

**EPISODE 56**

[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. This is the podcast where we have conversations with individuals who have made a decision to use themselves and raise their hand and lead on some difficult challenges around the world and in their own community.

Today is, for me, a pretty special day, because I get to have a conversation with Ellen Schall. I came across Ellen's work a long time ago. Ellen, I'm going to date myself and maybe you a little bit, but it was about 2000, when you wrote a paper, which we'll get into a little bit in some detail as we talk. As I'm telling Ellen, it changed the trajectory of how it did my work. I have high regard for the commitment that she's made to work in the public sector. She has been NYU since 1992. She has led leadership programs at the school for a very long time. She has been the Dean of the Wagner School as well and now she is, I'm thinking, Ellen, you must be a little bit on your little free to fly in some directions now after all your tenure there. First of all, I want to thank you for coming on to the podcast. It's good to have you.

**[0:01:21] ES:** Delighted to be here with you.

**[0:01:23] RT:** Okay. I got some questions I want to ask you. But before we get into that, I just want to give you a space to share with people anything you think you want them to know about you that helps establish a bit of context for the conversation we're going to have.

**[0:01:34] ES:** Yeah. I guess, what I would say is that I'm still learning. That being a reflective practitioner is a lifelong occupation and there's always something to learn. You mentioned that

you learned a lot from your daughter who's 30. I have a son who's 24. Being a parent late in life was a huge – has been a huge learning lesson.

The final thing, two things, I think, I see leadership not so much as a role, but as a set of actions, right? I think people can lead from many places. I don't think you have to be the commissioner, or the dean to be a leader. I'm now a Senior Presidential Fellow at NYU, working with the president of NYU and the leadership team at NYU. I see the opportunity from multiple roles to be effective as in leadership.

**[0:02:24] RT:** Okay. When we were getting ready for this, you sent me an email a few days ago that I thought was – had a scheme about how we get into this, but I think you offered a more accessible starting point. I'm just going to say a little bit of what you said here. You said, “We share an interest in developing people who have the capacity to lead on wicked problems. For me, it starts with an understanding of self and the impact one has on others and then understanding how teams and groups work and learn and pay attention to both process and task.” Let's begin there.

For you, you've spent a long time helping people build these capacities of a reflective practice. My question to start with is, what got you going down this road of studying reflective practice? Then we can talk a little bit about how you've helped other people develop it. How did you begin to work?

**[0:03:13] ES:** Yeah. Speaking of dating myself, I was at the Kennedy School at Harvard in a three-week program for managers in state and local government. I think it's there that I got exposed to Don Schön's work and to Ronnie Heifetz's work. Someone described me as a reflective practitioner. I don't think I'd heard before. I think what they were saying is that I was interested in sitting back at some distance from my own experience, thinking about what it meant, trying to draw lessons from it that could be useful not only to me, but to other people. That basic idea that the world isn't divided into theorists and practitioners, that people who are doing the work have a lot to offer about effective leadership and effective practice. That intrigued me. I think that's what started me off.

**[0:04:09] RT:** Okay. I think there's definitely going to be a place in here where we touch on both Heifetz's work and Schön's work. This podcast is called 10,000 Swamp Leaders for the same reason that your article is some ways, learning to love the swamp, which is to say, I came across Schön in a well-known quote that he has put forward here. For our listeners who have heard me speak to this a little bit in the past with different conversations, but from your own perspective, explain what the swamp is contextually, relative to the work of public service and why it's a useful metaphor for engagement?

**[0:04:43] ES:** Yeah. There's a set of challenges in the world for which the approach is pretty clear, right? If you think about the medical world and you break your arm, the doctors know exactly what to do. They know how to set an arm. If the healthcare profession is trying to think about how to improve the health of a population, that's the swamp, right? There's no recipe. There's no clarity. There's lots of things that have to be figured out still. Whether you're thinking about racism, or anti-Semitism, or health inequity, or Islamophobia, or poverty, or justice, those are swamp issues. There's not a playbook that says, do these five things and you will create a just and equitable world. It is a complicated set of levers that we have to try to figure out how to engage and move forward, so that we produce the results we're trying to produce.

