

EPISODE 53

[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 welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with people who have made some decision in their personal and professional life to raise their hand and choose to lead on some complex and difficult challenges in the world. Today, my guest is all the way down in Melbourne, Australia. I don't know how we're pulling this off. Thank gosh, time zones are good. Nick Conigrave is my guest today. Nick is bringing – Nick, what I call or what the French would call a bricolage background of mosaic of skills and talents that you've combined together in some pretty interesting configurations to help people build their leadership capacity. I really am looking forward to this conversation because you're chasing down the same road that I follow a lot. So first of all, welcome to the swamp. It's good to have you.

[0:01:08] NC: Thanks, Rick. It's really, it's a great honor to talk to you today. Thank you for that.

[0:01:12] RT: You're welcome. Before we get into anything, I'm going to turn it over to you to give people a sense of who you are. Tell them what it is you want them to know about you that think establishes context or background, anything that you think makes sense to help them follow us along in our conversation.

[0:01:26] NC: Thanks, Rick. Bricolage is an interesting word. I haven't used that before. But yes, I started my career in 1986, as a junior auditor in London. That didn't last very long, lasted nine months. But I did discover sort of a negative or bad culture in an organization could look like, was one of the big accounting firms at the time. So I left and went traveling, came back to Australia and found my way into advertising, which seemed like a good idea at the time. I spent 10 years in advertising in Australia, and four of those in Asia.

While it was an interesting career, and I enjoyed sort of the creative side of things, although I was on this – it's what the industry calls a suit, account service. It lacked a sense of purpose. I remember sitting in a meeting with a couple of senior colleagues, and they were getting very animated about the benefits of wet cat food. I felt like this is really not something that's going to keep me energized in my career. I had the sense to speak to someone who I trusted, and I asked them their advice, and said, "What do you think?" His point to me was, I seem to like the people stuff, and he also thought that one should keep on learning.

He referred me to a postgraduate course in organization behavior, and that was really the turning point. I can remember sitting there on a corner in a city cafe in Melbourne. It was just like someone that opened up the doors, and the wind blew through an opportunity. All of a sudden, there was opportunity in front of me. It was one of those turning moments, turning points in my life.

I went back to university and one of the texts that I had read, the foreword from the author, his intent of this book was to help make organization fit for humans. I thought, wow, that's just such a compelling idea, having come from the negative culture of a big accounting firm back in '86, having spent 10 years in advertising. They weren't bad organizations, but they weren't particularly the best-led organizations in the world. This seemed to me like a really wonderful idea and a purpose, and I thought I wanted to do that.

I was very fortunate in finding my way to a company called Hay Group in 1997, where I joined as sort of the bottom and I had to sort of restart my career from the beginning again, because I joined as a junior. Hay Group was a niche consulting firm, global, focused on the areas of organization design, and reward, and leadership. Its leadership practice came out of the Harvard School of Psychology, led by David McClelland and Richard Boyatzis. That's really where I found my home, and I found the world of leadership, and I found a way of looking at the world where I could actually help leaders create a climate where people can do their best work. That sort of became my *raison d'être*.

That's where I feel like I grew up, and it's also where I discovered education. Well, I'm not a teacher, and I haven't ordained a school principal. I was privileged enough to work on a program of leadership development called the Leading Australia's Schools Program, which was a six-year program in collaboration between Hay Group and the University of Melbourne on behalf of what was the – became the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership. It was a national program, and I got to work with nearly 500 school leaders over those six years. As the work that they did as school principals to create a context where teachers could do their best work, where children could truly learn and thrive, it just really grabbed my heart. It was quite compelling. I fell in love with education as a sector.

Then, after 20 years at Hay Group, I had the privilege of moving over to EY with a mutual friend of ours, Adam Canwell, where he was building out a leadership practice globally. That really actually expanded my horizons, because while I've been very deep and narrow in the world of Hay Group, I think what **[inaudible 00:05:13]** was a much broader sweep of different ways of looking at the same problem. I've had the privilege of meeting and working with Bob Kegan, who I think his work around adult development is seminal. Had the privilege of working with Gervase Bushe around clear leadership. Also was able to bring Ruth Wageman, who was a colleague of mine from Hay Group, and now a colleague in business, around her work in how he set the conditions for high-performing teams.

