EPISODE 48

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:06] 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.

[EPISODE]

[0:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp leaders, the podcast where we have conversations with friends, colleagues, complete strangers that I've met who are working around the world, and making their efforts based on a decision that they had to choose to lead on some very difficult situations. If you're a regular listener to the podcast, you'll know that we've covered a lot of different topics and a lot of different areas of work. Today is a particularly cool day for me because I have a guest. I hesitate to even call Joe Badman, a guest. He's a friend, he's a colleague, he's a work partner, but he is a guest for these contexts.

Joe is a very interesting guy. We're going to get into his primary focus right now, is he is the managing director of a consultancy in London called Basis. One that I'm familiar with is I do some work with Basis as well. He runs that operation, which is its own challenge, because he's in camp with a bunch of renegade consultants who are out changing the world. But Joe has a very interesting background, not the least of which he is the first Welshman to be on the podcast. We're probably going to start there, Joe, with what that all means. So I want to welcome you to the Swamp, and thank you for joining us on the podcast today. Good to have you.

[0:01:32] JB: Yeah, good to be here. Thanks for the invitation, Rick.

[0:01:35] RT: Yes, you're welcome. Let's kick it off with you to give people perhaps some context. What is it you want them to know about you that you think is relevant, not only to what you do, and how you live, but also in the context of the conversation we're having here on this podcast?

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[0:01:50] JB: It's a tricky one to answer, because I'm interested in so many different things, and I often find myself in a bit of a predicament where I'm trying to explain to people what it is that I do, what it is that we do basis, and how – all the things that I have learned over the years kind of combined together to be of use in solving kind of messy problems. I guess the thing that it's useful to dig into at some point is that I'm just really, really interested in learning stuff, and I've got pretty good at the – I guess, the practice of learning things, because I love being a beginner at a variety of different things. This could go from learning about adaptive leadership. I love a beginner on that journey, all the way through to – I also do magic, I love being a beginner, and learning new tricks.

I suppose over time, I've just got quite good of the processes. I wouldn't call myself a master in any of these things, but the kind of process of mastery is something that I think about quite a lot. I think that cultivating, yes, a real hunger to kind of get better at stuff, and a real joy in the process of improving. I think that's something that's maybe worth talking about at some point.

[0:03:02] RT: Okay. We'll definitely get into that. For our starting point, I made mention the fact that you're a Welshman, obviously from Wales. But my experience is that, our upbringing, our influences, both culturally and where we come from, and parents, and fans, and friendly family have more influence on us than we realize until we're a little later in life like we are now. So for people, I know that being where you're from is a big deal to you. Talk a little bit about how, where you come from, and the culture you grew up may inform a little bit about who you are and how you use yourself in the world.

[0:03:35] JB: Yes, so I grew up in the Welsh Valleys in South Wales, which is a pretty deprived area in the UK, even in Wales. It would be considered one of the most deprived areas because it was a coal mining part of the world. In fact, it was that part of Wales, essentially something to be proud of, really. But it developed the industrial process of mining coal that essentially power the whole planet during the Industrial Revolution. But when the mines shut, it basically gutted that part of the country, and left very, very kind of poor, poor community. I kind of grew up in that context. Another thing that's worth mentioning is that, over the course of the sort of 19th, and 20th century, the Welsh language, which would have been very commonly spoken in Wales, gradually started to die out. That's as a result of lots of different factors.

Some kind of targeted attempts by the kind of UK Government at that point to try and reduce the amount of Welsh that was spoken in Wales, because it's kind of seen as, I guess, the language of Welsh nationalism. So Welsh was dying out, very, very poor communities. I kind of grew up in that environment. But my parents in the 1980s, the Welsh Government had some powers devolved to them, invested tons of money in Welsh medium education. My parents took decision to send me and my siblings to a Welsh language nursery, Welsh language primary school, Welsh language secondary school.

I grew up in a really strange situation where I was growing up bilingual, but couldn't speak Welsh in the home. For me, growing up in that community and growing up as a Welsh speaker in a community that essentially had Welsh taken away from it, is something that I am immensely proud of. I've been really lucky in this job that I'm in currently to be able to look for opportunities to work through the medium of Welsh, to create opportunities for other people to work through the medium of Welsh, to help people contribute to making change happen through their first language, so it's something that I really care about.

But I kind of had an interesting upbring, because my mom was public service through and through. She's like a stick of rock. If you cut her open, you'd find public service on the inside. My dad was an actor, mainly an out of work actor for his whole life. But amazing storyteller, really great performer. I've tried to take kind of elements of both. I suppose I've been really influenced by elements of both their personalities. I'm super passionate about public service, but I also have learned an enormous amount about storytelling, and performance, and authenticity, and all those kinds of things from my dad. So it was kind of a unique mixture I suppose of parents in that way.

