mental health support that's adequate enough regardless.

[00:14:42] RT: I love your distinction. It wasn't a business an organization. It was a campaign, a movement a cause. Yet it's somewhere. You turned it into something more structural, I'm guessing but you clean me up on my assumption here, in order to organize resources to have bigger impact in some particular way. So can you speak a little bit about the journey from campaign to the next level for larger – because I do want you also – I don't want to get out of this conversation without you sharing some of the statistics of the actual impact that you know you're having right now in the UK. So how did you get yourself to a place where you could have the impact, just to be able to speak to here in a minute or two?

[00:15:25] MZW: Yes. So my mistake. So in that room, it was by mistake. It really was. It's definitely by mistake, and I still think I'm really winging it by mistake. But after that amazing APPG meeting, chancellors approached us. They started approaching me, and they were like, “I really want you to come down to my university, and we'd love to work with you, and we'd love

you to help us develop a strategy on how we can support our students.” I was thinking, “What do you mean support, and what do you mean me?”

I ended up going down. As soon as they said, “Oh, okay. What does it look like for you to come in and do this work?” So we've had this amazing conversation. I've come up with all these recommendations, and I've come up with a strategy for them. Basically, at the time, I didn't know I was consulting. But I had consulted on a strategic business sort of change thing. When they said, “How much would that cost,” you know what? You have to clutch your invisible pearls, and you're like, “What do you mean how much would this cost?”

I was thinking I didn't know how much did it cost me to come down. I don't mind you like reimbursing my travel sort of for the train. What do you mean how much it's going to cost? They were like, “Yes. And, you know, what's the different bundles? So if we were to just take this, how much would it cost? If we were to take you coming on board and help all the teachers and train them and all of that stuff, how much would it cost for you and your organization,” which was called My Mind Matters Too at the time. That's what the campaign was. “How much will it cost?”

At this point, there was no business model. I promise you. This was not the intended outcome. The intended outcome was I just wanted to raise awareness. As the title of our campaign was called, I literally just wanted to let the government know that my mind matters too as a young adult, not as a child, not as an adult. As a young adult in that really weird brooks of you're developing and entering adulthood in that transition, that we matter and that we need support. We need tailored support for us. That's all I cared about.

So for it to kind of come quite organically and then for me to have to run home and be like, “What's a business model canvas like? How do you sort out fees? How would you write a contract?” I literally had to go home and search it all. As a young entrepreneur and as a young business owner, no one teaches you how to do this. I know even for adults as well. Most people that enter kind of entrepreneurship and freelancing at an older age, you are winging it from the go.

So imagine I've been like, “Yes. No, no worries. I'll talk to the team. We'll draft up a proposal, and I'll get back to you in terms of fees. But just out of curiosity, sort of what is your budget?”

Thank God, I'd come from like sort of sales, and I'd had a lot of internships beforehand because that conversation could have gone completely left. But it was an opportunity where I realized we are the right people to do this. Actually, we do need young people, and it needs to be something that's a co-production model. Why not try? What's the worst that can happen? It goes wrong, okay. I count my blessings. I did what I could do. But we walk away.

There's no – because, again, it wasn't my intended outcome to have a business. It was just impact. I want change. So, yes, that's kind of how it ended up becoming this organization. We winged it.

[00:18:30] RT: Okay. So you wing it long enough to actually get it up out of the mud and realize we actually have a real thing going on here. We can do something. So talk a little bit for people because it's been what? It's four or five years ago that that occurred.

[00:18:43] MZW: Yes. So we celebrated five years since that first initial campaign in March 2018 this year.

[00:18:51] RT: Okay. So share with people some statistics on the impact to know what winging it can produce in the world in terms of impact.

[00:18:59] MZW: Absolutely. So to date now, MindMapper, I'm really proud to say, has directly taught almost 10,000 young people across the world. We've directly impacted 50,000 young people across the world. We've worked in four different countries, and we've worked with about 40 different organizations, so from corporate companies to universities, to schools, to local community organizations, and statutory, and non-state organizations.

