

**EPISODE 66**

[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 in their life and in their career to use themselves to lead on some very difficult challenges, how they use themselves as multifaceted. As you know, if you've listened to podcast, some are very much frontline, some are in support roles, some are in teaching roles, some are in consulting roles.

Today, my guest is Nick Ellem. Nick is from New South Wales, Australia, Sydney, I believe. Nick, you can clean me up in a second on that one. Nick kind of wears all those hats, near as I can tell. He's a teacher, he's a coach, he is a contributor, and he is an originator of ideas. It's all of those things together that intrigued me, that caused me to try and badgered him into coming to the swamp and having a conversation. He said, yes. Nick Ellem, welcome to the swamp. It's great to have you.

**[0:01:14] NE:** Thanks, Rick. It's nice to be here.

**[0:01:16] RT:** Yes. In order to get us started, I'm going to give you space to tell people what it is you want them to know about you. Then, we'll just get into the work that you're up to.

**[0:01:25] NE:** Well, first and foremost, I'm an adaptive leadership practitioner. I think as many people who listen to this podcast and some people that you've had on the podcast have had an out-of-body experience from attending the Harvard program with Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky. I attended that program in 2012. I think that was a really life changing experience for me, being in a room at the age of 32 with 60 other leaders from across the world, who are looking to develop leadership. I think, for me, it was a real eye-opening kind of experience.

I think that's what brings me to – I started my career in adult education, mainly involved in training roles and organizational development roles. I came across adaptive leadership in 2011, where I met a woman named Rosamund Christie, and Rosamund had been engaged by our organization to run a leadership program. I noticed on her bio was this art and practice of leadership program, and it really intrigued me.

That was really where my journey started with leadership development. So, I've been in leadership development for 13 to 14 years. After coming back from the Harvard program, had a really, really an eagerness to start playing with the model and the ideas, and to start learning and experimenting. I think that's really where I've been in the last 10 years, since I've been at the Kennedy School, and really just getting my hands dirty. I've worked in non for profit and government agencies in internal leadership development roles. I've also done a bit of consulting and coaching, really working in large, complex systems that are quite fractured complex, have really taken on large, messy problems, and using the adaptive leadership framework to really help frame what those challenges are. But then, how do we actually intervene skillfully? So, that's really what I've been playing with and experimenting with over the last 10 years or so.

**[0:03:32] RT:** As you mentioned, there's been prior guests on the podcast, who have adaptive leadership background and come from all sorts of places around the world. I'm one of those people. But for listeners who may not have listened to any of those prior episodes, and they're hearing you talk about this for the first time, because this will be a bit of a song line, I think, that carries our conversation here, at least in the background. Help people understand what it is about – what is adaptive leadership, why does it matter? Why do we need it in the world, and why have you decided to make it a fundamental part of how you spend your time and having an impact?

**[0:04:09] NE:** Yes, there's a lot of questions there. But I think, for me, what is adaptive leadership? It really is about helping people find their own capacity. In the sense when Ron wrote that first book in 1994, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. I think that really kind of laid the foundations for building on the work of many other people, but really illustrating that leadership can be exercised from any position, anywhere, at any time. I think that really is what adaptive leadership is all about. What adaptation do we need to make in this situation, around

this particular set of issues as an individual, as an organization, as a team, as a community, as a country? I think that's the opportunity that it brings to the fore that it provides more – as Ronnie would say, more diagnostic options, and more action options to play with. It gives people more options than they wouldn't necessarily have.

I think what it also provides is that opportunity to see themselves as a leader where they may have not seen themselves as a leader, that leadership comes from above. I think that's where adaptive leadership provides a rich opportunity to be creative, to experiment, to try things different differently, and take risks on behalf of something they really care about. I think what happens often is, you and I are always wanting to make a contribution to the world, to make a better contribution than we have in the past. I think we know that people find it difficult to navigate situations, and I think this framework provides clarity, provides a way of seeing problems that we cannot unsee. I think that's the power of the adaptive leadership framework.