Bringing all that together has led me to – I think the reason we're here today around the idea of getting involved in helping to lead transformation in education, and the adaptive leadership work of Heifetz. I remember reading his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* in the – must be in the early 2000s. I was reading and I just went, "Oh my God. This is like putting everything into practice that I've been thinking about." Because my postgraduate work in organization change, and consulting had introduced me to the psychodynamics of work, the Tavistock Institute work, but I've never found a way to put it into practice.

I think Heifetz's work, and Heifetz's and Linsky's work does that. It really takes that holistic view of organizations and puts it into practice. I've now, working in the field of organizational or leading transformation in education, which we can talk about further on down the track, and continue to work in the 6 Teams Conditions world. We've just started a business locally to help promote that work, because we believe that we need to move from an individual perspective to

a collective perspective. We think the problems we're trying to solve, the complex adaptive problems that I think really engage you, and colleagues need teams, and teams of teams. So we've set up a business locally, and we're in the process of doing that. That brings us today, Rick.

[00:06:59] RT: Well, that's today and into the future. Let's talk a little bit about that, because I think that when you and I started exchanging about a month or six weeks ago, I don't know exactly when it was. It was slow emerging, but it occurred to me as I was watching, or reading things that you were passing back and forth to me that you had written something, and I'm going to quote this. I think I got this right that you are interested in integrating theory and practice to help leaders learn how to lead on the job. That was a piece that jumped out at me, because the work that I'm most interested in, have been interested for a long time is moving from insight to capacity, with the ability to actually do something different when it matters, when the clock is running, when something's at stake.

My perspective is that insights actually come rather cheap in the marketplace. It's, what can you do with them when it really matters? When I was reading with the work you're doing, and we'll talk a little bit about 6 Team collaborations here in a moment. But I want to get your take on this right from the get-go here, which is, what is your point of view or what is it that you have learned in this journey about what it takes for people who want to be good at leading, forget the framework for the moment, but they just want to get better at the capacity of leading? What does it take for them to actually build that capacity? We're using the word practice here. But what fits inside from your experience, what are some of the things that need to live inside the practice that gives people a decent chance to be able to grow their capacity?

[00:08:29] NC: Well, it's such a great question. I suppose it comes to this idea – so I've been involved in leadership development for 25 years now, and I've work with, I think thousands of leaders over the time. Primarily in program work, leaders take off-site, they learn something new, they have an epiphany. Then we have this issue of transference. The issue of how do we get leaders to do it on the job? So I've always had this sort of fantasy of, "How could I walk alongside a leader and be with them as they do the work without being accused of being a stalker?" It's also a commercial model, it's not sustainable.

The first paper that I wrote around leadership as a learning activity. My proposition was a couple of things. Firstly, Lewin's idea that we learn best when we discover it for ourselves, is something that really grabs me. Part of what I'm looking for, and I certainly haven't solved for this, but what I'm looking to do with myself and others is to find ways to create an environment where people can do the learning on the job. What I noticed is, and hence why I wrote the paper is that, organizations in the main are not set up for learning. This is one of the things that Bob Kegan makes the point that organizations are designed for delivery not to development. I think if we're going to lead in the complexity of the world, we need to adapt, we need to be learning, we need to bring learning on the job.

My proposition to leaders is, how can they become more self-aware of their own practice in the here and now as they're doing the work in environments that they operate in to seek to continue to learn? That I think is hard if it's – this is to move away from individual collective, because I do see us spend too much time focusing on the individual. The fantasy, if we just had better leaders, it would all be solved. I think we need to be a bit more holistic, and say, "How do we create conditions for leaders to do good work?" This loops, because ultimately, leaders create the conditions, so it's sort of a self-referencing model.

But what I noticed is, when leaders actually step back, give themselves permission to not know, and create a term I've heard, negative capability. There's a poem by Keats that quotes this, I haven't read that, but I'll say it. It's about the ability to create a space where we can actually receive and we can open ourselves up to learning. But that takes courage, because as I say, organizations aren't set up for this. I'm not sure if that's a bit of a rambling answer, Rick, but I'm looking for ways of engaging with leaders who can actually bring the idea of learning in their work on the job every day.

