

**EPISODE 49**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER:** You are listening to 10000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:00:20] RT:** Hi, everybody. I'm Rick Torseth. And this is 10000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with people literally around the world, today is no exception, who have made a decision to, in my way of thinking and saying, raise their hand and choose to lead on some issues that they felt were interesting, compelling and something they could have impact with.

Today I have the real pleasure to have a – geez. I don't know, Karin. 15, 20 years maybe of time that we've known each other. My guest is Karin Zastrow. She lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. She is the founder of Direct Leadership: Development Partner and Leadership, Work, Culture and Teamwork.

You are certified FLOW therapist. I'm not sure what that is. Maybe we'll find out before we're done here. Master trainer of the human element and radical collaboration. And you are an author of the book called *Direct Leadership*, and that is probably the core of our conversation today and the reason we pitched this idea up together.

I got a bunch of questions, Karin. First of all, welcome to the podcast. And secondly, introduce yourself and share with people anything you think you want them to know about you at the outset to sort of establish context.

**[0:01:37] KZ:** Thank you, Rick. It's a pleasure to be here. One of the things is I think I was born very curious. And, of course, all children are. But I think I was born with a particular curiosity that has been the driver of my career, which I can best describe. And I'll see if I can translate this notion into English.

Well, when my daughter was a kid, we were reading this children's book about a 10 year-old-girl and a 10-year-old boy. And they were living sometime in the dark Medieval ages. And along with them, the book and the movie, it was called *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*. Maybe some of your listeners are familiar with it. Along with their lives on the ground. There were some little people, some pixies living underground.

And these pixies were ever so often looking up when the Earth above them was thundering with stuff and they were saying, "Why do they do this? Why do they do what they do?" And I feel my alter ego is like that. Why did grown-ups – why do grown-up people do what they do? Why do they say what they say? Or why don't they say what they want to say? And that's been – it's been a puzzle to me when I was a child. And I think it came to determine that I got into working in the human resources field.

I grew up in the suburb of Copenhagen. I'm the youngest of four. And we had very little means. I'm happy to have grown up in a country that had so much welfare and education that I could become the person I am today. But I had this – I was always wondering.

And then, especially, of course, I was wondering when people weren't kind to each other. How can I teach them something better? How can they not see how harmful their words are or their actions are? Yeah, I guess that's part of me. And it's certainly part of my work to identify, to hear the things that are out of tune in work regulations and see what I can do to mend it.

**[0:04:36] RT:** It's wonderful. It's wonderful. I love the phrase. Hear things that are out of tune. I want to chase after that a little bit here. You and I met – and honestly, I can't remember if it was in Japan the first time or New York. I know we were in both places, but I don't know which one occurred first. And we were there because we were at a gathering of an update program for a body of work called The Human Element developed by Will Schutz.

**[0:05:03] KZ:** That's right.

**[0:05:04] RT:** And I remember my first experiences with you as a combination of what you said here wondering about why do they do this? And what's out of tune here? And I would add sitting

on top of a great skill to listen and read the room, which is what I experience you being able to do. Also having a point of view therefore about what's going on and how you might be able to be helpful.

And, of course, delivered it in what some people might call a classic Danish delivery style. But it struck me that you were on the hunt to try and figure out how to help people. That was my own way of explaining it.

And so, you have created a business in the context of leadership and you have a particular point of view about this. I'd like for us to crack open what this body of work called direct leadership is. Because I'm sure, for a lot of listeners, this could be something they've not heard before. Let's begin with the beginning. How did direct leadership come about? What was going on? What did you see? What were you trying to address that produced your beginning point for this development of this body of work called direct leadership?

**[0:06:21] KZ:** Wow. This takes me back to way before you and I met. I think in 18 – no. Not in 18. In 1984, I got my first job in consulting in the human resources field. The term human resources or human resources development had barely reached at least Denmark at the time. It was kind of a personnel counselling type.

And I got to – I was hired by this consulting company to do employee satisfaction surveys and to report them in ways that people could actually understand. Because they had a psychologist there who could do all the data references, right? But nobody could apparently understand it. So, they hired me to do this.