It's an extraordinary framework in the sense that it makes that distinction between the balcony and the dance floor. I think, often, the leaders that I work with every day are very much on the dance floor, and they are rewarded to be there. I think what leaders find the biggest thing is being able to, which is most critical, is to be able to step out of their day to day, and really understand the pattern that they are caught in. Particularly, when they're in situations which they can't see the forest for the trees, I think that's really where the framework is so useful, powerful, and it has currency. I think, the other part of it is, it has its own language and it gives people a language to be able to – a common language, particularly if you're – the books that have been developed, whether it's Ron's books, and Marty's books together, or other people that have created extended the work of adaptive leadership. Because it's been now 40 years, who would have thought? It's been around for such a significant period of time.

We're coming up to a celebrate celebratory year. In October, the Kennedy School and the Adaptive Leadership Network are holding a 40-year event. I think it's an opportunity, as well as for people that are new to the set of ideas to learn, but also to bring new ideas to the model. Because I think it's something that the model is not a set and forget sort of set of ideas, because I think we're all coming up against challenges that are equally complex. If not, more complex than they have been. I think that's the beautiful community that it has created over the last 40 years, that people are so – it's generated so much a sense of purpose around trying to

overcome some of these big adaptive challenges, whether it's climate change, whether it's how we address technology, technological innovation, how do we create better, more vital communities.

I think the organizations that I've worked in are very aligned to those sets of values. I think, for me, the adaptive leadership framework is a mechanism, a vehicle by which we can really make progress on those big daunting challenges.

**[0:07:58] RT:** Thank you. You started this conversation or this answer my question with the point that I don't want to bury this lead. Which is, that leadership can come from anywhere in the system, anybody in any chair can lead. But let's talk a little bit about that, because, I think that gets passed over and glossed over the significance of making the choice to raise your hand, and lead in a system or in a culture that has not necessarily nurtured that as a deal. So, meaning, it's a risky proposition for a lot of people, both either in the world they work in or the way in which they're constituted to.

So, talk a little bit about what's that really about, and let's just give people counsel right from the get go here. What have you learned about that moment in time when you choose to raise your hand and make a choice? How do people prepare for that? What do you think they are to know about it in advance so that when they do come to that point, they have some understanding?

**[0:08:54] NE:** Yes, it's a big question, Rick. I think what's important to be thinking about is when you're trying to exercise leadership is the impact you're going to make on people, whether good, bad, or indifferent. So, the level of risk that you're taking has to be measured with the people that you're trying to move. If leadership is about holding attention, and keeping attention on the issues, nor on – I think it's been understanding the community that you're trying to mobilize, and I think that's a real – we think that it's a really important issue to us, but we've got to understand where are people sitting on this issue? I think that that diagnostic work about trying to understand what are the people's values, what are people's loyalties, which group are they, which particular camp are they sitting in on that issue, I think it's really important.

To really walk in their shoes, to – as Maxime Fern would say, is being able to operate from the enemy's camp, to be able to see what is going on from their perspective. I think that's a real

capacity that we were not seeing a lot of today, where people can sit with other people, and who are completely in opposition to what's going to – in terms of ideas. And to be able to still walk away and to be respectful of each other. I think that's the real challenge, is to provide the adaptive leadership framework, provides a set of practices in a way of having dialogue, in a way that tries to – in service of the whole, not just in service of one particular group. I think that's the most important thing, is be able to start where people are, and to be able to think about what's important to – not only to a particular faction, or particular group, or individual, or set of values, but what's important to the whole. I think it's being able to think systemically.

I think that's where leaders struggle with, is because we think leaders think what's in front of them. How to think more systemically about what is actually in service of the group or the community. I think people kind of can lip service to those ideas. But I think actually, what it actually means for them is to actually have to give something up, whether that's status, credibility, significance of – their own significance, where it's not about them, it's actually about the issue. I think that's the power of the framework, it's actually kind of giving us space to be able to hold multiple perspectives.

**[0:11:15] RT:** Okay. You mentioned a word here that comes up frequently with people who are familiar with the framework and the structure of adaptive leadership. There was the word mobilize. For people who are unfamiliar, this word will come up frequently. Let's give it some specific context, and meaning, and why in the world, somebody has to mobilize. Because in most organizations, the leaders who tell people what to do. There's a couple things to unpack there that I'll leave it to you to unpack, but mobilizing is a critical element of the work. What does it mean? I'll let you take it from there.

