

EPISODE 58

[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. As you know, if you are a listener, this is the podcast where we have conversations with individuals, in this case, couples who have made some decision in their life and in their professions to lead and work in some very complex issues.

Today is a particularly poignant opportunity for me, because I get to interview Maxime Fern and Michael Johnstone, who I have followed their work for a while. This is a chance to have a conversation with them. They have a brand-new book out, a relatively new, called *Provocation as Leadership: A Roadmap to Adaptation and Change*. Which I believe is a very significant contribution to the kind of conversations that we've been having in this podcast for a couple of years. Michael and Maxime, welcome to the swamp. It's good to have you here.

[0:01:06] MF: Thank you.

[0:01:06] MJ: Good to swim with you.

[0:01:07] MF: Thank you, Rick.

[0:01:08] RT: Yes. Thank you. All right. I'm going to give you a chance to tell people what it is you want them to know about you before we get into my questions. Maxime, why don't you go first? What do you want people to know about you?

[0:01:19] MF: I think it's – as we work together with others, we're in the habit of letting people know that, as well as being a working partnership, we're also a living partnership. That is, we're

married. This work that we do together is something that we carry and are looking for and exploring in almost everything we do. It comes in particular from our early work as systemic family therapist. Where we learned to look at a system, rather than individuals to have an understanding of how to make a difference.

[0:01:58] RT: Great. Thank you. Michael?

[0:02:00] MJ: Well, to build on that, Maxime and I have been living and working together for well over 40 years. As part of our early training, we work with some people who, both in family therapy and elsewhere. For whom, challenging the system, or challenging the client group was an integral part of the work. We have been intrigued by playing around with making a lot of mistakes with the whole idea of provocation, as the critical element in orchestrating change. Whether you call yourself a leader, or exercising leadership, or not.

So we learned, for example, from some of our early influences in family therapy, that rather than avoiding a crisis, part of the work of family therapy is to induce a constructive crisis for a family. We learned from Frank Farrelly, who wrote a very influential list for us book called *Provocative Therapy*. That without raising challenging questions, and helping people see the contradictions in the way they think and act, change is unlikely. We've been playing around with these things for a long, long time, together in various aspects of our work. We are psychologists by training, that have grounding and other disciplines as well.

[0:03:19] RT: I want to start with the book, because that's what – as I listen to you speak, this might be the presentation of the coming together these varying places that you spent your time for the last 40 years. I neglected to say introduction, you spent 16 or 17 years at Harvard at the Kennedy School teaching with Ron Heifetz, and **[inaudible 0:03:38]** around adaptive leadership. You have had your own consultancy for a very long time down in Australia. There's multiple pieces here at play that I think we want to get on. But the book, that's its own work to write a book. That's a big deal in and of itself. What, if you don't mind me stealing the line, what provoked you to write the book at this point in your career and in your life and what it's about?

[0:04:01] MF: I think there are two parts to what provoked us. One is, that's probably the most relevant. We've been working with others, teaching others to interfere in other people's

business. That is, do the work of adaptive leadership for a long time. The model, as you know, is both really straightforward and complex. Once you get into it. We found that the essential part and Michael referred to that earlier of it being necessary to provoke people out of the status quo they're in is something that practitioners don't always want to go to. Given the various lives we've all had, and what we understand, and how we know ourselves. Who in their right mind wants to get on the wrong side of people?

We were stimulated to put a full-frontal focus on provocation, to say, yes, everything that comes next and alongside provoking people out of their comfortable status quo is important. But unless you're prepared to face the reality, that if a challenge is adaptive, then something needs to shift, if there has to be progress. I haven't met anyone who willingly says, "Yes, provoke me. Help me be uncomfortable." That's really what led us to write the book. We wanted to put this issue front and center where it belongs. Then, our ability to write it occurred, in part because of the pandemic. We had made this decision, and then, we're able to travel in the way that we had been. It led very nicely to us having that chunk of time with each other to pull things together, stretch it out, explore it, and develop it. Then, there was the book.

[0:06:08] MJ: Then, add a little to that. One of the things that we saw, especially with practitioners, people who are leadership educators, and consultants, let alone those out there in the world trying to exercise leadership. We saw those coming away from Harvard saw the method of instruction, and teaching, and the exhortation to challenge and provoke as a bit of a mysterious art form. People had a very cockeyed idea of what provocation was. If I was to simplify it, most people see it as kind of throwing a bomb into the middle of a group.