[0:06:25] RT: Well, I did not know the last part about your father. That's cool to hear. I think I mentioned, but let's amplify it a little bit. The work of Basis is in public service, for the most part, or in issues that are involving really gnarly, messy, wicked problems that we know about. I know that your mother had some indirect influence on how you got your career launched. But how did you – maybe it was your mom, and maybe it's something beyond that. But what pulled you towards working in social impact, public service, local government, at a rather relatively young age professionally. What was the attraction there?

[0:07:01] JB: My original intention was I wanted to do something in international relations. So I was working in a coffee shop after university, and got a new apartment, started, put my deposit down, started renting the place, and then immediately got sacked. That was quite difficult because I had rent to pay, I had no job, and my mom at the time, she worked in the Job Center. She had a good job in the Job Center. That's for people who are not from the UK, the Job Center is part of the Department Work and Pensions, is a big part of that department. Helps people find work, it gets them out of work benefits, that kind of thing. My mom basically just got me a job, like an admin job, and I was really lucky.

[0:07:45] RT: Thank you, mom.

[0:07:46] JB: Yes. Thank you. Yes. Actually, very lucky because lots of people wouldn't have been that fortunate, and would have been in a really, really tough situation. But I immediately just fell in love with this job. My mom was the most passionate public servant, so I had – growing up, I never saw working in a benefits office as a bad thing. I saw that as a really positive thing. Very quickly, I was coming into contact – so I was 21, 22, and I was coming into contact with people that were in really, really difficult circumstances because I got that job around about the beginning of the last financial crisis. So we're talking about 2008, that kind of time.

So you had a real mixture of people that were out of work and have been long-term unemployed and had lots of really complex problems. It was going to be really hard to help them through those. and get them back into work. Then on the other end of the spectrum, you had accountants, and people working in financial services, and people who ran businesses, who had never needed any help from the state before, and they were out of work too. They needed a different kind of help. But I found that I was kind of pretty good at navigating those conversations, and maybe it was, I could kind of empathize with the situations. And usually, would get to pretty good conclusions in those conversations with people, where I would find some way of helping them. Some meaningful way of moving them a step closer to whatever it was that they needed next.

I noticed that wasn't always the case, because that can be pretty oppressive environments to work in, but I didn't find it oppressive at all. I find it hard, but I really enjoyed the ability, I guess,

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just to help somebody just meaningfully, even if it was only a tiny amount. I thought that that was really important, and I wanted to keep working in a space that enabled me to do that.

[0:09:29] RT: I'm curious in that environment at that time, financial crisis, a lot of pain, and human suffering going on. From what I'm hearing you say is, your job is basically to meet that condition every day and do the best you can for people in that. What did that work in that engagement with those people day after day after day teach you about you and about humanity that you didn't know that was like, you know?

[0:09:54] JB: Well, I think – I was just out of university. In university, even if you're doing a subject in the humanities, there's always a quest for the perfect answer. You're trained to – I'm going to try and get a first here in this essay. I want 20 out of 20. I guess what I learned is that, when you're dealing with people that are in real crisis, forget that 20 out of 20 stuffs. It doesn't exist. You are dealing with real complexity, there's no clear understanding of the problem, there's no clear understanding of what you need to do in order to help that person. You just need to rely on other things. You need to rely on your ability to build a real relationship with people, build some trust with them, to demonstrate to them somehow that you actually care. You're not just saying you care because it's your job to care. But they see, they know, they feel the truth of it.

If you can establish some of those things, then you can help people make some progress. I guess what it told me about me was that I cared more about those things, building those skills than I did about coming up with the perfect answer. I realized very quickly, that I had an application to enter to do international relations at that university I studied at. It was Bristol University. I withdrew that application, because I was like, "You know what? Actually, this isn't the right course for me. I don't want to go back to try to write perfect essays. I want to engage with the messiness a bit more."

[0:11:20] RT: Yes. You remind me of a line by Peter Block, who is speaking the same language that you're speaking. He's saying something to the effect that the purpose of life for most people should be, ought to be giving up the quest for knowing answers in pursuit of a better question. I think that in the world that you live in and work, and the world that I live in and work, the absence of that understanding is problematic, because most of the things we confront are

unanswerable with a specific answer. So it leads me to another question, then. How do you manage the ambiguity of knowing that that's the world you're going to live in and work in for the rest of time, and that we still live in a world that puts premium and cachet on answers? And you deal with human beings for whom the journey is ambiguous, and the outcomes are going to likely be ambiguous, and we got to keep going. So listeners out there who are choosing to do this kind of work in the world, what are you learning about that journey, and how you guide people on that journey, so that they do see progress and hope with the work that they're trying to get done.