Then I think the most proudest bit is that we've been able to provide 30 young people with jobs. That is from full-time employment, internships, freelancing, helping them get into actual qualified practitioner and qualification and licensing roles. Because they realized that they were also passionate about mental health, became tutors and coaches on our programs and then thought, "Wow. Actually, I want to become a therapist or I want to become a psychologist or I want to become a psychiatrist." They've gone off. Then now, they've come back to work for us again but with that level of expertise. I think that's been the proudest thing.

Also, in terms of having that reach of how many people have read our things or how many people have been in assemblies and sort of workshops, I'm pretty sure our work and our papers have been read by well over 100,000 people.

[00:20:24] RT: Talk a little bit, if you will then, what the actual work is that happens when your people meet the youth that are looking for mental health resources. What's the engagement look like there?

[00:20:36] MZW: Absolutely. So we feel almost like a tutoring organization but for mental health. So you can get tutors for everything; math, science, English, every single topic you can think of. But you also get tutors that work in terms of personal development and careers. But you don't necessarily have that one-to-one tailored support in terms of coaching or accessing mentorship really around your mental well-being.

We decided to create a curriculum, so something that works alongside schools but as a top-up, something that can complement the current education system to fill in those gaps. So we created a curriculum that tailors everything from psycho education, the neuroscience behind it, around the physiology, but also around that kind of key CBT coaching and DBT skills that a young person can walk away from that initial workshop, that initial one-to-one session, or from the initial program and have the practical skills to go away to look after their mental health from a daily basis. But also to know where to get adequate support if they ever come in crisis and navigate that with clear choices and in a way that works best for them.

[00:21:46] RT: So I want to – you have a quote on a video. So it's out there for the rest of all time, right? They actually have two quotes that I made note of. One is I'm passionate about mental health because every day I wake up, I should not be here. Sort of a dance partner, if you will, with that is what keeps me going is 13-year-old Meg. Do you mind sharing a little bit about what that actually means, so people have some understanding of where you're pulling from to have those quotes?

[00:22:19] MZW: Yes, absolutely. So I just want to offer a trigger warning because I know some of the things that I'm about to talk about might be quite challenging. If this is for you and you

might not be in a great mental health space, please do switch off now. But like I said, so I was 13 when I was diagnosed. But I really went through probably one of the most turbulent childhoods as the result of my mental health when I was 14. I had my first suicide attempt only at 14. You should be out enjoying life sort of thing.

Then I had my second suicide attempt when I was 16. Then I had my final one on my 20th birthday. I feel like I had been in that place where that was my only option sort of out. I know that's what a lot of people feel like that your only option is to no longer be here. That's horrible, and it's so sad, and it's a really, really, really awful place to be in because it's not necessarily that you don't love life or you don't love the people around you. It's just that you see no way out. When I say that I shouldn't be here, I really shouldn't because I've had three attempts, and I'm still here.

I'm also a Christian, so I really do believe that the reason I'm here is because of the work that I'm doing, because I've had multiple attempts, and I really shouldn't be here. But there must be a reason. There must be a divine purpose, and there must be a divine intention for why I'm on this Earth today. If it's just to help one person or to ensure that another Meg somewhere doesn't end up going through the same thing, and that actually we can stop that early, then I've done what I needed to do.

[00:23:50] RT: Thank you for that. I think it helps people with context as well to know the strength you're pulling from in order to do this work.

[00:23:57] MZW: Absolutely.

[00:23:59] RT: So this podcast is called 10,000 Swamp Leaders. So I want to shift the focus a little bit because I want to go back to this accidental winging it development of an organization of which you now are suddenly finding yourself as the leader of at the same time. Let's start with the basic. Based on your own experience in traveling this road, what is leading to you? What does it mean to you, now that you've been in this position of having to be such a person for a few years? What is it?