We realized that that not only was unhelpful, but it was unproductive, unhelpful idea and unproductive. Because nine times out of 10, if you throw a bomb into the middle, people get hurt literally and figuratively. We wanted to develop and offer a much more nuanced, and as you kindly commented, a practical and reliable way of thinking about provocation. That it does encompass a wide range of approaches, including some that are relatively gentle, and kind, right through to those that are more, let's call them aggressive. And that the real skill of provocation is being able to match circumstance with action.

Therefore, we have tried to show in the book a variety of methodologies, methods, and tools, and a variety of examples that show when people have used them. So people can see where the circumstances, the context, the environment in which people are operating is matched by what kind of provocative action is taken that helps make progress. So those two things together, I think are very important.

[0:07:57] RT: Just the word provocation, it can be a pejorative. I know you spent a lot of times in the states and so you probably are following the comings and goings of our current deal. We certainly have some people in the political side who are using provocation in I'm sure ways that are not the way that you view it as being useful. I noted in the book that you say at the outset that the books about rehabilitation opportunity, and growth, and the rehabilitation component is to – it sounds like, for what we're talking about, reclaim provocation as a useful function rather than a destructive function like we're seeing oftentimes in our political arena.

Can you speak a little bit about the reclamation, and the opportunity, and the growth as you see it as sort of a top line as we get into this conversation for people? Because I think a lot of people are like me, they're thinking provocation. I don't want to be part of that, because there's enough of it going around, and you're advocating, there's a way to do it well. What is the opportunity reclamation, the growth opportunities here is a sort of an anchor for the conversation.

[0:08:59] MJ: That's a really, really good question in today's world. As it happens, we're about to, in a month, run a master class here in Australia, where we're looking at the theme of how you make progress in a world where there's so much disturbance, and where people are saying we're provoked out of our minds. Both by external circumstances, but also by people in prominent roles, who use what is described as provocation for destabilizing purposes. You see it all around the world, including in your own country.

The distinction that we would make is that a provocation used constructively and productively is about making progress. In order to make on complex issues, in order to make progress on complex issues, you actually have to bring people together with diverse views. Knowing that the provocation will open up some of those historical wounds, but there needs to be a container in which to have those sorts of conversations. The politicians and others who use provocation

destructively do it to create division, and to highlight the needs of one particular group over others. That's a really critical distinction that I think we would make.

We want to rehabi- we could have called the book something different. We could have called the book constructive means to challenge the status quo. But we wanted to highlight – even using the word provocation is provocative, because it has certainly negative connotations. We think it's a means to get people's attention at its simplest. Provocation as a means to get people's attention to the things that are holding progress back.

[0:10:43] MF: One of the things that we think distinguishes how people react or think about provocation, and what we have in mind as a significant intervention for adaptation is the notion that we are always looking for purpose. So provocation is not for its own sake, it is in the service of the difficulty that people have and are explicit about it, or have and are dancing around. In our work, we're continually amazed and surprised at the relationship people have with the current status quo. Despite the most eloquent protestations, and requests, and demands for things to change, what we actually experienced in the room or an engagement is a commitment to things staying the same. It's only in that sense, that provocation as we are proposing it makes sense. It's a tool, an opportunity, a way of recalibrating a system that is stuck in place, and where there is not awareness of that.

[0:12:00] RT: Okay. A question I've got here is to help people who are listening, because just as you say, Maxime. They may have this orientation to it as something that they prefer to avoid. What are from your perspective the essential elements of useful provocation?

[0:12:16] MJ: Well, at its simplest, and we write about this in the book. We call it the architecture of provocation. At its simplest, a provocation is a stimulus in an existing system. That can come from someone within that system, someone exercising leadership, or an event from outside, an exogenous challenge. Just to illustrate the difference, the arrival of COVID-19 was an exogenous provocation to the system, to a global system. None of us were prepared for it. The status quo was totally unprepared and thrown out of kilter by that.

Medical systems around the world, so those in roles of authority in medical systems, for example, here in authority. By requiring us to stay at home, they intervened in that system. So

as an intervention into the system, to test and challenge the limitations of the status quo, in this instance, to create safety for people, protection. There's the stimulus, but then there's the reaction. I think when people talk about provocation, frequently, what they're talking about is that the reaction they have. The fear, the disturbance, the discomfort, which no one wants. No one wakes up in the morning says, "I'm going to feel as uncomfortable as I can today."