**[0:11:48] NE:** Yes. I think, for me, mobilizing is bringing people together on difficult issues. That's partnership. Leadership is not a lone wolf activity; it's done with other people. So, in essence, it's not like the traditional kind of notion that around, I just tell you what to do, and you do it. It's actually going – when it's adaptive, the challenge requires learning, it requires partnering, learning through others. It requires building alliances, and understanding that we need to build relationships to solve these complex challenges. Because what we're going to have to do is, is really understand, be able to shift those, because those relationships may not be working for the issue. What do we need to do to be able to – if we're going to move this

complex, mobilize this complex set of relationships to make progress on this issue, but also build the capacity of people to understand what we need to do together to make this new future possible. Because our assumption is, we need to change for whatever reason.

But also, it's about confronting a reality, a reality that we're not willing to face into. We need others to help us face into that, because often, we need a new faction, a new set of alliances that we need to build to confront an issue. Those current alliances may not actually be serving the issue. I know, Jeff Lawrence says this often. He's another adaptive practitioner out there, and is often referred to in Marty and Ronnie's work is, there's no such thing as a dysfunctional community, or broken organization. It's set up to receive the result it's currently getting.

Starting from that place is really important. I think, when we think about mobilization is, one of those relationships, one of those alliances, what do they need to learn? What do they need to depart from? What traditions are actually needing our essential, and serving as well. But what new capacities do we need to let go of, and what new capacities do we need to learn? They're the kind of essential questions any leader has to kind of think about when they're trying to orchestrate, or mobilize people on an issue is, well, what do we need to do differently? How do we do that together?

I think it's that whole notion of, you're going to move as fast as everyone else around you. I think that's where leaders fall short often or get tripped up is because they moving too quickly. They're just focusing on their own agenda. I think that's the work of leadership, is being able to hold and bring people's attention together, and mobilize people to get things done, both technical and adaptive. I think that's often missed, is that, people go, "Well, we're just trying to do adaptive work. Actually, we're trying to do it all." I think that's the – we're trying to do both the technical work in concert with the adaptive work that needs to be done. I don't think you can't do it without the other. I think that's really important essential task, is to be able to think about mobilization in the form of both at an individual level, at a relational level, and across the system.

As Ronnie refers to in a lot of the work that he's written, instead of the stories that prompted him to go to the Kennedy School in 1984, was really about how does he work at an aggregate level, how do you move a system. So, how do you bring multiple stakeholders together to work on that issue, because you can't solve poverty, or you can't solve domestic violence by just focusing on

the victims, or focusing on the perpetrators. You've got to think about the whole system. I think that's what mobilization is about, is thinking about, "Well, how do I mobilize everyone around this issue?" The people that need to be mobilized, who are those unusual voices that don't usually get a say on this issue is really important? Is to think about, who are the unusual voices that we need to kind of get involved in the conversation?

**[0:15:44] RT:** Okay. You've laid some nice framework here and some structure for us to go forward. I'm interested, to shift to just for a moment to you, yourself. In this work, since you did the work at Harvard, what, 12 years ago? What have you learned about yourself as a conveyor of these ideas, and how you teach and develop people, and maybe some of the mistakes or some of the errors you made along the way that have helped you develop a more refined delivery of the work? Because as you know, Nick, you're talking about helping people build capacity so they can function more. That's a journey, it's a process, that's a practice.

Help people understand your own journey, your own practice, and what you've learned along the way that helps them, maybe will save them making the same mistakes.

**[0:16:31] NE:** Yes, absolutely. I think I have made many a mistake. Thanks, Rick, for the opportunity to share my dirty laundry, and I'm happy to. You're raising a really important issue. I think we need to talk more about our mistakes, because then, we can learn from them. So, for me, I think, when I came back from the Kennedy School, I was very excited. I had a big [inaudible 0:16:50] attached to my forehead. Really wanting to, really excited, and enthusiastic about cascading these ideas. But I think, what I learned pretty quickly is, that people have their own ideas about how to move people, and how to change organizations, and how to transform organizations. What I learned pretty quickly is, that it's about relationships.

You can't move anyone unless you've got a relationship. I think that's where, I think I found it really – I've had some not so good experiences where there is really – where I've put pressure on some of those relationships, when they weren't ready to have pressure put on them. That's when it can create, what we call the holy environment, the container isn't strong enough to hold this complex, this hot potato. I think that's where I've learned, I think is that, spending more time focusing on the relationships. Really, I think it is about building your authority. We talk about in the adaptive leadership framework about how do we deploy our authority, but I think it's also

about how do we build informal relationships with people and understand what's important for them. That can take the form of just being consistent.