[00:24:28] MZW: Do you mean what makes me who I am now or what have I noticed about being in this position?

[00:24:34] RT: It could be both. It's just let's crack open the conversation because people out there listening are saying, "Okay, that's pretty incredible story. I don't know that I got what it takes to do anything close to that." So let's not compare. But somewhere in the long the line, you made a decision to lead yourself. Now, you're also in charge of an organization where a lot of people are looking to you as the leader, whatever that may mean, for guidance, direction, safety, support, those kinds of things that leaders can foster.

I don't know to what extent you dug into what leading is when you were in that place or if you just started doing it. So this is a chance for people to maybe pick up some ideas about what that stuff looks like from somebody who's traveled the road you've traveled.

[00:25:21] MZW: Yes. I think one of the biggest things was vulnerability and authenticity. I said there are lots of leaders out there, and there are lots of methodologies and algorithms that you can read on how to be an effective leader. But at the core front of it is how do I just become an effective human being. I am a human being rather than a human doing. Therefore, I need to show up as me. It's not about my craft or my work. It's about me as a person, Meg.

All I wanted to do in all my organizations is show up as Meg. I want to be 100% and authentic in who I am and be vulnerable enough with my team that they trust me to. They know that if things don't go right or we have to pivot a lot, they're behind me 100% because I've been vulnerable, and I've also been so open about the fact that I don't have all the answers. I have a clear vision and mission, and I'm passionate about this, and I've got the drive and grit, and I think I'm the right person for this. But I need everyone else around me, and I need them to be part of the boat, steering that ship.

But I also need them to also be gentle with me. I also can learn so much more from other people as well. That first the initial step of being completely and 100% authentic and vulnerable is probably the best ingredient on how to be an effective leader and how to build incredible teams because actually putting you and your personality in there, people can relate to you more. You've been in situations. We've all been there where we've met a chief exec from an

organization. Or you meet the big CEOs or the big investors. For instance, the Dragon Den lot, and you're like, "Wow, these people are amazing." They almost seem so far removed because there's so much separation.

I knew as a leader it didn't matter if I was the CEO, I was a practitioner, or I was on admin. I wanted everyone to be able to have complete access to me. But there wasn't it being far removed that, again, you see Meg as Meg, not as that leader. It's just, "I really like that Meg. I really like working for her." Or, "I really like working with her." Or, "The reason that I'm in this organization is because I believe in Meg, and I believe in the vision. Therefore, it's now my company and my vision too," sort of thing.

[00:27:37] RT: In order to continue to scale, I'm going to guess that you have some aspirations for impact that are bigger than where you are now. What's your philosophy about the people that you work for, developing their capacity to lead? What do you think about that, and what's your actual tactics for pulling that off?

[00:27:55] MZW: Two things is always around capacity building. How can I make people or systems work more effectively? So how can I coach you? Definitely, as a manager, I know this now, especially in my other role. So I run, obviously, MindMapper, but I'm also the strategic head of innovation and strategic programs at a local Mind, and I love that. One of the things I've noticed as being a leader or a manager is I'm very much about coaching. How can we find out what you're amazing at and make you even better at it? What can you specialize in?

I know what I'm amazing at, and I specialize in that. I'm amazing at problem-solving. I'm amazing at ideation. Give me any problem, and I can build something for you like that. Making sure the systems and the nitty-gritty detail bit is in place is probably not my thing. So I always need people around me that can refine, refiners like, and that know where to see the cogs in. So it's about tapping into what people are great at. People often think that as a leader, you have to be amazing at everything. No. Actually, leaders need to find other people that are amazing at things and help them do the things that they're amazing at.

In terms of scaling, that's what I do. I try to find superstars. I remember me and my old co-founder who has now recently left the organization to go on to do amazing things. One thing I

said to him, I said the way that we're going to be the best organization, the best company, and the way that this is going to work and scale and have the impact that we want is that we need to surround ourselves with superstars. We need to surround ourselves with people that are like us, people that are go-getters, people that have big vision, and also people that have had experience of leading as well.