Part of the work as provocation is to recognize and manage the disturbance that the intervention creates. Whether you created exercising leadership by intervening or you're responding to something from outside. But we've also learned and we talk about this a lot on the book, that the interaction, the vibrations between those two elements create kind of a bubble, what we've described as a provocative moment, which can last 30 seconds, 30 minutes, or 30 days, or longer. The real work of change happens in that bubble. Heifetz, and Linskey, and Grashow talk about it in their work. Their work of disequilibrium, the productive zone. What we've tried to do is to talk about provocation, as a variety of means to create productive learning.

[0:14:26] MF: It's almost a year ago now when we were first launching a book. We found ourselves in Israel, almost as soon as we opened the conversation. There was a reasonably heated, if not, furious intervention from a member of the audience. Who said, "How dare you put provocation and leadership in the same sentence as a title for a book?" In that moment, of course, it told us a lot about the essential elements of provocation.

What can people take? What's the pacing that needs to be in our hearts and heads as we do this work? I think it's really important to remember when you ask, what's an essential element? Part of that is, what can people tolerate? Which is why –

[0:15:18] RT: What can they handle.

[0:15:19] MF: Yes, what can they handle. In that instance, what is a word mean? Now, a year on, things in Israel are looking very different, and the trajectory moved much faster in the direction that this particular participant indicated. But it's, again, a reminder about what's essential, what's reasonable, and what's useful, and purposeful.

[0:15:44] RT: We'll pick this back up again, but I'm just thinking about you two in that room. I know you have a long history of being in rooms with people where the temperature raises. Listeners here who are trying to figure out how they build their own capacity to deal with this stuff. For you two, how do you hold yourself when the temperature goes up, either because somebody from the outside brings the heat into the room, then you didn't see it until it's spoken? Or you by design are tempting to raise the heat, because you said you need to get some kind of people little off center for them to start to engage? How do you do this for the two of you?

[0:16:22] MF: It's a great question, and one that we talk about together quite a lot. It feels to us as if this work is more than work. It is a way of living, a way of being prepared to be on an edge in the service of something that is worthy or you believe in. For us, it's really important for us each to know ourselves as well as we can. We use each other as partners, and other people that we work with. So that, when any one of us triggers, deliberately, or inadvertently, a really strong reaction, we can hold steady. Even though that holding steady might not be elegant in the moment, and may require us to enter more fully into relationship with the group in order to stabilize if we have gone too far or triggered something we didn't see.

In a way, we have to ask of ourselves the same thing that we're asking people we work with, that we can be surprised, get it wrong, blindsided, we can offend. None of that's intentional. If we're not open to that happening, then we can't actually do this work. We think of ourselves as very lucky because we can help each other. These conversations are kind of always with us in a way. But I think those principles of self-knowledge, support of others, reassessing one's intention, and impact are really significant components of that.

[0:18:08] MJ: Linear as well. Some of this has been hard, hard one, hard learned, so a lot of trial and error, and screwing up from time to time. But I think there are a number of really essential components. Interesting enough, I think they are true for anyone who exercises leadership, irrespective of whether they are provocative or not. The first is, you got to create a container for the work, what Heifetz calls a holding environment. It's not enough just to come in and whack people around their heads. That's connected to what Maxime said about purpose.

I think the second thing is, and we've learned this both the hard way, and also through hearing back from people. It feels important for us to demonstrate wherever you can how much you care

for the people you're working with. Whether it's, you have respect for what they're trying to do, and for the people personally. Then thirdly, you got to hold two contradictory ideas. One is that what you're doing, the intervention that's purposefully or unintentionally provocative is exactly what's required. At the same time, it could be totally wrong. When people really react strongly, you've got to be open to scrutiny, to the possibility that that intervention was an appropriate off being too strong, whatever you want to call it.

[0:19:29] MF: As you're saying that, Michael, I want to add that – because you've raised, Rick, the idea of what do people do when they want to move more into the world of useful provocation. I think it sounds very simple, but it's important to not panic when it appears to go pear shaped. Because we've both had the experience of there being fury in the room, and people being out for our scalps. Then, within an hour or two, or next morning, people coming back with a very different understanding and being in a different place. Allowing for just holding steady, being prepared that you've got it entirely wrong, you're going to have to do some work to reconnect. But also, hold, because maybe this was exactly what was needed.