And the first – that brought me my first insight into work to leadership and to the fact that something was missing. Because every one of those surveys we did said that employees, their spirits were visible. And in today's terminology, we don't talk so much about being visible. But we talk about being present. Being available to employees. But in those days, maybe they just wanted to see them. I don't know. But the essence was the same. Every one of these we found that employees really were hungry for a leadership that would notice who they were and be there when they were needed.

And then if I fast forward to something like 14, 15 years later, I had started my career in team, and employee and leadership development back then. Then I had been doing consulting for a little while. And I had been employed. I had been a leader myself. And I got this job in an organization that produces natural food ingredients. Got this job.

And I remember the guy who hired me said, "We are a totally new field here." I was the first person to be purely human resource development in this 125-year-old company. And, unfortunately, the guy was also – he was right that we were on – what's the term? You're on a soil that has never been under a plow. He was right about that.

Unfortunately, he was also – how can I say? He was very optimistic about what could be done. What I was supposed to do? He presented me with a list – I don't know. Of a hundred wish list. Of a hundred items that he and I were supposed to do with no budget and no other staff than essentially me.

And the big overriding question was this company needed to become global. Learn to work together across 20 countries. And they needed to become international. Those were the days. We're in the 90s where globalization and a different flavor of digitalization that we have today was the issue.

And so, I was to teach and especially the leaders to work well together. Start sharing information across and not just treat their individual countries as individual kingdoms. I was on – and I still didn't have a budget. I was looking for the thing which would do that. And that took me to Brazil. We had a new HR manager in Brazil. And he said, "Do you know this concept? I want to work with it." That concept was when you refer to the human element.

For four years, three years maybe, I got some more stuff. And my staff, we trained the whole company. Everybody except the people who worked out in India and couldn't read or write. Everybody got some portion of training in the psychology of relationships, which this is really about. And how the psychology of relationships is a useful knowledge if you want to work well together.

And at the time I thought, "Wow. This is marvelous work." And I want to make clear. I still think this is marvelous work. I just completed the training where I trained some new trainers to work with the human element. But I found that the side of leadership that was developed by understanding the psychology was precisely that, was a matter of being present and available to people. Being non-defensive. Listening better than they used to.

But there was a side of leading people that didn't improve at all. And that was intriguing to me. Because I had finally – when I was hired for that company, I didn't have a budget. But finally, I had got myself a budget. I had spent a week of all of every manager's time. A lot of money on traveling. And it hired a co-trainer. The realization that it happened exactly – they haven't done everything I hoped for was very unpleasant. And then, I suppose, it's my – this pixie curiosity.

**[0:13:23] RT:** The pixies under the ground.

**[0:13:25] KZ:** I said, "So, why? Why is this? What have I overlooked? What's going on? Why are they not learning? Why didn't we succeed in making them understand how to take this understanding of human nature and turn it into leadership?" And that set me off on a new quest. And the result of that quest became the concept of direct leadership.

**[0:13:55] RT:** Okay.

**[0:13:55] KZ:** Which I am now in the process of changing to do leadership.

**[0:14:01] RT:** Okay. Let's get to that. But before we do that, let's help people understand what is direct leadership at least at the point back then when you started to organize and codify into a format that people could develop and learn from.

When you say that there was something missing that the human element work was not producing, you had told me a little bit a while ago that they made good – that helped people become better people but not necessarily better leaders. And so, I think part of what you're saying is you could see this lack of leadership development happening that the human element wasn't addressing.

When you saw that, how did you go about creating a response to that? What were the inputs? Or what were the things that you pulled from that you put together to formulate this thing called direct leadership so that people understand context-wise what is it that direct leadership is attempting to pull off here?

**[0:14:57] KZ:** The first thing I did was to sit down, close the door and think, "Oh, my God. What have I overlooked? This is embarrassing. I need to find it." I was looking in my bookshelves. I was looking inside of my brain. Something was missing. Because I came from a state – it was a wildly successful training program. We had like between 90% and 98% of the participants thought this was the best thing they had ever experienced. And here I was thinking, "Well, yes. But I just had a meeting with so and so and they don't understand the job of leading people." I was like, "All right. There is a side of the psychology, that is important." And some people can understand the hands-on practical doings of a leader without any introduction. Maybe because they had good role models. Maybe because they're just really smart. But a lot of the people really didn't understand that there is a set of roles to fill and a set of responsibilities to fill.