[0:12:29] JB: It makes me think of a lot of things. I mean, I run a consultancy, and it's not ideal when you're running a consultancy, to not have a really easy to explain product. Frankly, it's a nightmare. But I suppose, for me, the joy of this kind of work is working alongside people and helping them to put words to something that they already know. Most of the people that we're working with, they know that there's no perfect solution to what they're trying to do. They know there's no plan that they can follow. If we can build another relationship with them, to get into a place where they are willing to accept that, and we can build enough trust with them, that they're willing to, I guess, trust us to help them get started and see if we can make a little bit of progress, rather than just by doing something pre-planned that's never going to work.

If we can get people into a place where they're willing to have a go, and they see that we can make progress through a completely different set of skills, through a completely different set of So, methods, that's what keeps me going. Because it's incredibly transformative, I think for that person and that organization. If they make progress on a messy challenge, by more kind of agile and adaptive means, then that completely opens up their whole world. They will approach complex, messy, wicked problems in a completely different way from thereafter. The impact of the work is more than just that piece of project, more than just that project. It has a far more longevity, I think. I think that's a little bit of a rambling explanation, but I think you get what I mean.

[0:13:59] RT: I do get what you mean. I think I would – not think, I know I would amplify that effort by saying that those people have arrived at a station in life before they're engaged with you in this conversation, where they have literally known answers to most of the hard problems that they face. They've been rewarded, they've been recognized, they have developed a

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lifestyle to some degree around that skill set. So to think that that's not the end all be all to the future. In fact, it could work against you, and adjust to the work that you're doing so that they build that capacity is no small effort for them. Or, I'm going to say on your behalf that people at Basis, no small effort to move them along in that journey. If that's so, and we think it is, so talk a little bit – actually, I'm going to backup. The first time I met you, and I think you probably remember this, you were a participant in a program that Basis was doing.

[0:14:58] JB: That's right. I thought you were going to say, I showed you a card trick or something, **[inaudible 0:15:01]**.

[0:15:02] RT: Yes. Well, that was a different then. But that wasn't the first time I met you. I don't remember – honestly, I don't remember what the work was we were doing or why you were there. Except that – do you remember this? I remember you sat in the very front row for most of the whole day, and you were completely turned on, and engaged by the work that we were doing and have asking people to do. Afterwards, after you all had departed, and we're talking. Dennis Vergne, for those listeners know, he was on this podcast in April of 2022. I and a couple other people were debriefing, and we kept coming back to this guy in the front of the room. Who was he? Because you really showed some stuff there.

Let's make the connection. How did you find your way in making a decision to lead public service to go into this world where you're going to advise public service, and you have no authority to make people do anything, and it's harder in some ways? What was allure, and what was that process like to make that transition for yourself?

[0:16:07] JB: Yes, so it was difficult. I think that lots of people that really care deeply about public service who work in the public sector, and then you move into consultancy. You have to kind of confront this somebody. What's the story why you're doing that? Do you not think you could make more of a difference on working within the organization rather than outside it? It's something everybody's got to figure out for themselves. But for me, the way that I moved into Basis was because of Dennis.

I've maybe met three or four people over the course of my career that had an enormous, enormous impact on me, and Dennis was one of them. I met him when I was working in a local

authority, so kind of local government when I was early on in my career, and I was doing kind of change work there. I didn't really know what I was doing. But in Dennis, I saw somebody that was so utterly just – I've never met anybody that gave more of a shit about genuinely making some kind of positive societal impact, and was positively enthusiastic about getting involved in the mess of it, and not shying away from rolling his sleeves up, not pretending like he had a solution, was perfectly confident to say, "I don't know, I don't really know, but we'll work it out together." People actually believed him. I was like, "Whoa, how are they believing that?"

So yes, there was something about him that I just wanted to – yes, I wanted to work with him. It turned out that was a really great decision, because from a kind of developmental standpoint, I think he's probably had the biggest influence on me, of anybody I've met in my career, really. So pretty easy answer. There was no inner turmoil about it really. I just really wanted to work with him.

[0:17:40] RT: It's a little difficult for us to have this conversation about our friend, because everything you say is spot on and right. I met Dennis under slightly different circumstances in a graduate school program. But almost instantly, there was something about him that was compelling in a modest kind of way, or in an unassuming kind of way. And a hard worker, as you say, committed to the efforts that he's trying to do. I can easily see the attraction there. Sometimes I think you and I, we're going, "What the hell did we do signing on to be part of this circus with this guy?" It's always because it's always a good thing. I understand your deal here.