[0:20:24] RT: So you have to be comfortable with not knowing exactly what the next future is going to hold, and trust that you've been doing the best you can in the moment.

[0:20:33] MF: Yes. Well said. I think that's it, yes.

[0:20:37] RT: There's a whole bunch here. I want to come back to this piece too, because I can imagine people listening saying, "Well, these two people, there are pros from Dover, no matter what they say, and I am reading your book for the first time, da, da, da." We will tend to their concerns on that question, because you do a good job in the book of giving them some scaffolding for this. I have a couple of questions. So just more, really, because I dug around beyond the book. I have a question for both of you, each of you. Maxime, would you share your big man and the big stick beginning?

[0:21:08] MF: All right. Gosh, yes. Well, I think as I said in the book, that was very early in my working career. I was as green as was possible. I ended up in a place that, in hindsight, I shouldn't have been. The police were supposed to accompany a person in my role, when a call came in saying very eloquently, "A man has gone berserk. Send a counselor." But I think what,

as I explained, I, again, foolishly pushed open the door, because I could hear crashing and banging going on in the house. I saw a very big man with a very big stick, welling into walls, ceiling, light fittings, just creating havoc, and he saw me there.

I said, "Hello, I'm Maxime. I've come from the health center and I'm scared." He dropped his big stick, and he looked at me and he said, "What are you scared off? You scared me?" Inadvertently, I had provoked him into seeing another side of himself. Now, as I go to the pains in the book, that's not any kind of recommendation of how to ever intervene. It was wrong in every way, but stayed with me as a life lesson about what else is present in each of us, and how can we make it more likely that this other alternative that's more productive can also arise?

[0:22:49] RT: Okay, Michael. Your turn/

[0:22:51] MJ: Just let me comment on that story, because it says a lot. It's an example of, if you like, a crisis, an exogenous crisis, pressure. Maxime's intervention, even though it wasn't planned, or just came out of nowhere was actually very gentle. It wasn't a big, provocative intervention. It was a very gentle intervention, but it was a paradox. It was a paradoxical intervention, because it highlighted the very thing that was happening. He was afraid, he was disturbed, she was afraid. By naming it in the way that she did, paradoxically, it made it possible for the man to see his own role. It was a very big intervention.

[0:23:31] MF: From a very small woman.

[0:23:33] RT: Very small, with a very small word. It's changes. Michael, I'm interested in your dirty boots beginning.

[0:23:42] MJ: Yes. In the early part of my career, I was doing research for a PhD in Malaysia, in two shanty towns, the illegal settlements that impoverished people from the countryside built. For the first month or so of my being there, I avoided going into these places, that I was there to study. I came to realize that I had a lot of fears to do is not really knowing how to do this thing, how to do it. It took me quite a while in being there to realize that I was caught in this loop of avoiding doing that work, going in, starting to do the work, and figuring out how to make it work. I realized I had to shift it.

I built myself kind of a desensitization strategy, very incremental, very small things that confronted the very thing that I didn't know how to do. We write about that in that book. I got help to go and meet the head of shanty town, asked them to introduce me to someone. Got help to go and visit another one to find out how I can even drive there, let alone, enter it. Slowly, over a couple of weeks, I began to do these small things. The big realization eventually was that I was held back by my own lack of knowledge, my own incompetence, and believing as the so-called expert, I needed to know, and have the answers to know what to do. But the people who had the answers were right there in the settlements, and all I had to do was sit down with them, and talk.

[0:25:16] MF: And listen.

[0:25:17] MJ: And listen to them. There was a huge and very influential revelation. Hence that idea of dirty boots, I had to get into the settlements, because you couldn't go into the settlements without getting your boots dirty, literally dirty. That the only way for me to learn was to get my boots dirty.

[0:25:36] RT: These two early experiences, and for listeners thinking, all of us have some kinds of experiences early in our life. What counselor advice do you have for the work of reflecting a little bit on prior experiences in life as a means to stand, I don't know, if it's on higher ground or more solid ground? You're having these insights relatively quickly to the experience, but I'm just curious, people are thinking, "Mm, what about me?" What do you say to people about past life being relevant to today?