If the high ground, what Don Schön calls the high ground, is where there's an effective recipe, where there's a technical answer. We know what to do. Those problems are important too, right? We want more problems to have clear solutions. It's not as if that work isn't important. The work that pulls me and that intrigues me is the work that's messy and which there aren't clear answers and for which dedicated people committed to trying to work their way through the swamp are really the value that I want to cultivate.

**[0:06:23] RT:** Okay. You say in your writing, and this may be different for you now, because I'm pulling from the paper that you wrote on the swamp, but you say, how do we educate and prepare people for leadership in this area? It strikes me that you've been engaged with that question for a long time for yourself as a teacher of this work to people. What's today when you think about that question, what's the answer, at least where you are with it now about how we educate and prepare people for this work?

**[0:06:55] ES:** I was at a gathering of leaders last night that NYU has a doctoral program in leadership and innovation. I was talking to, I think, more than 50 people who had signed up for this and were starting their journey. One of the things I said is that a more sophisticated answer is generally both and not either or, that we were in a very polarized moment in this country and in this world, and we need people who can work through that polarization and see how to bridge divides. I created a course when I became a faculty member at the Wagner School called reflective practice. I suggested that what people need to do is start with themselves, right? They need to understand themselves, they need to understand their impact, they need to work from strength, but understand the dynamics of working with people who are different than they are. I still think that's all relevant.

I think you start with where people are, in general. You can find ways, even with undergraduates, or young graduate students, for them to reflect back on some experience they had working with other people on some issue that matter to them. It could be volunteer work, it could be academic work, it could be early jobs, and for them to think about some moment in which they feel like they learned a lesson. Like, "Aha. Now when I think back on that, I would do it differently," or, "I think I actually figured out a way to be useful in that context," and asked them to reflect in a way that isn't just a war story.

At the end of the day, we've had a hard day, we come home and we say to our partner, or our spouse, or our friend, "Oh, my God. What a mess. This was really hard." Or like, "I had a great success." Those are steam letting out stories, right? They're not necessarily reflective. I think the skill that I am always trying to get people to stronger on is to think about the lesson learned in some way that you can draw a larger lesson from it that might be useful to other people. It's fine to just let off steam, but the question is, if you step back, what do you think you learned in that context that might be useful to other people.

**[0:09:21] RT:** Yeah. I like the provocative thought that comes from Heifetz, what's my contribution to the mess I'm trying to solve as a prompt for that. I don't want to miss these moments, given that the audience, the people that are listening here are people who are looking for ways in which they can develop themselves and their practice. At the individual level, because I know that you then, also, we'll talk a little bit about how the organization can be reflective, but let's start, keep with the individual for the moment. What counsel and advice have

you picked up over the years about this that somebody might need to know about, about the elements of the practice, which in this case happens to be about self-reflection? How would you counsel somebody on their own to design a practice that is self-reflective, that can help them be wiser about who they are in the world that they're operating in?

**[0:10:09] ES:** I think, feedback is critical. I think of feedback as a gift. It doesn't always feel like, you're thrilled within the moment. But setting up situations in which – I met with a young colleague the other day and I was saying to her, think about something you're working on. Find a colleague who's in a meeting with you and ask them to observe you as you try out that, whatever particular thing you're trying out. Is it how to speak up, or is it how to let others speak up? Is it how to appreciate others' work and build on some idea? Whatever the thing you're trying to work on is, ask that colleague to just listen closely, take notes, and then debrief with that person after the meeting.

This is what I was trying to do. Remember that moment when such and such happened? That's what I was trying to do. Did it feel effective, or did I fall flat? Ellen, I interrupt people. I somehow have trouble stopping myself. It's like, I think I'm engaging. I think I'm building on what you say, but sometimes, I cut you off. I might say to somebody, watch me for this, right? I'm going to try not to interrupt. Tell me how well I did.