Like I can recall, when I was working in one of the departments many years ago, and there was a healthy skepticism about the program that we were wanting to implement, and it was an adaptive leadership. The approach, the program was adaptive leadership. They already had this set of ideas, and I can recall one of the directors that I was working with, saying to me, we don't want to have to clean up a mess when you're gone. That, for me, was a real kind of warning to really think about, really being careful about the work that we're doing, and being smart, and skillful, and technically competent. But also, being aware that there's a lot riding on this for other people. I think that's a real opportunity to step up to. I think these are all indicators that are – if we're thinking about getting on the balcony, what is going on in the system for those kinds of things to come up? It's about trust and it's about relationship. It's about contracting, about building the authority, building on the work that you've done to build those relationships.

Then, really engaging them as part of the program or whatever you might be doing. I think that's the real – for me, that's been the biggest learning, I think is about staying in relationship and repairing trust, when trust is on very tender ground. It's on tenterhooks. I think, the way that you can go about over time, building those relationships, deploying yourself in the most competent way you can, but also working with other people. Because I never do this work alone, I'm always doing it with other people. So, who has thinking politically, who's got those relationships? Who's got credibility? How can I leverage some of that to support the adaptive work, and how do I work and start where they are?

I think, the thing is, people have their own interpretation of the world, their own sort of frameworks, and how do you work with that? I think, you don't try to hit people over the head with the adaptive leadership framework is my kind of lesson. But I also, I think is, as I become more of a wise owl, in my 40s, and have been kind of worn over time is, I think that's the opportunity, is to really calculate what risk is worth taking here? Do I have enough credibility in the bank? Do I have enough authority in the bank to be able to pull this off, this experiment?

I had to say, in the past, I've been very on the more provocative end in deploying these set of ideas. I think it's finding a balance, it's a polarity. Can I raise the heat? Can I ask a really tough



question of the group? Can I deploy myself differently that may actually be discombobulating for the group? I'm often thinking about, okay, what do I need to do first to build the level of trust with this group? I think it's a range of techniques I've talked about, but I think there's some of the kind of things that have kind of either got me unstuck, and where I think people can – for me, has been – to reflect on it now, and haven't done a lot of reflection, to be honest. I mean, other than going, "I shouldn't have done that." You put your head on the pillow at night going, you play things back. I think that's important too, because your gut is an indication of – and your sleeplessness is an indication of, I guess, the adaptive work that you're facing into about wanting to be liked, to want to be seen as doing good work.

There's a whole lot of stories, kind of, you're also trying to reconcile in your own mind. I think, the most important thing is starting where people are, and listening, and building those relationships. When relationships become a little tricky, is thinking about how you can repair, and rebuild, and start again. I think that's where I'd probably – there's plenty more.

**[0:21:58] RT:** It's okay. You've done well. You also remind me that Malcolm Knowles has some wise counsel for adult education. He's taking a much broader scaffolding structural approach. He's got a list of items that he thinks needs to be tended to if you want to have a shot at being able to make progress. One of them is, people want to be regarded and have the felt experience that their prior experiences mattered and it counts, and that will be contributing to what they're trying to do going forward. I think, oftentimes, people in our world come in, like we're bringing a blank piece of paper here, and everybody's starting fresh. Not enough good work is done in advance of that to understand what's in the room in life, and in general, that we can work with. But also, have them have that experience of being felt and heard. Now, they're really – perhaps, ready to go on the journey with us at that point. So, good counsel.

Let's get into what I think is some – you sent me some information about some things you've been doing, and I read it, and I thought, you got some stuff here I want to talk to you about. Because, as I understand it, Nick in reading your paper, you started with a place that we're all familiar with, which is, done a lot of work in this area, and sometimes, it just isn't working, and what's going on, and what's the process, and what are the demands that the organization has for how we develop leaders. We've squandered a lot of resources of time, money, and energy,

tried to figure this code out and crack it. I read your paper to say, you took that personally, and you want to do something about that. So, you've done some work on this.

I want you to talk a little bit about what you call a leadership learning cycle. But maybe, in your own words, what the seed chord was, that you started to tap into, that led you down this road, and then we can get into the model. But why you were provoked to do this and how it came about?