From there, I took my own library. Went my own bookshelves. They didn't have the answer. Then I went looking at some bigger bookshelves. Went down to my old business school in France to see if they had the answer. But I didn't really. Hardly, that was satisfying. Because it was like, "Oh, I'm on to something here. This is exciting. Will Schutz wrote that other book. Maybe this is the book I should write." The book about the doings of working as a leader.

And there is where the direct part of the name comes in. I was thinking what should a leader deliver in terms of interaction and support to his or her direct reports? That was where that came in. But since I didn't find anything in any of the bookshelves, I started to drawback on all these employee satisfaction survey results that I had known over the years and thinking, "So, what is it that employees are always complaining that they don't find?"

**[0:17:41] RT:** You're thinking, "They're talking to me here in their data. I got to figure out what they're saying?"

**[0:17:46] KZ:** Yeah. Well, to some degree, they spoke very clearly. There was this thing. We would like this visible present leadership. I was like, "All right. Can I decipher this? Can I break

that down into something smaller?" And the next thing was we started looking into the interview processes we had when we were appointing people, or hiring people, hiring leaders. And analyzing, "To what degree did we actually check if they knew the job?"

And I found, "But we don't." We talk about their values. Their ambitions. Their other competencies or the time they have. And how their ideas about the job is? And we give them some personality tests. And then we like it if they're assertive. But we don't actually talk about whether they understand the job. That's how that process started.

And then I started thinking, "All right. How can we break this down? How can we break down this idea of being visible and proficient? And, initially, I had like 10, not commandments, but ten

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**[0:19:24] RT:** Somebody's already come up with Ten Commandments.

**[0:19:28] KZ:** Yeah, I figured – yeah. And, initially, I had them just as roles. Let's call them roles instead. And I thought, "Yeah. All right. I'm on to something." Then I ran a pilot program, because I could do that. I was still employed at the time. I had people, I could invite them and say, "Hey, we have an idea. Can we test it?" And we did and they liked it. And they said things like, "Hey, I wish I had known this when I got my first leadership job." And I was, "Okay, here we are. We're on to something." But then they said, "But 10 is a lot."

And so, I got – and I hadn't been able to make it shorter. And one person told me, "Oh, but isn't coaching the headline of everything else?" And I was like, "Ah. No. I know you're wrong. And, also, no. I can't explain to you why that is. Let me go home over the summer. Come back to you when I figure this out."

Seven of my ten were actually responsibilities. Those are the ones I call roles today. There are seven roles. If you're a leader, you should deploy strategy. You should take care of how work is organized. You should help your staff share knowledge. You should be the team builder, et cetera. And then the three remaining ones were what I today call styles, which is more of ways of interacting.

And then, obviously, I started looking at this other concept, situational leadership, already has four styles. Could I just replace my styles with those? And I found that, "Ah, not really." Because situational leadership really is a contingent what is technically called a contingency model.

If you're an employee, if you can analyze the situation well enough, you know exactly what style to choose. Whereas what I wanted people to do is to work with their intention. What do I want to achieve?

**[0:21:55] RT:** My way of hearing what you're saying is that that shift in focus is moving into the actions and the movement of leading rather than a role or a position, so to speak. Meaning it's an activity that they're activating people into some kind of process.

**[0:22:14] KZ:** Yeah. Absolutely. For a very long time, the employee responsibilities were sort of implicit. That you're a leader, you need to help your employees and you need to help them in these ways. But recently I started to make explicit that listen – actually, we need to start with the employee in mind. We need to start with what should anybody who comes to work in some sort of organization, what should they produce?

Well, everybody should really work in alignment with the overall goals and strategies and the values. Everybody should understand the organization they're in so that we can navigate and help each other. Everybody should be collaborative because there is very little work that can be done all by yourself. Everybody, to some degree, or small degree, or larger degree make decisions. How do we make decisions?

Today, I really invite people to start with look at what employeeship is. There are some things that we want people to do when they come to work. And leading them is really only to support them in doing that.