**[0:11:25] RT:** There's a part of this that sounds like you're saying is that you're also having them put the thing they're trying to develop into the real world with something really at stake going on here. It's not just a practice field, and then we go into – you're actually trying to work a little bit in real time with the real stuff.

**[0:11:41] ES:** Absolutely. I think feedback is important. I use something called role messages, where I have a group of people fill out a form in which it says – in which each person comments, each person on the team comments on the other people on the team. What are the behaviors you want, Rick, you appreciate from Rick, and you want to see more of? What are the behaviors in role that you'd like to see less of? What new behaviors would you like to see from Rick, right?

You can do that anonymously, or you can do that in a group that has experience with each other straight out. I think, feedback is really critical, because we often imagine that the effect we have is the effect we wanted to have. It's so often not true.

**[0:12:25] RT:** It's so often not true.

**[0:12:26] ES:** The other thing I would say is journaling works. You can journal personally, of course, but you can also journal professionally. Then you can go back and read your journal and notice patterns. Like, "Oh, this is interesting. I get in trouble when, or I feel particularly effective when." You can think about your blind spots like, "Hmm. I seem to run into difficulty in these situations. What might there be there that I'm not knowing about myself?" You can try to ask other people what they see as your blind spots.

You mentioned Ronnie Heifetz. I'm very intrigued by his idea of going to the balcony. I teach people the skill of going to the balcony, which basically means, imagine as you're in a meeting or working with other people, that there's literally a balcony in the room, from which you can observe what Ronnie calls the dance floor. Most people get caught up on the dance floor. They're right in the middle of the action. If it's a dance floor, the metaphor helps you realize that you can see yourself, if it's a crowded dance floor, maybe you see the people next to you, but you can't see the whole picture. If you go up on the balcony, you can see who's dancing, who's not dancing, who's dancing with whom, all of that, right?

What I'm trying to teach is the ability to go back and forth, to be both in the moment and on the balcony. Come back. What I teach people is in this old-fashioned way. When you have a pad of paper, there's a pink line down the side of the paper, just literally. I keep my balcony comments on the left column. When I'm in a meeting and I'm tracking the work, I write down what we've just agreed to do. This is the task and process part. Like, okay, we're trying to solve this problem and we've just agreed, you're going to do this and I'm going to do this and we're going to proceed this way.

I also write down on the left-hand side of the paper what I noticed from the balcony. I notice that we get sidetracked. All of a sudden, we're talking about something else. We're talking about the election, or we're talking about a sports game, or we're talking – we're talking about the weather.

All of a sudden, we were working and now we're not working. What was it that happened just before we got sidetracked, and why did we get sidetracked? Or what happened, or I notice when women get interrupted by a mansplaining person. Or I notice that these two people seem to be at odds with each other, or I notice that I got anxious at some moment and I wonder, did I get anxious on my own behalf, or on behalf of others? I noticed that somebody might get pulled into a fight, or flight moment. I'm noticing the dynamics, right?

I think you can teach people to do that and then you can teach people how to have balcony moments in the moment. Early on when I learned this skill, I would stop a meeting 10 minutes before it was over, scheduled to be over, and I would say, what can we learn from the balcony here? Who has a balcony comment? As the group got better at this, you could say it in a moment. You could say, "Wait, let's just stop for a second. I think what happened here is that so-and-so said something and made us anxious, or it made this group of people anxious and we got pulled into something else. Let's pull it back. Let's get the work on track." You can actually, in the moment, make a balcony comment, once you've taught people.

**[0:16:20] RT:** You could have several balcony interventions in the course of an hour-long meeting, rather than save it to the end.

**[0:16:25] ES:** Exactly. Once you get good at it, you don't need to save it to the end.

**[0:16:29] RT:** Yeah, yeah. You did it initially at the end and now you're doing it in flow. What's your observation about the change in the quality of the content of the balcony observations in flow versus saving to the end?