[00:11:04] RT: Okay. Let's not lose that, but let's come at it from a couple of different angles in. Because I think that you're involved with probably multiple explorations to begin to get some progress on that question you just raise. I don't know if this is the right time in this conversation to bring in 6 Team Conditions. But it strikes me, the earlier comment you made in your introduction about team learning versus individual learning I'm sure is what drew you to this organization and why you're aligned with them. Give people who don't know anything about 6

Team Conditions or some context and framing as to what the six conditions that constitutes the model, and then we can go from there.

[00:11:42] NC: Yes. If I could just wind a little back, and I know people will accuse me of being too focused on theory. But as Lewin said, "Nothing is practical as a good theory". But the work began, Richard Hackman at Harvard in the nineties and Ruth Wageman at Hay were doing, looking at, well, what actually accounts for high-performing teams. In fact, people just assume teams outperform individuals. Hackman did the work to show that, in fact, a well-designed team, high-performing teams actually do outperform individuals. But if most teams aren't high-performing, and the research that the team did with Hay Group back in the late nineties showed that about 75% of teams are either mediocre or poor-performing based on the criteria of do they meet or exceed the expectation to their stakeholders.

In the main, high-performing teams are really outstanding when they're well-designed. What they did was, a lot of the research at the time looked at the individual leaders and the attributes of the leaders, and it was very behaviorally based as though it was all about the leader. But what they showed was actually, if leaders set up conditions, and the conditions are – first condition is a real team. So a real team is defined as being bounded, so we know who's on the team. Stable, it's got time to be a team, like build relationships, and interdependent. That's the critical piece, is that they have a task that they have to do together. Most teams a team in name only. They come together, they say they're a team, but they've not actually done the work of, what is our collective work, what do we own as interdependence.

If you look at, at the core of what makes collaboration really powerful, and this is based on – so I wrote my thesis for my master's on collaboration. I noticed in the literature that people don't define it, they just say the word and assume they're all talking about the same thing, and I don't think they are. But if at the core of good collaboration is the interdependence that you and I are now dependent upon one another who actually work together, we are intimate, we share knowledge, and so we're tied at the hip. There's risk in that. That's not like a warm bath, that's risky. But it's that creative tension and that generative opportunity to create something new.

So a real team has a compelling purpose based on the interdependent task. The funny thing about the compelling purpose piece is that, a compelling purpose is consequential that matters.

It's challenging, they're stretching it, but it's also clear. The research show that all teams think that the work they do is consequential. It's really challenging, but they're not sure what it is, which shows you that the independent task is actually, hasn't been worked out. I think most people get in a room, think they're going to just team together magically, and they don't. So they miss each other, they don't really collaborate. It's too risky because no one's quite sure how to work. It's like, everyone walking into a room ready to dance, but no one's sure how to get on the dance floor.

Then the third essential condition is having the right people relative to the task, so that you've got the right skills, capabilities. Diversity of perspective is another one, which you would notice in a lot of large corporates these days. The focus on diversity inclusion is absolutely correct, because in a complex world, diversity gives you more perspective. But as we know, diversity without inclusion is just a recipe for conflict, and so creating that inclusion.

Then there's three supporting conditions that create that, but those three essentials are places that any leader of any team can begin doing the thoughtful work of just actually, how do I want to design his team for success?

[00:15:06] RT: Okay. Here's the timeless question for you. You might as well weigh in for the books a history here. What is your definition of leading?

[00:15:14] NC: A few years ago, someone asked me that question. I was foolish enough to answer it, because – and I tried to give out an answer. But as a colleague, a friend of ours, Graham Finlay would tell you, when you look on Google Scholar, and you put the word leadership, and you use the word leading, not leadership, so I'll differentiate that. But if you put the word leadership into Google Scholar, you get five million hits.

Leading for me is about creating – well, actually, I'll cheat and just use McClelland's statement. I think leading is about creating conditions where people can do their best work, where you can create the conditions with relative to something that's meaningful for us all. It's something that's bigger than any one individual, that people feel stronger, and more capable in achieving, in flourishing in that space, and achieving that task. For me, leading is about creating conditions

where people feel stronger, and more capable relative to the challenges they have in front of them would be a way of putting a stake in the ground.