[0:26:09] MF: Wow. I am so glad you asked that, because it's a hobby horse of mine. We're often working with people who are entering into the field. All of us as humans are hardwired to learn from those who know. Along with that comes an undermining of oneself. I think all of us have had the experience of being in the room with someone who is a so-called expert. The moves they make, the things they say are definitely the right ones. We wouldn't know what they are if we don't write them all down some version of that.

I was working many years ago with a very young woman who came from a very privileged background. We were working in areas where people were not privileged. She felt consistently that she didn't have anything to offer, because she didn't have direct experience. And yet, when we talked and looked at who she was, where she came from, how she came to know what she did, her values, and convictions, and her own experiences were so rich and available to her. That I do spend quite a bit of time trying to encourage people to know what their own story is, and to validate that.

It's good to learn from others, but not at the expense of undermining the particular gift that each of us brings. When someone will stand in front of a group, and in their own way, confess or acknowledge the unknowing as a means of inviting people forward. They do that with an integrity that others can smell, sense, and trust. Encouraging each person to take themselves seriously, to work out who they are, what the particular way they have in the world. Even to think about in the private life, when are they the most comfortable, when are they speaking freely, when are they connecting with others. Because that's the self that's authentic, and then with the addition of skills and learning to come to be with other people to do significant work.

[0:28:39] RT: Yes. Michael?

[0:28:39] MJ: It's a very big question, actually. To me, I think you're asking about – well, what is the role of reflection, and how to encourage it further. I think it goes right to the heart of what we're trying to do in this book. One of the early origins of word provoke and provocation has the meaning of bringing forth something, eliciting something. Leadership and leadership learning is about bringing forth a whole range of things, understanding of where you're stuck, what patterns are getting in the way, of what aspirations a group has, and the gap between that and current reality.

A personal reflection, or a group reflection, or reflection of the history of a team is a form of story. A good story, a good reflection will help bring forth something. Again, highlighting that you don't have to throw a bomb in to get the work of leadership on the table. It's about activating an individual or a group of people to start doing things, thinking, engaging, diagnosing, taking action in smaller or bigger ways that are different than before, and that test and challenge the status quo. A good story, which is a form of A personal reflection can do that.

Just to illustrate. We worked late last year with a very senior executive team of a professional services firm. Part of what happened is that they were telling stories about their recent history. It was from – we came to understand it over time as a very self-serving story. The story about how well they got on, a story about how productive they were, a story of how they understood what adaptation was, and it was a story that wasn't serving them.

One person in that group, we were encouraging trying to get different viewpoints told a very slightly different story. There wasn't a self-serving and self-congratulatory. Just that story itself shone light, it's like, it opened up a crack in the carapace of the self-congratulations that everyone had. And therefore, was a small platform for them, and then for us to start saying, "Well, what other stories might need to be told?"

[0:31:05] RT: All right. So let's go back to your provocation then. So you in the book say that you offer four lessons that show that provocation is the skill necessary for leading in leaders. When I read these, I thought, these make a lot of sense to me. But I don't think I had to come up with them, had I not been reading your book? So therefore, I have no access or agency probably, or it's random. Would you talk about the four lessons, and maybe now there's five or six, I don't know. But share with people what you think are sort of fundamental that need to be tended to and address in order to have provocation be useful?

[0:31:39] MJ: I think the two biggest ones, so we won't talk to them all, because it's a very fat idea. The first is that we all prefer the status quo, whatever we say, we revert to the status quo because it's comfortable and it's known. We prefer what we know, even though we might know that it's not working for us. Then the unknown, and the disturbance that will come, the loss, and you've written about this in one of your blogs, Rick. That would come from moving away from that status quo. That's a really critical one.

The second one is that, all the theory in all history shows, we learn about it from biology, from evolution. That change in the fundamental composition, the DNA of a person, or the way they think, or an organization comes because there is a challenge to that status quo, a disturbance to that status quo. That forces the organism in some way to reconfigure itself. "Force" can come from outside or from – that's two.

Then, the fourth is that there are risks as we said earlier, that there's always risks that you will create temporary, or longer-term harm. We have many little anecdotes, and stories in the book of some of those risks, and times when we probably went too far. And that you have to recognize that what you're asking people to do is to tolerate a disturbance that they may not have asked for, or that they may ask for, but aren't ready for, or capable of dealing with. Then, part of your responsibility is to deescalate, if necessary, see what your mess is, what you've created. But also, hold them long enough to know.