**[0:16:40] ES:** No, they get better, right? As more people get able to go up and down from the dance floor to the balcony, the quality – it starts out in this very tentative way, and as people get more comfortable with the concept, they can intervene more effectively.

**[0:16:59] RT:** Okay, so I want to pick up on a piece you threw in at the very beginning about what your views are in leadership, that it's a set of activities, rather than a role and a position and to acknowledge that that's another Harvard Heifetz contribution to the dialogue here. For me, I think a very important distinction that we oftentimes lack. From your perspective, not just

in teaching, but in the life in an organization at NYU and all of those kinds of places you put yourself, how has that distinction been useful and informative and actionable for you, given that you had it for quite a long period of time now? How does it show up in your own life?

**[0:17:39] ES:** It shows up in a few ways. One is it allows me to encourage people who are not as high in the hierarchy as they might wish to be, or imagine themselves to be at some point to take up their own leadership. That you can lead from many places, and NYU is a place that encourages that, and so I'm able to help people think about how to step into their own leadership from multiple roles. Then now, I have a job that's completely undefined. Before, I was the dean of a school and I knew what that meant and I operated from that role. Now I'm a senior advisor to the president in effect. I self-authorize. I just think, "Oh, I see a problem. I think I could help fix."

**[0:18:26] RT:** How is it different to be full-time choosing to lead, as opposed to a role and function that's got pretty good definition to it where you may be parsing your choices to lead? How does that shake out differently for you personally?

**[0:18:39] ES:** Yeah. I mean, what I miss – I love being the dean of the school. I was a faculty member there for 10, or 11 years and then the dean for about that same amount of time. What I loved about being a dean and being a commissioner is helping people develop a shared mission and then execute on that mission. I loved having teams. I liked developing people. I liked hiring people, helping them be effective. I miss the team part a little bit. I mean, I'm part of the team now, but I don't have the responsibility of guiding teams. I have the responsibility of being in teams. It's wonderful work. I want to put a plug in here for working in city government. I worked in New York City government for a dozen years. Your daughter is now in city government, right?

**[0:19:30] RT:** She is.

**[0:19:31] ES:** I think it's a great opportunity for young people. I think it offers a huge amount of opportunity with great impact on really important issues. I try to encourage as many people as I can to take advantage of that. I also think frontline practice is important for young people. Because a lot of young people, this is a public service announcement, a little bit off our topic.



**[0:19:57] RT:** Go for it. Go for it.

**[0:19:58] ES:** A lot of young people want to imagine themselves in policy roles. Sort of telling other people what to do, or developing ideas. What I learned early on in my career is that it's relatively easy to come up with ideas for other people that you think other people should be doing. But it's harder to execute, it's harder to manage than it is to be a policy advisor. What you learn when you are working in a big institution and trying to get frontline people to do something is that unless you've been in one of these frontline jobs, you don't really understand as a policy person what the challenges are.

It's really incredibly revealing to see the world from the ground up, and to see how difficult it is to make change, because people do what they do. The policy can be X, but people find a way around it. If you don't understand how it works at the ground level, you're going to be much less effective in a policy role.

**[0:21:05] RT:** In a policy role. You teach students who are, they're going to go into that world, or in there and in graduate school and they're coming back out a little bit. When you have them, I'm assuming this is a point of view that you put forward with them as a way to think about their career and how they want to plan for the future.

**[0:21:21] ES:** Right. I mean, a group of people I spoke with last night are people in their 30s and 40s and 50s. I mean, they're people who are in senior roles. I think the lessons about being a reflective practitioner are available to people at multiple stages.

**[0:21:38] RT:** Okay. Let's extend then circle out then, because you do this in your writing. I want to write this down. I said, you believe that a leader's primary task in the swamp is to help the organization become sufficiently reflective, so the organization can make meaning from the mess they confront. My question is, if I've got my own personal self-reflection practice, and I'm choosing to lead, or I have some authority to actually marry leading an authority, how do I scale this reflective stuff so that the organization starts to have it as a piece of their culture?