Because, actually, how can you build leaders without people that also have that innate sensation to lead? I think this is going to be quite controversial, and I don't think it's a bad thing to say. But not everyone's meant to be a leader, and that's okay. But for the people that are, how can you find more leaders that can cultivate other people, that can take on characteristics of leaders but are not ready to be leaders in themselves? How can you get other people to lead themselves sort of thing?

[00:30:06] RT: Yes. I think I appreciate you saying what you just said here because I think that in the world that I live in, we go about our education of leaders. We've seemed to forget the value of followership and the value of teams and the wonder that can come from those people functioning in a healthy work environment that not everybody wants to be a leader much less. But they sure would love to be a great follower.

When I listen to you speak, it's impossible for me to work in your organization without developing good following skills inherent in the culture and the way in which you're looking at the philosophy of how you want to build the organization. So I think you're a little ahead of the curve there, by the way, so congratulations.

[00:30:44] MZW: I think another thing that really you can challenge is like I didn't want to be a leader. It's just something that, again, by mistake. Often when I'm in teams, I just get pushed into that role. But something that I love is I don't think I'm an entrepreneur. I'm an intrapreneur. I love being with teams and other people's ideas and making them work. I am a follower, but I've done it in a way that has made so much sense that instead of just being a follower, I've actively taken that ambassador role where I've been like the chief follower. This is what we're going to build. I believe in it 1,000%, and we're going to make it work.

That's often what happens. I really can take on anyone's idea and be like, "Okay. That's the vision that you want. Let's do it. I can do it."

[00:31:27] RT: So here's the question I ask every guest on this podcast. It's my experience that we tend to learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes. Can you speak to one or two failures of leadership on your part, and what lessons did you learn from that that people could benefit from as listeners here?

[00:31:45] MZW: Two of my biggest failures, oh, my God, is number one, for anyone listening, this is a big thing. I remember I just tweeted about this recently which is please don't be afraid to make scary decisions. Just because it doesn't make sense to other people, it doesn't mean that it's not the right decision or the right decision for you. I feel like because I was 20-something-year-old, and I'm surrounded by all these incredible mentors, board members, advisors, and you've got all these people that are experts. But no one was messed necessarily an expert in the field that I was working in. I listened to all the noise.

For a lot of people that are in the startup entrepreneurship world, to scale where everyone tells you need to build a big tech product, you need to build an app, you need to build something that's allow you to scale rapidly. Actually, our USP our unique selling point was the fact that we are just people. The reason why young people connected with our curriculum the most wasn't because of tech. It was because it was real people delivering the program behind it. Actually, the tech that we should have built should have been to connect real people, rather than to connect apps and programs and bots and AI and all of these things.

It really wasted a good two and a half years of us building because I went down a complete rabbit hole. Instead of believing in the core vision, the problem that we were originally trying to solve, I listened to outside noise of what's going to make this scale. Actually, no, we shouldn't have been thinking about scaling. I should have been thinking about what's going to get me in front of even more young people to get that impact. If we want to reach one billion people, how can I get more young people like myself trained up to deliver these programs?

There are everywhere. There are young people everywhere. There are students everywhere. There are an abundant amount of assistant psychologists and psychology students that need

work experience. I just need to tap into them and train that trainer to do it. Not build a tech product that's going to do that. So that was the number one thing that I really messed up on. We could have been where we are now in year five in first year if I didn't listen to all that noise. But I went down a rabbit hole, and I feel like that's the biggest leadership mistake because I should have trusted my instincts and been daring enough to make that scary decision.

I really appreciate all of your expertise. But I think, actually, for the company we're building, this is what we need to stand behind. So that's the first one. Then the second one was feeling afraid to fail in person. So in 2020, I think, we had this big idea to hold the Glastonbury but for mental health, so a national mental festival for young people called **[inaudible 00:34:20]**. The whole idea was it was supposed to bring together young people and organization all together in this incredible festival to talk about the past, present, and future of youth mental health. We had this big idea. We had these amazing performers.