[00:16:14] RT: Good. All right. I won't hold you to that. It's fungible. You may discover something next week you want to add or delete from it, but that's a decent start for us. Let's talk a little bit then about – I want to ask you, to start with, you gave us this description of the journey you took professionally. I'm interested in the one or two moments in your life, aside from that cafe when the doors opened, and you saw the wonder. What has drawn you to this work of helping people build this capacity to lead? What speaks to your core human purpose in the world that has you want to express yourself in this form?

[00:16:53] NC: I'll use an event that happened when I was at the accounting firm in 1996, just because it's sort of – it's always resonated strongly with me. I'm a junior auditor as an Australian in a London firm. So you can't be much lower on the social hierarchy. Being Australian, it is a – from **[inaudible 00:17:09]** and being a junior in an accounting firm. I was sort on the lowest rung of the organizational hierarchy.

It was five o'clock on a Friday night, in the middle of winter in London. So it's dark, it's five to five, my mind has – I'm doing a job that I find pretty boring. I'm surrounded by a group of people who I don't engage with, I just culturally didn't fit. All I can think of is I'm about to go down the pub and meet my friends. I'm thinking like – that's where my mind is going to. I'm going to be released from this tedium.

At five to five, the partner on the audit walks into the room with a box of photocopying, and sort of drops it on my desk, and says, "Have this copied on my desk at nine o'clock on Monday morning." My mind immediately goes to, "Well, there's three hours' worth of work sitting in a dark room photocopying." Which made me despondent as such. But what made me really angry was the glint in his eye, the joy he got out of actually basically giving someone a really shitty task at that time of night just for the fun of it. I just thought, what is it about creating – what is that in an organizational sense? What benefit do you get out of that? It struck me that these organizations were not set up to help people flourish. It seemed to me just like a waste of opportunity. It didn't seem to serve any purpose other than that individual. There was no collective benefit.

I suppose I carried that with me as, why would you? That's why I left the industry, and then went to find my way into advertising as a sort of a second try. While advertising was interesting, it just didn't seem to add up to anything bigger than the money. I wanted to do something that actually had an impact greater than myself, greater than us, like something that – a creative. Something that was creative, something we built. When I found my way to that textbook, saying that he wanted to create organizations that were fit for humans, I just went, "Oh, okay. That's something bigger than me. That's something."

Where that's something bigger than me comes from, I suppose comes from my family of origin, sort of thinking back to it. My brother grew up as a gay man who was in the seventies, and that was not – he was marginalized for his sexual orientation. He gave me sort of an insight as to what it's like to be marginalized and to not be allowed to express who you are fully. He was my older brother, so he's my hero in a sense. Maybe that's some – my parents were very on the artistic sort of side of bringing people together and creating things together as part of that. So, yes.

[00:19:47] RT: That just takes us to a think of, at least for me a reoccurring question in this podcast. How do you use yourself to lead in your work and in your life?

[00:19:58] NC: Yes. So as I say in my second paper, I think as a leader, you are the instrument of the work. It's through your own, how you step into the world, and the intent and the impact you have. I try to be self-aware. I've done a lot of personal work around understanding my own drivers, and reflecting on why I do what I do. I've got a daily practice of meditation to try and quiet the mind and be aware of how I'm showing up. But I also recognize that it's not all about me, it's about the environment in which I operate.

I try to be aware and open to what's going on around me. I mean, Peter Block writes beautifully, I think in *Flawless Consulting*, that the art of consulting is about using thoughts and feelings in service of the work. That's how I try to show up in my work. Sometimes that requires me to, and I did this recently, where I was working with a group and admitted to them that we've designed a day together. I think it's the right thing to do, but I can't guarantee it's going to work. I did that

deliberately, because I was asking them to step in and try something new, and I didn't want to pretend that I was sitting here with all the answers. So I wanted to actually be honest.