**[0:22:10] ES:** Yeah. I think you can model reflective practice as a person, right? You can do everything from setting an agenda that calls for this, like let's stop and think. I think what happens in public service often is that the challenges are, they're waves. They just keep coming at you incessantly. You can spend your year, your month, your day dealing with the challenges that keep rolling in. Unless, you step back and think, "What am I doing here that could I be doing something that changes the system, so that there are fewer waves of this coming at me? Is there some way that we could all be more effective if we did something differently? Or are we destined to just keep dealing with the waves of whatever crises were in the middle of?"

I think that's the point of reflective practice, right? It's like, okay, whether you're a legal aid lawyer, or you're a caseworker, or you're in whatever party of the system you're in, faculty member, student leader, whatever, it's important to step back and think, what's the ultimate goal here? What are we trying to achieve? Are we set up to achieve this maximally, or could we be doing something differently so that we would be more effective? I think you can ask that question in multiple contexts.

**[0:23:42] RT:** It strikes me that that's in form, in part what you've been doing with your students, or the people in your teams, so that I'm guessing, that they're taking this capacity through learning firsthand in the meetings with you and taking it to their teams, and so the organization starts to scale that out as a cultural and a value add.

**[0:24:01] ES:** You find colleagues who are also interested in asking this kind of question and you say, let's stop together and think. Let's take a step back and think, what are we trying to achieve? Are we doing it the way we want? Are we feeling effective? If not, what could we do?

**[0:24:14] RT:** Yeah. Okay, so I was intrigued by another comment you had here. You said, regarding self-knowledge, you say, leaders need as bigger repertoire of skills as they can amass, because they will inevitably be limited by one's shortcomings. Ain't that the truth?

**[0:24:27] ES:** Mm-hmm.

**[0:24:29] RT:** Talk about that a little bit. I'm a leader and I've been caught out, my shortcomings catch me up, but I don't understand its repertoire of skills and stuff. I'm new to this moment. How

do you coach and counsel me about how to think about that? Because that is my experience. I'm being blindsided. How is it different than what we've been talking about, if at all?

**[0:24:51] ES:** Well, so in leadership development programs, what you can do is help people write up critical incidents, right? Tell me about some dilemma you tried to solve and you felt effective, or ineffective, right? Then you can help them parse it out. What was your goal? What was your strategy? How did you implement it and where did it go wrong? Was it your strategy that didn't work? Or was it the implementation? Your strategy makes sense, even in retrospect, but how you went about it was the problem?

There's a circle of reflection here, in which I think lots of times people go into meetings with no strategy. They're just like, "Okay, this is my 11.00 thing." Then at 12.00, you think, "Well, what happened here? What was that last hour about?" I think the question is helping people see that there's a way to take it apart, to sort of deconstruct. You go back to the goal, the strategy, the implementation, and the result. Where did it go off the rails? I mean, New York, the subway just went off the rails twice in a week, literally, right?

The airplane thing we just went through with a Boeing airplane, had a hole in it. There are these opportunities to step back and think, where did it go well and where did it go wrong? Why did it go wrong? What was the problem here? Where did I not live up to the potential that I had originally? Because originally, presumably, well, that's the question. Did you have a strategy? Did you have an implementation plan? Did you talk to the people you needed to talk to in advance? Did you develop allies?

**[0:26:47] RT:** All right. There's another theme that I picked up in your writings, which is what you refer to as the power of role, which I think is an important distinction. I also think it's a distinction very few people have in their role in their organization. First of all, define it for people who may not have this concept. Then, why it matters and how they go about cultivating them.

**[0:27:11] ES:** Yeah. I do think you're right that people don't think enough about the consequence of a particular role, and they take things very personally, right? If you think about this, you can think about being a faculty member is a role. Being a chief budget officer is a role.

Being a fire person is a role, right? I mean, these are all roles. People have reactions to role and they have reactions to authority. We under-attend to that.