**[0:23:53] RT:** Yep. Okay. Let's jump ahead then. Because now you've sort of cracked the code on your question and what was missing. And why are they doing what they're doing? And you got a pretty good grip on how to address that through direct leadership.



Let's bring us a little more into the, I'm going to say, quasi-present, because this has been a long stretch of time. But somewhere in there, you leave the mothership of the organization and strike out on your own. You've been a practitioner of your own work, your own discoveries, your own philosophy, methodology. It's called direct leadership.

Talk a little bit for people who are saying, "Okay, I'm beginning to get a little bit of sense of what she's attempting to do here." But give people some specifics if they were in one of your programs, direct leadership programs. And I know there's an evolution coming in the program. But let's stay in the first version now or wherever it was. What is it that you're helping them actually be able to do inside the framework of direct leadership?

**[0:24:57] KZ:** I'm helping them by giving them a job description about the part of their responsibility that is actually leading people.

**[0:25:12] RT:** And when you do that – this is the question I have. You forced this question in my brain. To what extent is it easier to do that in "a public program" where people come from all sorts of different places and they're there on their own accord? As opposed to being hired in by an organization to deliver this program to an intact group of leaders in the organization? And is there anything you've got to compromise on because the organization has some philosophies about leading and they need to be harmonized with direct leadership, vice versa, versus a public program where you're sort of in charge of the methodology and the point of view?

**[0:25:52] KZ:** I don't think there is too much difference. The advantage of doing some in-house program is, of course, that you have colleagues. And probably the program has been approved by a more senior manager or by someone in human resources, which means there is somebody who will support you in implementing your learnings.

But I think it's been equally successful to help people who come to public workshops with open enrollment to find a way. You could say that the biggest difference is really on the state of mind of the people who show up. People who come to an open enrollment workshop in my work, they come because they experience the pain in sales and marketing. That we are trying to fix the pain.

They come because they have experienced. They have frustrations. They have leadership positions. But they don't feel they know how to actually unfold their ambitions to be good leaders. They come with a bunch of frustrations. And sometimes we can relieve those. And others, we can't relieve.

Also, I had one particular program where two-thirds of the people who came were not formally leaders, but they were actually leading. And they were like – and I think I told them, "I have to disappoint you because I can't fix that part of your situation. But I can tell you what leading was."

And this was a lot of public – some public institutions where the person who actually had the title and the power didn't do much, so that people would come to them for leadership. And, like, "What can I do without having the role?" If you're inside organizations, well, some of the people – they will be some diversity in how experienced they are.

**[0:28:21] RT:** Yeah. I think you're – from my experience, what you're speaking to is this distinction between or the confusion that we make between authority and leading. Meaning the organization is a map more of authority. And not necessarily do the people who inhabit those positions meet the moments when we need leading. Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. But we keep looking at the higher-ups thinking, "Well, there's greater leadership up there." Because, clearly, they're at a higher place in the organization. And then these moments come and it doesn't happen and we're left to go, "How does this work?"

And what I hear you say – I think what I hear you say is part of what you're doing in your program work and working with people is you're giving them resources and moves to make that go with their ambition to lead by being able to actually do some capacity of leading that they didn't have had they not done the program with you. So, they have at least an option to do something differently and maybe have impact.

**[0:29:24] KZ:** They certainly do. And also, they have a way to measure their own if they are actually – what they're doing is actually leadership. Because that's an issue for a lot of younger leaders. They get the position. They go to work. There's all these people who approach them. These people who are their employees, they approach them with all sorts of stuff. But they can walk home every day for years wondering if I was actually leading or just putting up fires.

**[0:30:00] RT:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. All right. When you and I were exchanging about having this conversation, you let me know that there's an evolution direct leadership. And you were Keen to talk about it. And so, I'm keen to hear about it. Because I know direct leadership, but you're in the process of – I don't know what you want to call it. Refreshing, reframing, reorienting. Something's changing here. Give people a sense of what's afoot around what you're attempting to do now. And why now? What's going on now that's different than when you started direct leadership?