With this group that I've been working with, so this is in the South Australian education system. I've been trying to be open and honest about my own learning as I go through the process, as we tackle these challenges. The South Australian Department have crafted a new purpose for education and a new strategy. I'm working with leaders to put it into practice. It's a real expression of these leaders, learning how to lead this, learning their way forward, if you like, in putting this into practice.

[00:21:34] RT: In a couple of the papers you've written, you do, I think is quite an interesting and wonderful job. I'll remind people here now that the papers that we're referencing here, we'll put links in the show notes too, so that they can find those after they listen to the episode. But you do some interesting. back to our bricolage model here, you have configured a few different frameworks, if you want to call them that, into what you think is a useful design for developing leadership capacity. Let's, if you don't mind, maybe not all of them, but take what you think are the core elements of some of the things you think make up a decent chance for people to build capacity to lead that they would be wise to at least consider.

[00:22:18] NC: Cool. A couple of things that I think – I mean, academia, people are successful in academia by coming up with original ideas. Well, I'm not an academic, and I have a great love for the academic product. What annoys me about that is that, really good work gets left on the shelf and doesn't get referred to. My ambition was to draw back into the conversation, I think the great thinkers of our time in organization development, people like Kurt Lewin, and Chris Argyris, and McClelland, et cetera.

One of the things that I noticed when I wrote the *Leadership as a learning activity* paper was how people responded to the proposition that to do adaptive work, they have to actually step in and not know. You could see people literally, it's like having a physical response, a fear response of, "Oh my God, I can't do that."

That's why in the second paper, I wrote about giving yourself permission to not know. Because I do think when you're doing adaptive work, if you've got the courage to actually say, "I don't know

the answer," which is – because if you do know the answer, then that's a technical response to an adaptive problem. We know and it's harder to say that's the critical issue in leadership.

If I'm asking leaders to step in to an adaptive problem, and collectively say, "We don't know the answer." Then, what I propose is that you don't know the answer, but here are some frameworks that you can use in the chaos, to use as navigational tools to guide you. The first tool, I think the Heifetz's work around adaptive leadership is just seminal. Heifetz makes the point. When you begin, actually step back and ask the question, "What's really going on here?" Give yourself the permission to be a bit confused. I do say to my clients when I'm working with them, if this stuff doesn't make you feel a bit queasy in the stomach, then you're probably not looking at the problem hard enough. You haven't really engaged with the challenge. You haven't engaged with the wicked problem that you're facing into.

I think there's that orientation to framing the problem as an adaptive one. Then, I think you do need – it's a collective endeavor to solve a complex problem, because no one individual has enough perspective or enough – it's not a lack of being – not smart enough. It's just, no one individual can know enough of what's going on to have a fuller understanding of the complexity of the problem. So I do think you need a team, and I think teams need to be well-designed, and hence, why I think the six conditions are a really good beginning point.

Because the first question a leader needs to ask he, or her, or themselves is, "Well, do I need a team?" It's funny, but a lot of people are surprised by that question. Because often, they'll just assume a task need a team, but not all tasks need a team or they might need different types of teams.

The second frame that I encourage leaders to – we've opened up the door, we're dealing with the physiological response to anxiety of, I don't know. Given myself permission to not know, I'm trying to work out what's really going on here. Therefore, I decide I need a team to do this. So what sort of team do I need? Who do I need on that team? That's a place to begin.

Rick, one piece of research that I do love, and this comes from Richard Boyatzis. He talks about the fact that, so if you think about an adaptive problem, it immediately engages the sympathetic nervous system as an anxiety response to not knowing. I mean, that's just a physiological

response of anxiety. That's sympathetic nervous system, which is very – shuts down, can lead to task orientation, and shut down relational relating, and close us off to learning.

The best way to actually open up to learning is through the parasympathetic nervous system. Boyatzis' research shows that one of the ways leaders can do that is actually by focusing on the other and coaching others in that complex task. So if you've got a team, as a leader, you think I'm going to orient myself to coaching and supporting the team, you immediately create a space for learning. In that, you attend to the physiological response you can find yourself in. I think the second thing is teams.