If you just think about being a professor, people take up that role very differently. People walk into a classroom and figure out how to engage students in multiple ways. People take up the role of dean very differently. They take up the role of being a budget officer differently. If you think about – your daughter's now doing investigative work, right? Is she working for the DOI part? Right. If you introduce yourself and say, "I'm from the Department of Investigations," people have a reaction to that, right? There's nothing to do with who you are as a person. Nothing to do with who you are as a person. They get anxious. They're like, "What did I do wrong? I'm being investigated. I'm worried about whether you're going to be fair, all of that."

My husband used to work at a foundation, and you give out money. When you meet somebody who's giving out money, you suck up to them. You're like, "Oh, yeah. That's a really interesting idea you just have." Because you're trying to get something from, right? Then when he left the foundation, he lost all that cache. He realized who was his real friend and who was just hanging out with him, because they wanted to get money from the foundation.

Role matters. You need to understand whether people are reacting to you in your role and the authority you have, or whether they're reacting to you personally. You need to appreciate that much of the good stuff and the bad stuff that comes at you is in your role, not as your person. Sometimes it's your person. Sometimes you're particularly charming, or particularly annoying, or whatever. Much of it comes in your role. It's important to learn to distinguish that.

**[0:29:32] RT:** Put these dance partners together then a little bit, if you would, this issue of being aware and cognizant of role, my role, and also, that I have, if people listening here had the distinction that leading is a choice and an activity, what's the overlap, or the connection, or the potential between utilizing role and using choice to lead, as opposed to a splitting those, or not combining them?

**[0:29:58] ES:** Yeah. The other thing I want to say about role is that we all had a role in our family of origin. You could be the peacemaker. You could be the comedian. You could be the older brother. You could be the baby of the family. You often, we often carry those roles into

work, right? If you learn, if you figured out early on that conflict made you anxious and you became the peacemaker, it would be no surprise if you're the peacemaker at work. What you need to figure out is, is this still the role you want? Is it useful now that you're an adult?

I think we, in the reflective practice class, we did this work around family of origin, in which we ask you to think about the role you had in your family of origin and a role dilemma you're having at work, and to see whether there's some connection, right? If you're always the person at work who tries to smooth things over, is that getting in the way of your leadership? Are you unwilling to risk somebody being annoyed at you? Because when you were a kid that felt threatening and scary, but maybe it's what you need to do when you're a 40-year-old grown-up.

**[0:31:16] RT:** Yeah. It brings back the notion of choosing to lead my own life based on this self-reflective practice then?

**[0:31:23] ES:** Yeah.

**[0:31:23] RT:** Another reference you have. Let's go back to Schön. Actually, what I'd appreciate if you would for people who don't know who Donald Schön is, maybe give a little bit of an overview of him. I always thought he was – I never met the man. I just read his books and stuff. But he had an angle to seeing things that I didn't normally see with people who are writing from that perspective in organizational design and development. Particularly, he was an advocate of what he called artistry and a knowing that allowed people to function in messy zones. My second question here is what's Schön talking about there? But a little bit of background if you don't mind about who the man was and what value he contributes to this dialogue.

**[0:32:03] ES:** I mean, he was at MIT. He was a social scientist. He was interested in architecture and design, but he was interested in this idea of reflective practice and how people reflect in action. He had a notion that you could teach people across a set of professions how to do that effectively. That was very powerful. I don't know what else would be helpful.

**[0:32:27] RT:** Well, that might be it. How does his philosophy of artistry show up in your teaching with students?

**[0:32:33] ES:** Well, so I think, again, it goes back to the not recipe part, right? If you are somebody who follows – if you just think about cooking, and you're somebody who follows the recipe exactly, you get a certain result, right? If you're a chef, you bring your own artistry to it. You have a palette and you're thinking about how to create inventions in the food world that bring delight to people, right? In the public service world, what you're thinking about is, since there's no recipe, how do I experiment with ways of being that bring out the best in others and that help a group of people solve wicked problems.