But the whole idea of trying to get people in the room, oh, we had all the sponsorship that you could think of. We had all the companies. But getting young people in the room to get those tickets was so difficult. I think another big leadership failure that I had was that I was too scared to just say, "You know what? We might not have it filled, and we might lose some money here," because we had already been losing money. We'd had to plan this event. We were already losing money. I knew I wanted to still run the event, even if there was 30 people in the room, it's the first time you've done something.

Test and test quickly. Fail quickly, and you learn from it. We could have had that event. Sadly, I listened to outside noise again, and we canceled the event. We still lost money but we got nothing to show for it. Actually, where could that been from 2020 to now, it could have been from those 30 people in the room to 5,000 now. We could have done that. We could have tested quickly. Yes, we would have lost money. But we lost money anyway. What would have an extra couple of grand or an extra 10 grand that we lost? We'd already lost money. We could have been a completely different thing, and we could have 10Xed it, and it was the right idea at that moment.

Even now, the event still needs to happen, but I'm still too scared to do it because of not being bold enough to just be like, "Guys, true leadership is sometimes having to make decisions in the

dark and convincing other people that that's the right decision." I should have stuck by my gut. I think that's the biggest mistakes I've made.

[00:35:58] RT: Yes. One of the definitions of leader that I really have taken to over the last few years is, sometimes, leading is disappointing people in doses they can absorb. Sometimes, that means, yes, I may have to disappoint myself if it doesn't turn out. But I can't stand in the white line and wait for something to happen to me to cause me to move. So thanks for sharing that because I think you speak to the dynamics of anxiety and fear that we have as leaders that other people listening can relate to. So to understand not only the choice but the consequences that came from it is a useful way to get people sort of maybe a movement as well.

All right, so I'm curious. If there's people out there, and they could be young people, but they could be older people who have mental health issues. So for somebody who's listening, and they're hearing what you're saying, and you're sparking something for them, what counsel and advice do you have for them about what they might do to get help?

[00:36:58] MZW: I think the first one is understanding that you're worthy of support. So when I recognized that I couldn't manage it completely by myself. This is everyone has mental health. There's good mental health, and there's poor mental health. We all range on that spectrum, right? But we manage it on a daily basis, and you can go from having a main mental health in the day. Halfway through the day, you are stressed or you feel burned out. That leads to having poor mental health in some areas.

But there are some people that it doesn't matter how much self-care you do. I think this is the key because it kind of gets lost in the rhetoric. The kind of conversation at the moment is self-care doesn't solve mental illness completely. It doesn't completely alleviate your mental problems. It just helps you manage it. There are some people that have incredible self-care routines. They wake up early. They go to bed early. They are working out. They have a great support network. Yet they still feel depressed, or yet they still feel anxious, or yet they're still feeling quite manic or paranoid. They're doing the best that they can.

At that point, they need to understand that they are worthy to ask for help and support. Actually, they've done their best. They've done their part. They've done what they can control. Now, it's

open to the professionals to help them. So the analogy I like to use, and this is for anyone watching now, if you had a rash or a broken leg, what's the first thing you're going to do? You're going to go to the doctor. There you go. So why don't we do the same for our mental health? If you feel like there is something that's not quite right at the moment, and actually it's been going over for a long amount of time, go straight to your GP. Go to your doctor, go get checked out, and go ask help. That's the only way.

[00:38:40] RT: Okay, perfect. Two more questions actually. What should I be asking you that I haven't asked you?

[00:38:46] MZW: Maybe like what's next. But I'm happy you kind of haven't asked me what's next. I'm thinking. I'm still trying to figure it out.