I want to ask you a little bit about what you said at the beginning, because now you're in Basis. Talk about this practice and mastery of learning that you mentioned at the outset. Because I think that it's important for people in our world to have some grip with that, because in some ways, that lies at the core of what we're asking people to embrace. We can hang frames, and concepts, and strategies, and methodologies. But if we can't stir the blood to have them be curious and be learners, all that's for naught. What do you know about that? What did you learn about yourself? Then, how do you translate that is a core platform in which to do work with the people you work with?

[0:18:59] JB: I read Daniel Pink's book, *Drive*, I guess early on when that came out. He talks about, for people to be motivated, assuming that they get paid enough to meet their basic

needs, people to be motivated. They need purpose, they need – let me get this right. They need autonomy, and lastly, they need mastery. They need purpose, they need to see that what they're doing is meaningful, and meaning is going to be different for everybody, right? But they need to know that there's a real purpose to what they're doing. They need autonomy, so they need some freedom in order to – within some rules, they need some freedom to be able to figure it out for themselves. And crucially, they need the opportunity to get better at whatever that thing is over time.

This idea – I mean, Daniel Pink's an absolute master at conveying really, really complex information in very easy to understand terms. But that idea really, really resonated with me because ever since I've been really, really young, I have had more hobbies than anybody else that I've ever known. My best friend, so very embarrassing nickname, calls me Joseph Fadman. They're not fads. These are things that I work on for often more than decades. So fad is completely untrue and complimentary. But I absolutely love the process of mastering something, I take an enormous joy in it.

I think that for me, I've always been able to – I've always been – I had some kind of reason why I was doing the thing. I had a good enough purpose in my own head. I had all the autonomy in the world, freedom to kind of work on these things. It's something that has really, really influenced me. I think in the development of an organization like Basis where – and I'm going a little bit on some tangents here, Rick, so you'll have to pull me in if I'm not answering the question. But in an organization like Basis, that is a relatively self-managing organization that doesn't really have a hierarchy, you need to make sure that everybody has a purpose. They can see why they're doing the work, what's the meaning. You need to give people space to figure out how best to do the work, so we're working on complex problems, messy problems. So there isn't a perfect answer, so you need to give them autonomy to just work it out, and there needs to be the opportunity for them to kind of get better over time.

If you get those things right, then people generally a bit more motivated and can do amazing, amazing things. That's true, I think in the context of organizational development. It's certainly true in the context of projects. If you look at projects that are going wrong, oftentimes, it's because, usually, people are unclear on purpose. Why are we actually doing this? What difference are we hoping this is going to make? If that's not clear up front, and things go wonky

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very, very quickly. Similarly, if there's not enough autonomy, people are being told exactly what to do. They become very demotivated very quickly, and will often abdicate the responsibility for making decisions because they don't think they got the freedom to make them anyway.

If they don't get better, they don't see an opportunity to improve at whatever practice it is that they're working on. Or they'll leave at some point soon, because we all crave that. I mean, that's why we all have our own little hobbies. I know you're a really kind of keen cyclist, and I bet you – well, I know you're a bit of a nerd when it comes to the kind of metrics. You want to see those little improvements. We all want that in work and in our private lives. I think you can always spot whether there's a deficit one of these areas.

[0:22:17] RT: Thinking as you described that, if I'm on the client side, or the potential client side of a conversation with somebody from Basis, and you're talking about that approach. One thing I'm thinking about is, this gap exists a lot. I'm wondering, "Well, do these folks actually do what they're asking us to do in the work that they do? When they're together, when we don't see them, when they're not trying to pitch something to us, do they show up and actually do the things that they're advocating here?" The answer to that I know is yes, and you just amplified that.

But it takes me to a place that says that there's a big difference in the world of advising others, between trading in a marketplace of ideas, insights, which I would argue come fairly cheap and inexpensive in the market. And what you're advocating, which is a newer, greater capacity to actually execute when it matters when something's at stake, and we can produce a more desirable outcome than had we not had that capacity. That journey from insight, which you've got to have to scale and capacity takes time. That's what Pink's talking about in a different framework. So talk a little bit about how you accompany your clients on this capacity building journey, so they can go from somewhat at the outset needing you to a place where they're autonomous and can self-determine with greater capacity at a higher level. What's the work of accompanying them on that journey?

[0:23:45] JB: Well, essentially, we've stolen the way that we do that from the medical profession. So there's an idea in the medical profession, see one, do one, teach one. First of all, you get to – let's say – I'm no medical professional. So if there any out there, you're going to

have to cut me some slack. I'm going to butcher this. But say, you're an orthopedic surgeon, you get to – you have a training to become one, and you get to observe the surgery. Perhaps you get to ask a whole bunch of questions afterwards, so you get to see one. And probably, you'll see a whole bunch.