**[0:33:20] RT:** Okay, so since we're profiling influences here, we mentioned Heifetz a few times, but I know you've had some close experience with him and the work that he and they did up to up at Harvard, Kennedy School of Business.

**[0:33:32] ES:** Kennedy School of Government.

**[0:33:33] RT:** Government. Excuse me, sorry. I could get in trouble for that, couldn't I? Talk a little bit about that work. To the degree, Ron's part of your description, that's fine. Marty, part of the description. Marty Linsky. Why is that work important from your perspective, as somebody who works in public services and that work comes out of the Kennedy School of Government. Why does that matter to us?

**[0:33:53] ES:** In those three weeks where I took a class with Ronnie Heifetz, that three weeks of the Kennedy School where I was in that leadership program, I think what he insisted that people do is stop, right? That you could take a course in statistics, you could take a course in budgeting, you could take a course in a set of technical things. This is actually, when I became a faculty member at the Wagner School, the Annie Casey Foundation was looking for somebody to develop a fellowship program for their mid-career leaders. I've had the privilege of helping them work on that.

We started out imagining, as we, the woman from the – Sheryl Pashani, the woman from the Casey Foundation, who was tasked with developing this fellowship program, as we went around the country for a year asking what made for effective leaders, what we came up against was what you had said earlier, which is that at some point, people hit the wall of themselves. That it wasn't just about teaching people how to be more effective. These things matter, how to run a

budget, how to design a program, how to sell an idea. These things all matter, but that ultimately, if you don't understand the impact that you're having, if you don't understand yourself, there will be a moment when you hit a wall that is you.

That's really what Ronnie was working on, too, which is like, you need to understand the dynamics of groups and the role you play and where you get into trouble and how you can be effective in your using yourself. If you don't understand that, you're likely to run up against a moment in which you realize that the problem is you.

**[0:35:44] RT:** I had gone back to school about 15 years ago and did a master's at Saïd Business School. It was a joint program between Saïd Business School and Asha St. Paris, and we had to write a dissertation. I had become quite engaged with the work of adaptive leadership, and I concluded, I was going to do this program, but I got me thinking because the time, the nature of the work I was doing with some NGOs and chaired, or foundations was a lot of these people couldn't afford time or money to go off to Harvard or do the thing that I was doing.

I wrote a dissertation, average as it was, but it was really intended to see how could you develop these kinds of capacities in the absence, or the constraints of time and money, basically. Because my premise was that we need a lot more people with some capacity to do this work. That's informed everything that I've done after that. As we sit here now and you've been working with people for a very long time, students and probably clients and things of that nature, what do you think?

I know you've listed some things about the balcony and reflective, but generally speaking, how does one build capacity when they decide, "Okay, I can raise my hand. I'm going to the fray and lead, but I'd better bring some stuff with me." What's your counsel to them about how they go about designing that more comprehensive development practice in the absence of teachers and resources like that?

**[0:37:07] ES:** Linda Hill from Harvard Business School wrote a great piece years ago called *The Myth of the Perfect Mentor*, I think. I would say, find a group of peers. I think we overestimate the people who can teach us and under calculate, undervalue your peers. I would

say, form a group. Who are the people who are in your sphere, not necessarily in your own organization, because that can get too small a stage. If you're a non-profit leader, find four other non-profit leaders in your town. Maybe not even in your field, because you don't – you want to be free to say what you need to say without worrying that somebody's going to tell on you, or judge you or something. You need a rule of confidentiality.

Find four other people, a group of five, or seven, or whatever, who are also eager to learn. Then think about, make a book club. Bring in people who you think you can learn from. Create your own curriculum. Meet once a month, and use that opportunity to present a problem of practice that you're having and get advice about. I mean, I totally think you can develop yourself with a group of peers.