Then the third piece, and this is why I bring in Gervase Bushe's work around *Clear Leadership* is, a well-designed team has a compelling purpose. But a compelling purpose is not just something written on a piece of paper. It's something that's created, directed by a leader, but codesigned by team. It's not an object, but it's a living thing. That purpose comes through dialogue, and that dialogue is not particularly prevalent in most organizations today. Most organizations spend – if you noticed, most people in teams spend most of their time telling each other what they know. They don't tend to inquire upon what someone just said.

I think Gervase's work around clear leadership, and how to have a creative partnership where people can have a really productive dialogue is a key part of the puzzle. That's why I bought those three. Then if you dig further down, there's lots of stuff to sort of dig into, but it just gives leaders a start point.

[00:27:24] RT: Yes. I think I agree with you. I would – sure, it's probably the case in Australia. I know enough about Australia. Certainly, in this country, the fruit we are bearing for leaders around the struggle to even admit that they don't know what's going on here is steeped in a long history of educational reward for knowing answers.

[00:27:45] NC: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more.

[00:27:47] RT: The lost opportunity cost there is that we haven't stimulated people's curiosity to wonder what's going on here. So we find ourselves – I think, you and me find ourselves in this position of doing rudimentary education that should have probably happened when people were

seven, eight, nine, ten years old to give them a fighting chance to be able to get grip on some of the challenges they're facing, because he can't even see the distinction that you're making between or what Heifetz would make between a technical problem and a messy, complex problem.

The work is challenging, but that takes me to a place – first, I want to ask you this question, because you're a writer among other things, and you write papers. I know that the craft of writing is its own piece of work. My father was a newspaper writer for 45 years.

[00:28:33] NC: So is mine. So is mine.

[00:28:35] RT: You've probably heard this line. You write the book, and then the book rewrites you. I'm curious in your writing part of your professional life. How has the exploration of figuring out what you're going to do, how you're going to put it together, what you learn in the composition changed how you think about the work that you do?

[00:28:55] NC: That's interesting. I've come to writing very late. These two papers are the first thing I've actually had published in a broader sense. Particularly, when I wrote the first paper, it took me about four years because of a colleague. I was working with colleagues at Oxford through my EY work. I remember standing up at the back of the room, and Dr. **[inaudible 00:29:13]**, one of the faculty members there, as a classic academic said to me, "Well, what are you writing?" I went, "Oh, I'm not writing anything because I'm a practitioner."

But then, the wheels started turning. What am I writing? Then, I thought, I don't have anything to say. I went through this sort of existential, I've got nothing interesting to say. I literally, I went around this circle for about three years. I eventually came to this idea of writing a series of blogs, and it was my colleague, Tony Mackay, who actually offered to put those books together in a paper. But what struck me was, actually, after writing the papers, it's like, "Oh, that's just what I think."

I've been thinking and saying this for 25 years, I think. I sort of thought I'd been doing and no one had been that interested. But once I wrote it down on paper, all of a sudden, it became – people were, "Oh, that's really interesting." There's something quite different about – once you

do the work of putting it in a narrative and an order, like a good journalist, and actually getting it down. and ordering your thoughts, and making it digestible, that it has a different sort of nature to it. All of a sudden, a different way of engaging with people. That, I've really found – I've enjoyed. It's interesting that I don't know how – the ideas don't seem – once I get the idea, it doesn't seem hard to write, but it's actually, I haven't worked – I don't know what the creative process is. It gets me to the point where I can just sit down and write it/

There's a third paper that I'm trying to work out to turn this into a more corporate-facing document. I've been stuck on it for about eight months, and I still can't work out how to solve it, so I'm in that process. It's also made me – this is impostor syndrome, we all have it, but it's taken me a long time to find my voice. I've just turned 60, so I just feel like I've found my voice. So in some ways, I feel embarrassed by that. It's taken a long time to get here.

[00:30:59] RT: Yes. I think for the work that you do, the length of time you've done it, same would go for me. We underestimate the experiences we're having and the conversations we're having with the diversity of people facing similar challenges. We are in some ways the connective tissue that holds those conversations. We're the only ones who can probably put words to the dynamics that are going on in a situation. So to degree that we care about the people who are trying to solve this, and the world we live in, and -- we're almost, quasi obligated to struggle to figure out how we add this into something out of us, a paper, or a book, or something for the common good again. Whether three people or a million people read it, I think it needs to be there as part of the lexicon so that somebody down the road could find it. Yes. it's hard. But most of life is hard sometimes, right?