Then the next stage is, you do one. So you do the surgery, and you've probably got somebody else there, and they're kind of giving you some advice, and some coaching in the moment. If you get stuck, hey, we're there to help, and you'll do that a whole bunch of times. I know how many times orthopedic surgeons go through these phases, but let's say many. Once they've done a whole bunch, they've really internalized this process, and then they're able to teach other people. We try and take the same approach. Let's say, one of the – I'll take a generic skill rather than a method. Collaboration is enormously hard. Everybody has a bit of a platitude to say that. One of the functions that we often play in the context of really massive projects, is we help to facilitate those conversations. We help people to figure out what's actually going on based on what citizens are telling us, what the data is telling us. We help them wade through the mess. But the collaboration part of that is really, really hard.

So we design interactions with people, and we facilitate them in such a way that enable everybody to feel included, and to participate. So if we're trying to build that skill, that capacity within an organization, which is, I would argue far more important than being able to do a whole bunch of methods. If you can facilitate really tough engagements, that's very, very useful in all kinds of scenarios. But we'll do that with our clients participating, so they'll see what we think good facilitation practice looks like, and they'll see that a few times. The next stage of that is we'll cut – we'll do some stuff together, we'll co facilitate, we'll pick something really messy, and we'll work with them to design how we're going to go about doing the thing. But we'll do it together. So if they get really, really stuck, then we can kind of jump in, and we can help out. Crucially, we can give them feedback afterwards, and maybe we'll go through that a few more times.

But once they get to that stage, they don't know in theory how to do that. They know in practice how to do that. That is worth far more than, like you were saying, insights and ideas come cheap. Anybody can learn to recite what good facilitation practice looks like. But doing it is a whole another kettle of fish entirely. What we try and do is get people to a stage where they

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know in practice how to do something, not just in theory. And then when we leave, they're able to kind of show other people, or at least that capacity exists, and we haven't created a deficit within the organization. They've not become reliant on us. There's plenty of hard problems for us to work on. So, ideally, in that context, we would have made ourselves redundant. Now, obviously, I'd be very sad if Basis folded overnight, because we had no work. But I'm pretty confident there's enough messy problems in society for us to be able to help somebody else and go through a similar process.

[0:26:48] RT: All right, so let's take a site ball angle here, because you mentioned this in your introduction, but I know it has influenced, but I don't know how it has influenced. You are a magician.

[0:26:58] JB: Yes.

[0:26:59] RT: When I say a magician, you entertain, you do groups, you do all sorts of stuff. I have this side hustle going on that's real and vibrant, and you're very good at it. Talk a little bit about just the work of being a magician to start with without giving away the trade secrets. But how does that influence your core work?

[0:27:19] JB: So I got loads of things to say on this, and you'll have to shut me up. The work being a magician is the most, the most special thing. I think the problem with magic is that most people haven't actually seen good magic, and they've seen like a little trick here or there, and maybe they've been relatively unimpressed. But, you know, good magic is like good theater, and it's just an absolute joy to share it with, with people. Because there's nothing else like it. The experience of being totally, and utterly baffled, the experience of wonder, and seeing somebody experience that is just a beautiful, magical, magical thing. So it's a really, really nice thing to be able to share with people.

But yes, years ago, I was doing tons and tons and tons of magic, and I kind of got a little bit disillusioned with it, because I was doing lots of shows where people were paying tickets and dressing up nicely. At the end of all the tricks, would get a nice little round of applause. I got to this point where I thought, "Do you know what? People are just clapping because of the

conventions of theater." I don't know whether I'm any good or not, they feel like they have to clap because it's embarrassing, so they clap anyway.

I kind of abandoned that and started street performing at the Cutty Sark in Greenwich, which is a really nice spot in southeast London. I had to kind of go through the process of learning all over again, because street performing isn't the same as magics. So completely different discipline, where you've got to learn to stop a crowd, keep a crowd, ideally get them to pay at the end. But this is kind of what I was saying earlier on. I love the process and the practice of being a beginner and learning something new all over again.

The first street show I did in Greenwich, I got five P, which is like seven cents or something. It was a little girl that gave it to me, because she just felt so bad that it was just a terrible, terrible experience. Then by the end of the summer, people were putting folding money in my hat, and I kind of – I wasn't great, but I was kind of better. But the process of learning and getting better at something to me is just the best. That's where I find my state of flow. I feel just the same about the work that we do in Basis, and I'm really trying to wrestle something and get better at it. That's where I'm in a real state of flow. But it's kind of the process of working on magic is not too dissimilar to the process of working on hard problems, which sounds a little bit, maybe sounds a little bit trivial, but it's true.