**[0:30:38] KZ:** You're good at asking many questions at the same time.

**[0:30:42] RT:** I know. Sorry.

**[0:30:46] KZ:** There are several reasons. Why we are changing the name? And we are relaunching, rewriting a bit of the narrative of what the program does. It's a very practical one. A lot of people – we're going to call it do leadership. And we'll be working with the tagline that being is doing. Being leader is what you're doing.

It is not a title. It is not a position. It is a function of your actions. That has two reasons. One of them is that there is a lot of education going on that never helps people understand what they must do. It gets intellectual. Gets brainy. And I know, from all these employee satisfaction surveys, it's like that never reaches – that never puts them in contact with their employees as leadership behavior. That is one of the reason.

Another one is that the term direct – for some people, they confuse it with directive. And I would like to signal that we are more than that. Because, yeah, for a lot of reasons. But some people would, yeah, just misread it and not get the idea that this was about direct reports.

But the other thing is then that world of organizations is no longer the same. We have this volatility, these VUCA conditions. We have hybrid work. COVID sped up the process of distance work and hybrid work. And it also sped up people's inclination to resign from their corporate jobs and create their own situations where they could do some freelancing and maybe a little bit of part-time this and freelancing on that.

The workplace is changing. If I lead a team today, that team may consist of people who report to me. But it also made – it may also have members who don't report to me who I borrowed from somewhere else in the organization. And there might also be a freelancer who gets attempt to whatever it is we're doing for a certain period of time.

And actually, my work as a leader too might not be a permanent position. It may be something that I am asked to do for a period of time, for a shorter period of time. Everything is much more fluid. What I want to communicate now is that, first, understand what work is. What is a workplace? What is it that you need to understand about coming, going to work? What are the things where you need to lead yourself?

And then if you are invited for a shorter period or a longer period to lead others, what is it that you need to quickly understand so that you can actually fulfill that position?

**[0:34:35] RT:** You just said something really I think worth chasing a little bit here, in this question about – one of the questions you said is, "How do I lead myself?" Speak more about – because that's a sharper distinction, a specific distinction inside leading other people too. When you say leading yourself, people who've never maybe considered that as a concept or understand what it is, what do you mean when you're advocating leading yourself?

**[0:35:07] KZ:** I mean, that when I am – I mean, I have a specific definition for it. But before we go into the details of that – or I don't know if we need to. But then I mean that if I am invited to take part in solving a job, or several jobs, consecutive jobs within – or where that involves my being part of a workgroup or a workplace, then I need to understand that that requires some generic. There are some generic responsibilities that I need to take upon myself.

**[0:36:02] RT:** What are a couple of those generic responsibilities?

**[0:36:06] KZ:** Well, they would be to understand the overall goals and the values that govern this place, so that I can align myself with this or where this organization that I'm involved with is going and what code of conducts we have. Meaning, I can't just show up and only live by my

own standards. I need to understand the rules of the game where I am and not just understand them, but actually align my work with them.

I need to understand the organization. How work is organized? Not the organic realms. But what are the processes? Who are the people involved? How can I do things in a smooth way? Who should be informed of what I do? Who should I connect with for the best –

**[0:37:13] RT:** To understanding the network of work, the relationships.

**[0:37:18] KZ:** Network of work. The processes. Yes. I need to be collaborative. I mean, just to point out one more, I need to involve myself in working with other people. And I'm not just showing up as somebody, a vehicle for some technical skill and then I can – then I don't have to give a damn about whether I work well with people. Stuff like that.

**[0:37:47] RT:** Right. Okay. You're in the process, I believe, of writing another book. And I'm going to assume, and I don't know this, that it has to do with doing leadership. Is that a fair guess?

**[0:38:02] KZ:** It is.

**[0:38:03] RT:** What can we expect? And when can we expect it, more importantly?

**[0:38:07] KZ:** Oh, ouch. The first is easier to answer. There will be a new book, another book. For those who have read my direct leadership books, there will be things that they recognize. But I will also talk the parts about what do employees need to do? What should leaders do? The leadership roles and styles. They will be recognizable. But at this point, they may be identical. I'm not so sure.

**[0:38:48] RT:** Okay. But we won't hold you to a publication date here. But I will tell listeners that we will put varying links that you want people to have access to around the program work, the books, et cetera, so that they can they can grab that stuff and look at it and how to get a hold of you and those kinds of things.