So the worst thing you can do if you're disturbing a system and people get panicky is to say, "Oh, sorry. I really messed up" and withdraw. Take away all that disturbance, because it's the only way that that systems will begin to move. Left to their own biases, it's very unusual for real change to happen without there being some disturbance. Most organizations wait. Companies wait until there was a big shock from outside, but that's leaving change to chance. That's why we think the productive use of provocation is so important, because you're trying to get on the front foot, to exercise leadership, and not leave necessary desire change to chance.

[0:34:07] RT: Yes. Maxime?

[0:34:08] MF: Are they emerging? These are the lessons of provocation. I think it's implied, but it's increasingly clear to us that inevitably, most people are hardier than they'd have you believe. So as we each attempt to intervene in the system, even though it's been requested, there are various forms of shock, horror. How could you say that? It's like being dead. I've really gone too far, I need to step back. But again, holding steady, acting as if there is hardiness in a system is actually, I think, a very healthy and potentially productive thing to do.

[0:34:51] RT: So you raise a question for me there. I didn't think about until listening to you talk. I think it probably begins a little bit with your experience in family systems as therapists. But now, in the work you're doing now, is it possible to think that any system at any moment in time could be provoked for some reason, large or small for the benefit in the evolution of the system? Small provocations mean – I guess I'm juxtaposing provocation with complacency. Maybe that's inappropriate. If you're sort of in charge of a system or you're influential in a system, is there

always some little place where you could probably provoke and build some resilience around provocation?

[0:35:28] MF: Well, I think, yes and no. It's helpful to go back to Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky's is formulation of the adaptive leadership work. And to remember that we actually need provocation in a very small percentage of our exchange together. Mostly, the stuff we're doing together, the work we are creating is good enough, it's serving. It's only when, actually we are on the verge of becoming not fit for purpose, that we begin to look at the system, and what its patterns are, what its trajectory is. And then, someone might call or it might be noticed, "Hang on. If this keeps going, we are not on a good path." Then, provocation is needed.

I think because it is risky, it offers a lot, it demands a lot. Yes, one can always look provocatively at what is going on. But I think in the world we're in, and we have to ask, to what purpose, to what end, what is the need?

[0:36:35] MJ: My comment would be is that, groups, whether it's a whole organization, or a couple, or a society, even an individual, that a system will sooner or later always show what's on its mind. Including the patterns that get in the way, the gap between what they say they want, and what's actually happening. Just for instance, there's a little story, little anecdote in the book about senior tech manager, we called her Leanne. Who noticed after being appointed as the engineering manager of this large engineering team, then in her meetings, her staff, only one of her staff would talk to her directly. Then, when she said anything, all the other members of the team, all men look to their colleague, Tommy. The team revealed itself, the pattern revealed itself.

Then, the issue for Leanne, as the senior authority in that team was, would she exercise leadership or not? In other words, our job in exercising leadership, whether you're a manager or someone outside, is to observe, and listen, and then begin to figure out what kind of questions or interventions to offer. In Leanne's case, her intervention was extremely challenging, but very gentle. All she said was – we write about this in more detail. "This is what I noticed happening." It's factual. "We're in meetings, you don't answer me, you only talk – Tommy is the only one who talks to me." Then, her question on the surface, a very benign question. What do you think

about that? It's a deeply challenging question, because it is asking them, almost requiring them to comment on the very thing that they've all been avoiding.

[0:38:16] RT: Yes. I want to acknowledge for people who have read the book. Another reason to read the book is the section you've got where you talk about your own efforts to help, and how you made mistakes, and talk a little bit about – so it's not – not every story is a winning story from start to finish, there's ups and downs. I think that the acknowledgement of that is often not something you see authors write about. I give you credit for putting some of that in there. That said, can you speak a little bit about the reality that you can get hurt doing this?

[0:38:48] MJ: Well, you can get hurt, and you can hurt others, and you can get hurt because you push too far too quickly, too deeply, too fast, and get taken out of the game. Those are real risks. Every now and again, it has happened. Maybe more importantly, though, is that you cause hurt, unintended, and plan for unforeseen distress, and hurt for some individuals in a group. We do try to show through some of the stories what can be learned from those.

So yes, man, it's real. That's the paradox of real change. That real change – and you've written about it, Rick. Real change involves some degree of loss. And the loss is painful to people, whether it's of their pride, their reputation, their job. I read a lot on LinkedIn at the moment, for example. Of all the Googlers who are losing their jobs at Google, and how that company was in their mind and what meant to be part of that company has changed. It's not just the loss of the job itself, it's the loss of an ideal of what how the people thought about. Those are very real.