So if you want to create a really amazing piece of magic, really spectacular piece of magic, you would not sit in your bedroom for six months with all the books surrounding you, crafting out this amazing routine, and all the things you'll say, and the moves you'll do, and what you'll wear, and the audience you'll perform to, and then go out and perform it for 200 people. That will be a recipe for disaster. That will be the worst magic performance imaginable, because there will be so many things that will go wrong. You'd have so many assumptions about what you think would work that would come unstuck, and you would find that were untrue the moment you started doing the thing. I think that people who are designing services, in all kinds of industries sometimes fall into the same – sometimes fall in the same trap, and I fall into this trap myself.

You think that what you're dealing with is predictable, and you think that if you're smart enough, and you get enough smart people together, you think you'll be able to design the perfect solution. In most cases, if you're dealing with any form of complexity, you just can't, and the only

way of figuring out whether or not something's going to work – so in the case of a magic trick, whether it's going to be any good, or whether the service you're developing is going to have an impact is to test it and see if it works on a small scale. Then if it works, then you build on it, and maybe you add some more people into it, and add some more variables. Then you learn a bit more, and maybe you learn that there's something really important that needs to be fixed. Okay, we'll fix that next. You fix that, and then you build on it again. So there are a lot of parallels between creative disciplines, like in performance, and the design of really great services, I think.

[0:31:22] RT: So let's amplify one of the primary focuses of Basis for listeners because – and that is your emphasis in your passion for agile design work in public service. I think people – it's sort of similar to a lot of things in our world, they've heard enough of the language to think they know what it's about. In the time we – whatever time you think you want to take here, what is it you know about the potency of agile design work as a methodology to be helpful for society. And therefore, advocating on its behalf a little bit for why people should consider it. Because let's face it, our perspective is it works, it's useful, people benefit from it. But there's a lot of myth and hoowa around there as well. So take a little time to make a case.

[0:32:10] JB: So you've put me in the position of sole advocate for agile approaches. No pressure, right?

[0:32:18] RT: I'm also the advocate for adaptive leadership. We live in the same bloody world, man. I'm hoping that I find a new way to tell my story based on listening to you. It's all about me right now.

[0:32:27] JB: Okay. So this isn't six hours. I don't work in software development; I don't work in kind of digital. Agile is fairly well in those circles, in those environments. I work in public services, and I often – brick and mortar services. Sometimes there's a digital component to it. But these are people doing hard, hard work. Generally speaking, most people, they're not familiar with agile, as I would know. They've heard the term agile, because everybody uses it, and use it as a means of selling services. But they probably don't have the words to explain it.

For me, I'm just going to define some terms first. In the simplest possible description, agile is an approach for helping teams to develop products or services, or to implement change. That's it.

There's a bit more detail to it. If you're working in an agile team, what will often happen is you'll take a big messy problem, and you'll break it down into small component parts. Because you're now looking at small component parts, it's a bit easier to prioritize what's most important to work on. From the perspective of the customer, I think X is more important than Y. Also, because you're dealing with manageable chunks, it's not so overwhelming so you can make quicker progress. But agile teams need feedback from customers, so the people who will benefit from the service, and from other people know about the problem, and they use that feedback to figure out what works in practice and not just in theory.

So they test things out, they do some work, they make some change, they get some feedback. And then over time, they get closer and closer to a solution that closely matches what the end user expects. That's what I'm talking about when I'm talking about agile. I'm not talking about manifestos; I'm not talking about principles or values. That's what I'm talking about. So the reason why it's helpful in the context of public services, or at least kind of public services that I work on, is because most of these problems are messy. What I mean by messy is. It's not fully understood, because it's kind of constantly changing, and there's no perfect solution, there's no blueprint. So it stands to reason that the more traditional approach to making change happen, sometimes called a waterfall approach where you say, "Hey, this is our plan. These are the steps. This is the order we're going to deal with these steps." It stands to reason that that's not going to work in this context where you don't fully understand the problem and you haven't got a perfect solution, because there's just way too many assumptions.

The reason why this agile way of working makes sense in the context of public services is because you're able to test stuff out very quickly, see what works for real people, and then build on it over time. You also get some value at the earliest possible stages. Let's say we're working on a homelessness service, and it's not working very well. There are big delays between people getting help. And in the meantime, they're either rough sleeping, or perhaps they're in accommodation that really doesn't meet their needs. It could be all kinds of things not working.

If we were to try and fix that using a kind of traditional project management approach, that project would take a year. And we'd only find out at the end of the year, if we'd actually made a difference for the people that we're trying to serve. And probably the people we're trying to serve, have moved to a different location, maybe the circumstances have changed, probably

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doesn't even matter to them anymore. In a more agile approach, we would say, "Okay. We got a hypothesis that this way of doing it will be better. Why don't we try that for every fifth person that comes through the door right now? And we'll see whether or not it helps them. If it does, then we're on to something, and we'll build on it."