**[0:23:51] NE:** Yes. Well, the first question why I was provoked to this, I think, for many years, I've been involved in developing and improving the capacity of people's leadership. And often involved in the development, and design of leadership programs, whether it's coaching programs, team coaching programs, leadership programs. I think the obvious thing to say is that, is that people go to an event, often a workshop or an experience. They say that it was a great experience. I've been on the receiving end of that, looking at the evaluations going, I've done a good job today, like pat on the back. But I think what happens is we don't see that sustained change or shift in behavior. I think, it's an obvious thing to say, and there's a lot of research out there that says this, is that, a one and done experience is not enough to move someone's leadership, to increase someone's leadership capacity.

I think that's where the frustration I was feeling is that – and I think, I don't know if it was a symptom of COVID. But we were doing obviously a lot of virtual learning, and I'm sure you and others would have experienced this as well, is that, it feels to me to a lot of the time, I'm doing [inaudible 0:25:01]. I'm the expert providing. I've got an adaptive leadership workshop in 90 minutes. By any means, I don't think you can achieve a lot in – you can achieve some things in 90 minutes, maybe some level awareness and understanding. But realistically, to get the adaptive leadership or any sort of model, or set of ideas, to help people learn that, and to get it into their bones, is it's going to take a long time.

I think that's what was the kind of impetus for this, but I actually have to acknowledge that at the time, that I was kind of experiencing this frustration that I enrolled in a master's program at the University of Technology Transdisciplinary School, the TD School. They offer Master's in Creative Intelligence and Strategic Innovation. They take a transdisciplinary approach. That basically means is that, we look at the practices, the methods, the values, the actions of other

disciplines. Then, we look at the problem through the lens of other disciplines, and come up with something unique that's going to address that challenge.

I guess, for me, it was trying to use some of the models, and ideas that I've learned through that master's program to really deconstruct leadership education. Because I think, we've got into a situation where we've industrialized leadership education to such an extent that, yes, we need. It provides an opportunity to scale things, to scale leadership education. But at the same time, I think if there's something that's it's created a problem in the system, and what I mean by that is, we're generating a lot of content, and curating a lot of content, creating a lot of content. But how does that actually make translating into habit change, behavioral change. As an organization, who is investing in leadership development, whether through procuring external providers, or whether they're developing through internal resources, deploying, and scaling in leadership development?

I think we owe it as good stewards to really robustly reflect, and think critically about, "Okay, let's not just go through the motions. Let's actually step back and look at how we're doing things. Is this actually working?" For me, what I thought was, it was a ship dip kind of experience where we were putting people through programs and experiences, but we're actually weren't seeing the shift or the accountability of leaders to – we know that leadership is not enough, in the sense of leadership, education is not enough. But I think for me, it's kind of, how do we really dissect, deconstruct the way we design and educate leaders. That's where really I was starting from.

**[0:27:44] RT:** Okay. So, you've got very specific though, now. You have a model. I'm compelled by the leadership learning cycle. So, I'm just going to tee up a little bit, because I really – it's your conversation. You have four parts to this. I'm interested in you being able to explain the parts, but also the wholeness of it, the integration of it, but let's take it in turn. So, talk about how you came to these elements, what they are, and why these four versus five, or three others, or something. So, how did it get here?

**[0:28:15] NE:** Well, I drew heavily on [inaudible 0:28:16]. He was the program director at the TD school that I mentioned at UTS. He developed this, I guess, this language, temple, podium, lab, and academy to develop an innovation, an ecosystem. I've repurposed that set of ideas for creating, I guess, a leadership learning cycle. It's pretty noticeable, and I don't know if you've

noticed this. But if you think of Kolb's Learning Cycle, it really reflects the different ways that people learn. There's a lot of research out there that says, there's debunked learning styles, and the neuroscience now says, people learn very differently to the way that we were taught as adult educators to teach and to help people learn.

Thank Christ, things have evolved. But I think, what is really interesting about it, I think if I was to take each part of the model, and kind of walk you through it, I think it just provide a more tangible, more accessible language to think about your own leadership development. So, you can think of it as a way of designing, and sequencing a leadership program, or you could think about it, or apply it in terms of your own daily kind of everyday moments of leadership.