[00:31:52] NC: To that point you made about, children eight, nine, ten have this curiosity. I mean, what I do know is that the current education system is built on something that was fit for purpose of the 19th-century industrial revolution. Yet, we've known for 50 years, this model is no longer fit for purpose. Yet, around the world, we really struggle to bring to life a new way of learning so that children don't have the curiosity crushed out of them at the age of 10, because we need that. I mean, this is Ken Robinson's video from 2006, which is quite famous, talked about it. We're still struggling around the world to actually create education systems where children can truly learn and thrive.

Hence, why I'm privileged to be doing the work I am with South Australian education system, because they literally have got a strategy around that, which I think is some of the best work I've seen globally. Around creating a whole system for public education where children can express their own learner agency. Because that requires teacher agency, which requires leader agency, which requires bureaucrat agency. They've literally, as they say, they've tried to flip the system and do something really, I think, really beautiful, which I'm very excited about.

[00:33:04] RT: Okay. Here's the question that you're going to be familiar with, but maybe even have an answer off the cuff. But hopefully, you have to think about it. So we learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes. This podcast has the secondary focus besides having people like you on, sharing their stories about what they know about leading. So also to provide some information for people who might be a little further back on the trail of leadership development. So if they listen to you and I talk, they may pick up a few things that they could use rather quickly, and we expedite their development. So if you don't mind an example or to have a failure of leadership on your part, and what you learn from it.

[00:33:45] NC: I have been thing about this, Rick, because I've obviously listened to your podcasts. I've got a quick one, and then I'll see if another one comes up. But many years ago, working with one of my mentors, and we had been in a meeting with a client, and I was feeling really chuffed about the work I'd done. I felt like I'd worked with the client, and I've been very insightful, and help the client find new solutions to complex problems. I was feeling very positive about my contribution. I walked out of the meeting, and we were – my colleague and I were walking down the road, and sort of felt my chest puffing out, and strutting as I would, feeling confident about myself.

We were debriefing in the meeting and I said, "Well, how do you think that went?" She said, "Well, the problem is that we came up with a solution, but it was our solution. Our job is not to come up with the solution, our job is to get our clients to come up with the solution." What I'd done in that meeting was given them the solution, versus actually help them find their own solution. That was one of those moments, literally, and I think it's framed how I've seen consulting ever since. Is that, I think our job is to work with our clients to help them find their own solutions, because we learn better when we discover it for ourselves. That's a much harder

thing to do, because – the reality is, I think a lot of the consulting that's done these days is from an expert model.

I know that you referenced Donald **[inaudible 00:35:10]**. From an expert model, not a process mode, people get paid to come up with solutions, but I just think that model is broken, inherently. I think there is absolutely space for that model, but I think we need to create a consulting industry, where it's okay to walk in. You've had people on your podcast speak about dealing with messy problems, where we create space for us to learn together, which means that consultants need to learn with their clients.

[00:35:37] RT: Yes. I do think that this is what we've probably been a baseline in this conversation here, but to make more explicit. Which is one, the candor to tell the client that we're going to go on a learning journey together, and there's going to be a lot of things that come up that I don't have the answers to. But there's nobody else you're going to get in here has the answers to these things, so we have to go on this journey together. I think that's an important experience for people to have, because it starts to reacquaint them with their own learning, and then gives us a chance that maybe they can spread that to their team to start with. Then, so it goes, and so it goes up.

I guess you could say that we're in the re-education business, the rewiring of education and learning here. Let's take it to that cohort of people that are behind us in the journey and be kind of explicit. You're an elder in the tribe here, there's younger leaders coming behind. One or two pieces of advice that you wish you had back there that you think might have made things more useful for you, that people might consider.