So those people get some immediate value, and what's great about that is, obviously, it's brilliant for the individual, they get some value. But it's also great because it gives senior leaders who are responsible for these services some confidence that the changes you're proposing are actually going to make a difference. Rather than just having to kind of just prick, keep their fingers crossed, and pray until the end of the year, and pray to their Gods of project management, or the Gods of consultancy that it's going to work. So I think it's a real challenge, real double-edged sword, because what you're saying to people is, "Hey, we're going to get some value really quickly, and it will give you some confidence. But we're also saying that we don't know how. Are you up for it?

[0:36:51] RT: Yes. It also strikes me that one of the important aspects is occurring. If they say, yes, let's go on this journey, is that they come to understand that the measure of effectiveness and success is making progress on these gnarly problems, rather than thinking we can fix it. Because everything you do may tweak it a little bit as you go along. And so you're on a constant journey, and you're learning to craft a stain on that journey to continue to make progress on any evolving messy, wicked problem.

All right. Let's move on here a little bit. Let's talk about Joe himself. So you're doing this work, you're learning how to do this work, you'll learn how to be a consultant. It occurs to somebody in your organization that what we should do with Joe now is make him the managing director for the entire bloody operation. All right. People who listen to this podcast know my point of view on this, and that is, I don't believe there are such thing as leaders, I do believe there is choosing to lead. That's an activity and it's a thing we do. And then when we're done, we recede back, and then we choose to lead again. Tell us a little bit about what you've learned about Joe Badman when you became managing director of this gaggle of, like I said, lovable renegades who have points of view and ideas about how things should work, and keep everybody coherently organized and moving to have impact. It's a long question, so bear with me.

But with the understanding that we have listeners who are trying to figure out how to use themselves to lead on difficult challenges, and so what have you learned about how you use yourself inside Basis to keep it going, and external in delivering services to clients that have surprised you about who you are in this role of managing director.

[0:38:36] JB: So I just been joined by a Spaniel, so I'm hoping he's not going to leave on me at the moment. So I was with Dennis in – this would have been 2019, we were at a conference in The Hague, in the Netherlands. Dennis was from The Hague, he travels all the time, but only to The Hague.

[0:38:54] RT: I can vouch for that.

[0:38:57] JB: We've just gone through this really, really sort of messy, messy project, and I was pretty stressed about it. He said, "Look, obviously, it's not great that you're stressed. But you know what, it's really helpful to have somebody that worries about these things. Now, for people who don't know Dennis, you won't sort of get the humor in this. But Dennis was created as the most laid-back man on the planet. If there was a perfect profession for him, it would be that chair salesman, just get – chill out, and drink flat whites, and eat licorice all day, and think about really important stuff.

I thought at that time, like, "Yes, I do worry, and maybe I do need to get on top of some of the sort of stresses that I'm dealing with now." But there's something in that that I think is useful. I'm the kind of person that gets really bothered by stones in my shoe. If there's a stone in my shoe, if I think, you know what, something could be better. Usually, better for me is more impactful, more human, could make people happier. Those are the kinds of things that I really care about. If I see something like that, it will be a stone in my shoe. I won't stop until I've managed to get it out. That's not to say that I then take responsibility for doing all the work to solve whatever that thing is that's causing me some problems, I'll usually try and get people who are also interested, and care about to figure it out together. But I think like the restlessness, and that – being the kind of person that struggles with stones in your shoes, it's not necessarily something to be overcome. I think it's something sometimes that is worth celebrating, because you need – I think you need other people that like that around you. You need people to think, "Ah, you know what? I'm going to choose to lead in this context, because I think this is really important."

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[0:40:43] RT: Yes, I agree. Stay with that, though, choosing to lead. My view is that we tend to learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes. They sting a little bit, they live with us longer. So again, bearing in mind, we have listeners here who are a little further back on the journey. What can you share with those people about what you've learned from some of your failures? You don't have to share them all. But you know, what kind of pops up for you when I ask you this question?

[0:41:08] JB: I can think of a few times where I've really messed up, and they have lingered with me for a very long time. They've usually lingered with me, because I've given up on solving the problem. For whatever reason was, for whatever the circumstances where I've – yes, I've kind of given up on it. I think it's rare that that happens. But I think that a certain amount of failure is absolutely inevitable. In fact, a lot of failure is inevitable if you're working on messy stuff, and that's okay. That is part of the process. The trick is to fail early and often.