All right. I want to change the focus from that to Karin for a little bit. Because you are a major force of contribution and the thought leadership of the evolution of leadership. I have a point of view. You may not share this point of view. But I think it's a learning point of view, is that we tend to learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes. Kind of staying and they stick with us.

For you personally, in being a leader in present day time, what have you learned about yourself from any kind of setbacks or "failures" in your attempts to lead that inform a little bit about how you think?

**[0:39:47] KZ:** Yeah, that is interesting. Well, first of all, I didn't – I mean, I have been a leader in the beginning since I was quite young. In the beginning, just for a few people and then for a handful of people. And then I've been part of leadership division management of part a larger organization.

And I've never been asked this question before. But I wish somebody had told me, "What the heck is this job about?" Because the way I interpreted it the first few times around was mainly about controlling. Telling somebody – delegating work to somebody else and controlling what they did. That was caring as a leader version one or generation one.

**[0:40:54] RT:** Generation one.

**[0:40:56] KZ:** And then I swung with the whole – it has been a long period where psychology has dominated the work. I swung totally to the other side to becoming the person who – the leader who took a deep interest in the feelings of my staff. And I've made mistakes in both. You can hear that I'm trying to avoid that question.

**[0:41:32] RT:** You don't need to be specific.

**[0:41:35] KZ:** Oh, God. One of the first people I had reporting to me was somebody who was twice my age. And when she left, we had a wonderful conversation. But I was a pain in her back for all the time that she was my subordinate. Because she felt controlled and micromanaged to a degree that she detested. And she taught me a big lesson there.

**[0:42:11] RT:** There you go. All right. There is a direct leadership community of a kind, right? Network? Am I accurate in that?

**[0:42:20] KZ:** There is.

**[0:42:21] RT:** My question is if there's a form of that, how would people who are listening to you sort of get connected to that? Is that a possibility for them? I might be making this up. But is there a way for them to plug into a direct leadership community of some kind?

**[0:42:37] KZ:** Well, not currently. Because we will be relaunching it. And I think we will change it into a do leadership community. We've tested that name. That is so interesting. People like it much more. There are trainers, but there isn't currently a network. And we're kind of lying low with it because we want the new concept to be new when we launch it.

**[0:43:07] RT:** New. Yeah. Okay. Cool. All right. A couple more questions for you. What are your gifts, talents and untapped potential for this work?

**[0:43:16] KZ:** Well, besides that pixie curiosity, I think empathy. I mean, obviously, empathy and experience. But I think this talent or this desire to make life easier. You said help people. I think I would like to call it make life easier for people at work. And particularly for people at work, because that's where we spend so much of our lives. It matters so much because most of us spend more than half of our waked hours doing work. Then, of course, it's also a realm, environment that I know very well. Many years at various workplaces in different roles, that's a talent. The desire to make that easier. Language skills.

**[0:44:36] RT:** You and me – I hate to say this. But it's just a chronological fact. You and me are sort of in the back end of our professional career. We're not young, new, green shoots. We're wise elders. Hopefully, wise, in my case. What's ahead for you in your work and in your life when you look ahead? What are you looking forward to?

**[0:45:02] KZ:** Well, I like the part of being wise and elders. But my mind has got something wrong about age. Because I don't think I've ever felt more – what's the term in English? Candid?

Is a bit more precise. I think there are – many years ahead, there is certainly a new concept and a new book or a relaunch of the concept into the do. And there's a new book. I think there are – I know there are more books in my mind that need to be written, but they might not be about leadership. Yeah, this could be the second and final book about the workplace. Yeah. And actually, it's going to be about work. More about workplace than just leadership this time.

**[0:46:15] RT:** Okay. Hey. So, Karin, thank you for joining us in the swamp today. It's been a pleasure to have this conversation with you. I learned a bunch of stuff about you that I did not know. Thank you very much. We will put the links in the variant resources and places that you think are important for people to know about. And thanks very much.

**[0:46:38] KZ:** Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure to be here. Always a pleasure to talk with you, Rick.

**[0:46:45] RT:** Okay. Take care.

[OUTRO]

**[0:46:48] ANNOUNCER:** Thank you for listening to 10000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

[END]