**[0:29:39] RT:** I was going to say, let's take them one at a time then, so people can track with it. I don't know, the way your paper presents it, there's an order. I don't know if it starts with academy or if it mattered. Okay. Let's just start with academy.

**[0:29:49] NE:** Sure. In talking about, I guess, academy, which is the kind of the first and often the more traditional way we think about leadership education. I think this really is in a very traditional way. A formal, low heat, formal learning environment where learning content and practices are explored and taught. There's nothing extraordinary about that. But I think, it's kind of – the function of it is really kind of separating out, and kind of narrowing in on structured kind of learning. Just to give you an example, it might be a workshop on a particular model. It might be adaptive leadership, it might be authentic leadership, whatever it might be. It's about introducing new ideas, new concepts, and applying those two cases study.

In many ways, it's kind construction-led learning, so it's more hearing from an expert, and really, it's a low heat experience. It's more on the more didactic, more formal kind of learning. So that's the academy, there's nothing necessarily special about it, but it's kind of just calling it out.

**[0:30:57] RT:** But it is an essential part in development, so we want to keep that part. Okay.

**[0:31:01] NE:** Correct. It's pretty essential, it's served us well. It's, as we know, it's very common way that a vehicle by which people do leadership development, a very traditional kind of way we do leadership education. Moving on to the lab, which is probably more contemporary kind of

thing we've been seeing a lot lately. I don't know about you, but I hear a lot of people talking about a leadership lab, or a laboratory. Obviously, the adaptive leadership framework, but also the teaching methodology, case in point kind of creates this kind of laboratory environment, where the classroom is about looking at leadership in real time. So, thinking about where examples of leadership happen in the room itself, and how can we use those as case studies, examples of where we can learn from and practice leadership.

Case in point is would be an example of where the lab could be an experience, that could be created. I would say, depending on your situation, your context, this could be a very – this could be a low heat to medium heat experience. You could do it in small groups, it could be peer learning, but it's a laboratory, it's a place for experimentation. In many ways, it's a contemporary thing. You might see a lot of organizations talking about these days.

The podium is probably the most for me is probably the most kind of edgiest thing that is in this kind of concept around podium, temple, lab, academy. It's where leaders are actually in the limelight in their day-to-day situation. It's a real stakes environment. This element is to help, I guess, people embed what they've learned in the temple or the academy. It's actually giving a name too. I don't know about you, when you think you're on a podium, your heat is on, the pressure is on. I think we need to orchestrate environments, learning environments, where people get to experience that aside from – there's a lot of people feel there can be a lot of risk associated with the podium, but how this is kind of creating infrastructure, in a learning program, or in your daily kind of leadership moments where you're purposely and intentionally creating moments on the podium. That's really the idea that, where you either present, or you're having a difficult conversation, it's giving opportunity to – it's like being on the stage, an actor in a theatre environment.

It's kind of where the audience is looking to you, but also, from an adaptive perspective is, how do we think about asking questions to help the group take maybe some responsibility for an issue? It's really experimenting with; how do I be the person trying to help people take on this adaptive challenge? What do I need to be saying? What stories might I need to be telling? How do I get better at holding attention. This might be where you would – for that particular kind of capacity, you're trying to build, the ability to get below the neck, as Ronnie would say, versus above the neck, which is kind of where the lab and academy sit. It's kind of, your work in

people's head, in their logic systems. Where if you're trying to get people to engage differently below the neck, which is kind of in people's hearts, minds, and guts, the podium, we need to practice being able to do that.

I don't think, at least from my experience, when I was developing this model with some colleagues is that, we didn't have experiences in our leadership suite that did this. That's really where we saw the opportunity.

**[0:34:35] RT:** agree with you. When I was reading your description of this, I thought I just had this whole history of people. Watching people stand in front of a room, attempting to deliver something important, and really believing that when the moment comes, the words will come, and they will make sense, and they will flow. It's cringe worthy, oftentimes. I'm reminded of that great story of Winston Churchill going to Parliament to do the House of Commons debate. He pulls up, the car pulls up, and the chauffeur opens the door, and he doesn't get out, he doesn't get out, he doesn't get out. Finally, they say, "Prime Minister, we're here." And he says, "Don't interrupt me, I'm preparing my impromptu remarks." I thought, that's what he's doing there. He knows that when he gets in front of that place, he's got to be on it.