**[0:38:30] RT:** Yeah, good counsel. You mentioned a critical incident case work. That strikes me as a pretty good platform in and of itself just to work off of in a group. Keep working your own cases of leading and not going well, etc. I assume that you agree.

**[0:38:45] ES:** You can roleplay. You would be like, “Well, what would you have done? Let me set this situation up for you and let's find that two other people in the group who could enact it. Let me step back and watch them navigate the territory I was trying to navigate and see how they did it.”

**[0:39:02] RT:** Yeah. Okay. All right. I don't want to retire you here in this phone call, okay, or the Zoom call. I couldn't help as I was doing research here thinking, you've been doing this for quite a while now. What's your own personal reflection about the impact that Ellen Schall has had in this conversation over the course of years? Just how do you size up your efforts here?

**[0:39:23] ES:** Yeah, it's interesting. I was telling somebody that I was going to do this podcast with you. I was saying that I – there was a moment in my mid-career days when I realized that I had shifted from people knowing me, because they encountered me at work, in city government or something, or on a nonprofit board, or whatever. Then shifting to people knowing of me because they read an article I wrote. That was a weird moment for me, because I never really imagined that for myself.



I started out as a legal aid criminal defense lawyer, as very much down in the ground, representing one kid at a time and doing all that work. All of a sudden, and then I shifted to being a commissioner and things like that. But still, people knew me because what I had done. All of a sudden, they knew me because they read the case study about me that the Kennedy School has done, or they read an article, like you did. It was a really profound shift in my sense of the potential of the influence I might have in the world.

As I think about myself generationally, I think at some point, I shifted from doing the work directly to helping other people be effective in their own work and helping organizations be the best they could be. That's been a really gratifying piece of work for a life.

**[0:41:00] RT:** I'll tell listeners that I will put in the show notes links to the papers you've written. You're part of a new book that's coming out, too. Anything you want to say about that?

**[0:41:09] ES:** That was reflecting back on work that colleagues were doing in New York City at ACS, the Administration for Children's Services, where I was a consultant at some point with the other people I wrote a chapter with. Again, it's a good example of how this book was edited and pulled together by, and who's the deputy mayor now in New York. What it took to try to change a city agency with help from consultants and very strong leadership. Yeah, it was pretty powerful.

**[0:41:41] RT:** Yeah. I will say on your behalf, as the son of a newspaper writer and editor of 45 years, you're a good writer. The papers you write are actually compelling and engaging to stay with some kinds. As we know, they can be fairly dry and tedious to get to the last page. That's not the case with your writing.

**[0:41:56] ES:** Thank you.

**[0:41:57] RT:** Yeah, you're welcome. Tell people what the Ellen Schall Experience Fund is.

**[0:42:02] ES:** When I was dean at Wagner, it really does put a bow on it, I wanted people to have the internship of their dreams. I wanted them to put what they learned in the classroom and test it in an internship. I didn't want them to – because so many nonprofits in city government can't afford to pay interns, even though now, New York, it's illegal not to pay interns

in certain sectors. I wanted to raise money to support their internship so that they could have the internship of their dreams. I created a fund that allowed them to do that. When I stepped down as dean, they named it for me. The Ellen Schall Experience Fund is this fund that supports students at the Wagner School and having the internship they want.

**[0:42:48] RT:** How many students have benefited from it?

**[0:42:51] ES:** I mean, I think hundreds over the years.

**[0:42:53] RT:** Really? That's pretty cool. That's pretty cool. Okay, last question. What's ahead for you?

**[0:42:59] ES:** At the moment, higher ed is under attack, right? The value of higher ed institutions is being challenged by a lot of people. Our work is to make sure that people understand that NYU is an extraordinary institution, that operates across the globe effectively and brings value through its teaching and research and service. We intend to continue to do that and to prove the value of it.

**[0:43:29] RT:** All right. Ellen Schall, thank you for coming into my swamp and spending some time with me. It's been truly enjoyable.

**[0:43:35] ES:** It's been a pleasure.

[END OF EPISODE]

**[0:43:38] 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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