[0:40:00] MF: I think, Rick, you're putting on the table the fact that you can get this work wrong, you can go too far, you can do not enough, you can cause a group to coalesce against you. Sometimes that's a useful thing, because they find each other, but often, it's not. I guess from our point of view, way of thinking, that makes it a very real and alive endeavor. That means you have to have your wits about you, be prepared to be real with people, establish relationship before anything else happens, so that you've got somewhere to go. If in this real work, you trade somewhere that you ought not have done.

[0:40:45] RT: Not have done. The book is highly useful in giving people guidance about how to – my language here, how to construct a practice. Meaning that mastery is a progression, and

you have breakthroughs, and you have setbacks, and then you're have more competence at a higher level. The book is the place I'm going to tell people who are listening to go to get this, so I won't put you on the spot to have to. But in a sort of abbreviated form, what do you think are some of the elements that would be essential for somebody who wants to build some capacity in this? What are the starting points for them after they get the book?

[0:41:18] MF: Let's just say, someone is relatively new into this. They like the ideas they're reading. I think a first step is to be prepared to reflect on one's own practice. I'm assuming a practitioner, or a leader, or manager to begin that process of reflection, ideally, with someone else, a trusted confidant who can be honest about how the reflections strike them. Then, in a way to begin to redirect themselves about what is the contribution they want to make, and what would that look like if they began to do something other than they're currently doing.

Then, actually, to be prepared to engage in the process of loss, the willingness to take on this work is itself an adaptation. In that, some things will be lost. If someone has had has a position of formal authority in an organization, but some of the time, they now want to work with their own group, as we saw with very senior leader in the federal government department. He learned to stop being so helpful, and he put pressure on his people by no longer answering their questions as willingly and skillfully as he had done. He withdrew some of his services. That was very difficult for him. It felt like a real loss, not to be the expert, and to be seen with all of his gifts.

I guess that's a long way of saying that the path to doing more of this work, is firstly, to look at who am, what am I currently offering, and what would I like to offer instead in the purpose of what, and how much, and who will I do that with. So that person isn't alone.

[0:43:10] RT: Michael, anything you want to add to that list?

[0:43:11] MJ: Yes. Look, my comment would be that leadership and provoking as part of leadership, is the practice, as you've mentioned. And you need to practice a practice. So a lot of preparation, rehearsal, call it the way you like, training. One of the ways to do that is to – just a concrete thing that we've done with people we're teaching from time to time, is to remember a

scenario that you've been working with recently with a group of people or in coaching, where you thought, "Mm, some challenge might have been required there."

To craft three observations and three different questions, each of which is at a different level of intensity. So something that's cool, and really manageable, something that's warm, a little bit harder to do, and might put pressure on, and something that's hot. So you get a real sense of what the graduations are. Obviously, it's better to start off with something that's cooler and see what happens. It's really about practice.

[0:44:10] RT: Practice, yes. I think that's one of the great challenges of life and organization systems, why sports metaphors are so poor, because they have a week to practice before they play the game. We live every day in the game for the most part. So you got to be deliberate to find ways to take yourself out and get ready for the game. Small doses, I think.

I have a few other things I got to ask you two. Michael, you put me on to something, in some LinkedIn writings you did. I love this concept. I've never heard it before. But I'd like to speak a little bit about the provisional self, because we're talking about development. It strikes me, provisional self is a helping hand in perhaps a practice. Could you explain the origins of that and how it could be used?

[0:44:51] MJ: Well, it's an attitudinal thing. The idea arose from two sources. Maxime and I were running a masterclass about five or six years ago. The participants, all of whom were practitioners, very capable people were saying, "What you're doing with us is very confounding." The implication was, that they thought that they had to know how to do things in order to learn how to do them. We found ourselves using this idea of a provisional self to mean, a temporary state, learner plates, just another version of learner plates. No one questions that a learner driver is going to make mistakes, or an apprentice. No one expects the apprentice plumber to do the most complex work immediately. They start with really simple things and mistakes are to be expected, and they take offline to practice.

We use that idea of a provisional self and somehow rather, magically, it took hold that people sort of thought, "Yes, I can be a provisional self. I can learn with my learner plates on." It seems such a simply crazy idea that people don't have the highlights how experience capable

professional people have totally crazy expectations. Especially when they're learning, trying to learn to do something new and different.