[00:36:36] NC: I'll talk to it directly as a consultant, because that's the world I've been. If I look at my career, I've been a consultant in one way or another for all 35 years. One thing I say to younger consultants is always, look after your peer group. More often than not, I've seen people fail in organizations where they become focused on their boss, or their boss's boss, and look up, and try to be clever, and show themselves to be the best to their superiors. When, I actually think success in complex organizations is where you look after one another in a peer group and actually grow together. That's where I've seen, particularly consultants grow and learn.

I've got to say, some of the work that I've loved the most is helping young consultants grow up and step into leadership roles, and lead, and grow. It's always been that they've looked after each other, so they've done it in a collective sense. Then the only other thing, and I always – when I'm working with leaders and wanting to know what's their aspiration, what do they care about. It's often, you've got to find where the joy is.

I do actually do a lot of work with leaders around understanding what's their intrinsic motivation for the work and trying to actually find that spark that gives them energy to continue that struggle as you talk about. I think I would encourage every young leader to actually reflect on what is it that gives them joy, and not that that's all the – it's not just a hedonistic joy, but actual joy that comes from doing something that's bigger than yourself. But that takes time to find, it's not just something that pops up, and it's not a marketing gag, it's not a tagline. This is something that's visceral, intrinsic. I feel like it's that idea of the Japanese, idea of polishing the stone, it takes time.

I encourage, reflect on what gives them joy, and find those places that's so of appreciative. Try and bring more of that into your life. I heard a wonderful quote the other day, we move in the direction of the questions we ask. When you find what you intrinsically care about, then you'll know. It will prime you to look for that in the world, and put yourself in a position where you can create a condition for yourself where you can do your best work if you like.

[00:38:45] RT: Right. I'm going to ask you to take your consulting hat off now, and say, when you look at yourself today, and you're going back years you sort of took us through. In your own committed effort to learn about yourself, and your craft, and how you can be helpful in the world. How are you healthier, more useful person to yourself, to your family, and to your community because of this journey?

[00:39:08] NC: That's a big question, Rick. I hope I am. I can't guarantee that my wife and my son would tell me a that. In recent years, I've taken more time to stay physically fit, and I'm taking more time to be aware – my meditation practice is part of me wanting to actually be more in the here and now. I suppose I'm striving to find more equanimity in my day, to find more balance. I've interestingly enough, as a younger person, I was known for being very passionate,

but actually passion can lead you to tip over one way or another, and lead you into extremes. I've gotten myself into trouble over the years, maybe going to extremes.

Becoming more humble in the fact of recognizing, I don't know the answers, and in fact, there's a really liberating – there's liberation and giving yourself permission to not know the answers, to be not sure. I used to really look at people who were really confident and knew the answers, and I used to be quite jealous of their capacity to walk through life confident and knowing what they were doing. I now realize, actually, that's a fantasy. In fact, getting more comfortable with not knowing what's going on, and still being able to stay present, and alive to whatever's happening. My big striving is to learning how to be with the other, my wife, my son, to actually be really present.

I remember when I was in Singapore with my family. I was traveling so much, I ended up having to take my family with me. We were in Singapore, it was on a Saturday afternoon. The work was starting on Monday, and I'm in the pool with my son, he's five years old, and I'm thinking about work. He looks at me and says, "Dad, you've got your work face on." I just went – and that's a long time. That's 14 years ago, so I'm still struggling with that, being really present for the other. I think if we can all do that, we're going to have a better chance of making it through this mess.

[00:41:01] RT: All right. I'm going to give you the last word. Anything you want to say that we haven't discussed? Anything you want people to know that you think is useful before we draw a curtain on this?

[00:41:13] NC: Yes, I suppose. I'd love leaders to reflect on how they're learning on a day-to-day basis and giving themselves the permission, the joy, the curiosity of actually, to not know, and see what can evolve when you do work collectively together to solve complex problems, and find the joy that comes from that. I think there's – we can create a lot more space for that in organizations today, and we'll have a better chance of navigating through the chaos. I'd encourage every leader to ask themselves the question, how do they bring some learning into their day-to-day life?

[00:41:44] RT: Great. Nice ending. Nick Conigrave, thank you very much for coming to the swamp and sharing your ideas. It's been fun.

[00:41:50] NC: Thanks, Rick. It's been a great privilege. Thanks very much for your time.

[00:41:53] RT: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:41:56] 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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