I love this quote, as an actor, and a musician called Andy Nyman. I saw him talk at a convention and he said something like, "To err is human, but to err at the finale is inexcusable," which I love. I think that people should embrace a certain amount of failure, and should be honest about it, and try, and work in places, or try and cultivate workplaces where it's easy to talk about failure.

[0:42:14] RT: Failure. Yes, I agree.

[0:42:16] JB: Where people where people don't have to engage in face saving activities in order to pretend like things are okay. Because once you get into a culture like that, then you'll never make progress on problems.

[0:42:26] RT: I agree. I agree. So yes, I think that failure is fine. Failure is normal. I sort of trailed off a little bit there. You got the gist.

[0:42:34] RT: Let's go the other direction then. What are your gifts, and talents, and maybe even some unused potential that you could bring more of to the world to Basis, to clients?

[0:42:45] JB: Gifts and talents? Well, I'm very humble for number one. A plus for the humility. What are my gifts and talents? It's a horrible question. I think I'm quite good at conveying to people, and I've learned this from Dennis that I care about the thing that I'm working on. I suppose that, you know, to a certain extent, certain extent, authenticity, I suppose. I mean, that's a ridiculous thing. I'm very authentic person, that's the most cringe worthy thing ever. I don't think I'm a very authentic person. But if I really care about something, I'm able to convey that to people. I think that things like that, people knowing that you care, people sort of trusting that you have their best interests at heart. Those things go an enormous way towards making progress on hard problems.

I think I'm also pretty comfortable with giving feedback to people both kind of constructive, and crucially, when people have done really well, because I'm the kind of person – I'm quite – I need that. I need both the constructive stuff, and I definitely need to know when I'm doing a good job. I've tried to kind of work on that, but untapped potential. Oh, my goodness, just about every avenue I could imagine. What do you think? What do you think my biggest weakness is, Rick?

[0:44:04] RT: This is the reason for the question. I think that particularly in organizational life and adult life, there's an unconscious perspective, and orientation, and development around oil leaks. If we could fix the oil leaks around here, life would be better. And people can make an honest case in their life, once they've reached a certain age that, A, I know what my oil leaks are, and B, I work on them every day. You should have seen me 20 years ago with this thing. I'm way better than I was before, and I'm going to keep working on it, and I'll be better in 10 years than I am today.

But rarely is the conversation, what are the gifts and talents that we're not developing here? Because there's no upside, there's no ceiling on that. I think that in our world is, oftentimes getting to a place where we have some credibility of perspective that the organization of the clients don't have. Injecting this perspective as a part of the dialogue is an important thing because there is – it's authentically so that there's more upside here if we could develop more of our gifts, and talents, and context of the work that we do.

If somebody asked me about Joe Badman, I'd say, well one, he's smart as hell. Two, you have what I would call life juice, which is to say, it doesn't matter the context, it doesn't matter what

the topic is, it doesn't matter what the kind of work is, you show up with a kind of juice, and energy for life. It so happens that right now I'm doing this versus that. That to me is a fairly rare commodity, and people are attracted to that, and they will oftentimes follow because of that. You know how to use it wisely and well for the betterment, not for something else. I think, for me, my experience with you all these other technical skills, and knowledge, and stuff stack on top of that, and that's the thing I always think about when I think of you. So let's quit bragging about Joe Badman here and move on.

[0:45:53] JB: That was very nice, man. Happy to keep this thread going.

[0:45:57] RT: All right. Let me come to an end here. What have I not asked you that we should know? I think we've probably covered the most important stuff. What's ahead next five years? If you sit here now, where do you want to be in five years? Personally, professionally, where do you want to be?

[0:46:15] JB: Until taking on this job of running Basis, my focus was on becoming more effective in the work. I suppose to a certain extent, feeling in myself that I was credible, and really knew what I was talking about, and could really help and really make a difference. And I still care about, I still care about that. I really care about the work that we do. But the thing that I'm most excited about right now is developing that organization, and making it a place that – that yes, really makes people certainly has an impact that makes passionate people or enables passionate people to do really great, and meaningful work, and ultimately makes them happy.

That doesn't happen by chance. That doesn't happen just through goodwill and relationships. There are stuff that needs to be in place in order for that to happen. You do need some good systems, and you do need certain things to happen at certain points in order to enable, to create the conditions for an organization to work in the way that I'm describing. That is where I'm a beginner now, is figuring out how do you create, or how do you develop what is an already very human organization. How do you take that next level of evolution, so that it can continue to have a real impact or real societal impact? That's my project for the next few years at least.

[0:47:39] RT: Outstanding. Joe Badman, thank you for coming into the Swamp, and getting a little dirty and messy in the conversation. I appreciate it. Thank you very much.

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[0:47:47] JB: Hey, thanks for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:47:51] 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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