[0:46:16] RT: Yes. That's a great distinction. Okay. You spent some decent time at Harvard with Heifetz and Linsky, Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky. We should give them their full names, not everybody knows them. Obviously, that program at Harvard had a significant influence in the world. Obviously, I knew. But I want to flip it a little bit. You were there for quite a while. So what from your perspective – this is a brag question, and I don't know if you're comfortable with this one or not, but might you give it a go. What's the lasting contributions or the impactful contributions you made on the approach of adaptive leadership based on the way in which you taught it to people?

[0:46:54] MJ: Not our favorite thing to do, but let's give it a try.

[0:46:56] RT: Please do.

[0:46:57] MJ: I'm going to start with a comment that Marty made once to us. I was an accident. In a way, our involvement there grew over time, from almost nothing to quite substantial. Marty once commented that, we notice in one workshop after about five years here, that we were the only members of faculty who were there all the time. People came from all around the world to see Heifetz, to see Ron and Marty work. But they came and went, that's the way the program was structured. We didn't have to be there all the time. It's just how we chose to do it.

Our presence, being present, and demonstrating a commitment to that difficult work was a lasting contribution. It's something that we have held onto in all that work. But in terms of the – I think we did a couple of things, and we grew. One of them is, we codified and wrote up what this thing called case in point is. Up until then, it was just something that Ronnie particularly did, and Marty did as well. We try to codify it, we try to work it, practice it, unpack it, and write about it, and then teach it. Now, case in point as an accepted methodology. We feel proud to have made a contribution to making that more available to people. Then, this book is the next step, trying to get people to intervene more productively.

[0:48:23] RT: Maxime, what do you have to say?

[0:48:25] MF: Michael, it's an awkward question. You can never see your own impact. I think something that stays with me is, we used to at the end of every program, faculty would sit in front of the group, all of faculty who had ever been presenting. Participants could say whatever they like, ask any questions. One year, after we'd been there for quite a few years, a participant said of us, pointed down the front of the room and said, "What is it about those guys? Who are they really? What would we have done if they hadn't been here?" There was nothing concrete in it, but they were identifying something about us that seemed to make a difference to how we all work together.

One of the things that I have wondered about is, we very much turn up with an Australian presence. As you'd be aware, Australians and authority, haven't quite – Australians haven't quite worked out our relationship with authority. So we are always on the back foot in taking that authority role. And it's possible, there's something about that that has made us more accessible. And therefore, created almost a stepping stone for people, or at a minimum, an alternate way of viewing this work.

[0:49:53] MJ: Yes, very cool.

[0:49:54] RT: All right. We're kind of coming down to it here. Here's my last question. After all that you have done to help people over the years, what's it time for for you now?

[0:50:04] MJ: It's a very pertinent question, because last year 2023, the theme for our Australian masterclass for the Australian Adaptive Leadership Institute was, what is it time for. I think it's always a timing question. In the times we live, it's a particularly timely question. We're very fortunate, and that we do this, and we're going to have a lot of conversations, reflective conversations, future-oriented exploration together.

The most obvious and concrete response, what is it time for us for professionally? Is to do as much as we can to support the next generation of leadership, educators, and practitioners. To that end, we're doing quite a lot. Just for example, the next master class, we have two younger colleagues who are going to partner with us kind of as an adjunct faculty, and it's something that gives us a lot of pleasure. That's the one thing. What is it time for us personally? That's a harder

question, because we don't see our work and our private personal lives as being all that separate. We know how to separate them, but they're so intertwined. We love nothing better than to explore these ideas and to so probably just continue being nuisances.

[0:51:19] MF: I like that.

[0:51:20] RT: Continue being nuisances. Thank you for being nuisances in the world. Hey, Maxime and Michael, thank you so much for making time to have this conversation, coming to the swamp. I think you're going to be – it turns out to be very helpful. I will say in the show notes, there's a link to the book, there's a link to your consultancy. We will put other links in there that you think you want people to know about, about anything you're doing, anything you've written you think is relevant. Thank you so much for spending time here. I appreciate it.

[0:51:48] MF: Thank you very much, Rick.

[0:51:49] MJ: Thanks for your care and careful curation today, Rick. It was fun.

[0:51:52] MF: Indeed

[0:51:53] RT: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:51:57] 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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