[00:38:54] RT: Yes. I'm going to tell you. Right now, you just rolled up the second question with the first one. I was going to ask you what's ahead so –

[00:39:00] MZW: I feel like, yes, what's next probably. I was kind of dreading that you asked me this. I was thinking, “Rick, I don't have a good answer for you,” sort of thing. But I think what's next is, yes, just fearlessly doing what we're still doing. Every time I try to run away, and this is also a very vulnerable moment, there has been many times I've wanted to quit MindMapper, many times. Last year, the year before, where I've just been a bit like, “I don't know if this is the right thing that I'm doing.” Or, “I know I'm great at business, but this is really challenging.”

If I was to have done something in sustainability or something in finance, which I still have ideas to do in the future, I could have exited the company ages ago. So I very much know that MindMapper hasn't been the thing that's going to get me money. But it's the thing that I'm really passionate. This is the legacy project. This is the thing that isn't going to be the quick affirmations and the quick – that you've got, “Wow, this is multi-billionaire company.” No. This is the one that's going to save lives, and that's the most important thing.

What's next is how can I fearlessly continue to do what I'm doing and find joy in it. It's like what they say. If you're from the UK, you'll know who the gambling adverts. When the fun stops, stop. I feel like I'll keep going until the fun stops. But every time that I'm in front of young people or

every time we build the team, every time we recruit new people, and I see their faces light up because they're inspired by the work we do, how could I stop? How could I stop?

[00:40:29] RT: Okay. So for people who are listening here, they will be listening to this later than the date that we're recording it. But it's worth noting that as we're speaking right now, King Charles is being coronated in London. That caused me a recollection from a conversation we had while we were trying to get ourselves organized to do this. That is you did get invited to Buckingham Palace for a garden party, and you took a special guest with you. So would you tell people a little bit about that, what that was like because nobody else has been on the swamp and Buckingham Palace at the same time?

[00:41:03] MZW: Yes. I got to meet the royal family pretty much two weeks a year ago today. It was probably the proudest moment I've ever had in my life because I got to take my mom. My mom really is the reason that I do everything that I do. My mom – like I'm 25, and I'm a senior leader, and I sit in rooms with people that have had 25-year careers. That imposter syndrome does get me, but I've never not been told at home that just because you're young, it doesn't mean that you don't have a voice. I was always sat at the adult table. My mum has always been like be cut for what you believe in.

So to be able to take my mom where she could see that 13-year-old girl who was really struggling, and as a parent not knowing how to support, and then being able to see your child be recognized by the highest sort of body of politics sort of thing in our society in the UK, and then to be able to enjoy it like the A-listers that we did, it was amazing. We got a car. We were driven there. We had fascinators. It was just an incredible thing and also a proud moment for me as well.

My family are Kenyan by background, and we were, obviously, colonized by the UK and things like that. We're part of the common world. So to see my mom who grew up when things were happening and freedom fires, my grandparents, and then to be in the same organization but as guests and being celebrated, yes, a full circle, I could see how proud I made my family in the legacy. So get tears but it was just, yes, a big moment. It just reminded me like, “Oh, Meg. This thing that you accidentally fell into, you're not doing too bad. You're not doing too bad.”

[00:42:47] RT: Yes. I'm going to counter and say I don't think there are accidents in the universe like this. I think the calling came, and you picked up the phone and said, "Okay, I'm ready to go." So, Meg Zeenat Wamithi, thank you so much for your time. I will let people know. We will put links in the show notes to your website. I think there's a few other things you mentioned that I want to follow up with. If there's some links that we can pass on, resources and help for people, they'll be able to find those in the show notes and how to get a hold of you.

Thank you very much for your time and your contribution as an active member of the common good. It's always a joy to meet somebody who's hard at work for the common good. So it's just a pleasure to know you and to know you're at work, doing what you're doing. Thank you very much.

[00:43:33] MZW: Thank you so much, Rick.

[00:43:34] RT: Bye-bye.

[OUTRO]

[00:43:37] 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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