I love your advocacy, and your provocation here that this is not a winging function, that this is something you got to show up and be prepared for, because everything communicates. If it's a crummy communication, your followers pick up, they don't have to care about this. I think you're on to something here in this model, in the location of it. For some, I've seen that in explicit terms, and I appreciate you putting that work in. All right, let's go to the last step. Temple.

**[0:35:48] NE:** Temple, yes. What this is really about, and again, it's something that's kind of missing from the leadership experiences that we're creating is that, there's not a space for leaders to – in a temple, when you think of the metaphoric space of a temple, it's a very solemn base, it's a ritualistic space, it's very reflective space. Where people can connect with their purpose, their interior selves, and I guess, what matters to them. I think that's really important that people in particular having a set of an environment, which in the sense is a temple. We can create these environments in our everyday, but also, I guess, in the work that I do is in leadership programs.

We talk about crucible moments, moments where that have kind of required us to step up in some shape or form. That have been really pivotal moments in our own kind of journey, and this is an opportunity, I guess, to reflect on those. It gives people to get a sense of what's their growth edge, where, how, what is the next, what is the edge of my frontier of competence, and thinking deeply about, and it is, again, below the neck, thinking about what is the – my dad would say, "Grow a second heart muscle, son." That is the kind of idea, is how do we grow this additional capacity to be able to understand our interior. But also, to actually connect with what our higher purpose is.

Often, I guess, when we're so on the dance floor all the time, we are in the action, we are literally in the action all the time. I think it provides a space that is really allowing us to be able to notice our own patterns, and recognize those patterns. So, when we think about observe, interpret, and intervene, it's really playing in that observation space, when we think about the adaptive model set of practices and ideas. It's trying to get people to get on the balcony. But also, think about, and I've alluded to this in the papers around adult orders in mind. How do we move, shift, and evolve our consciousness? It's really, in many ways, to think about, as Keegan would say, operating from the socialized mind. Which is really, authority is external to me. We look to authority for answers, but when it's an adaptive challenge, I think at a minimum, we need people to be self-authored, in the sense that people are being able to exercise from their own inner state of judgment, and make choices, and exercise leadership.

I wanted to also give an example, I guess, there are places in whether – you might be thinking this might bring up or your own kind of ideas of a temple, it's kind of a – in a very secular society, we don't have these, necessarily – people don't have these spaces. When I think about in the context of a leadership program, the Australian Institute of Police Management has a great space in Manly., Where a lot of police people in Australia go, and across the world go to learn about leadership. But it's also very much – it feels it's got a very reflective, safe space for people to step off the dance floor, and to really reflect its very natural environment around it. It's in some ways, a little bit isolated. I think the power of – it provides a space for reflection that we don't, it's such a luxury, because we have so much information coming at us all the time.

So, that's what I think it creates a space for us to think, to get on the balcony, to check our interior kind of state, to think about what's my work in terms of when I'm connecting with my

purpose. Am I focused on the work and the issue or am I focused on my less noble sides of myself? So, it gets you an opportunity to kind of – and combining all of that infrastructure, I think is the most powerful thing that I've been talking about. But I think the temple is very powerful, kind of putting a line in the sand, and kind of calling it out. I think it's a really powerful kind of making it explicit. I think that's what I was trying to do in the model.

**[0:40:06] RT:** It's interesting. I think you're right, it's an essential component of development growth. I think it's interesting to see the different worlds. If you're looking at, say, for example, professional sports teams, or if you go to the symphony, or you go to the ballet. We see the performance; we see the dance floor. What we don't see is that, all those players, and actors and performers, the next day, they're watching video, and tape, and about what they did well, and what they didn't do well, and how do they improve. Then, they go back out and practice. So, they have a developmental thing built into their profession, that lead to such high performance. It's oftentimes lacking in a business context. The inclusion of the temple in your model, I think is an essential reminder that high performance is directly linked to my willingness to reflect on how I'm doing, and get feedback from other people, whatever that may be like. So, it's a wise model. I think, let people know, we'll put links in the podcast episode. So, if you want to include some of this information, or they can find it and follow up with you.

All right. Let me shift gears on you a little bit here. I know you know a little bit about Peter Block. Peter Block is a contrarian in every sense of the word. I'm a huge fan. He's got a thing about leading. He views leaders as social architects. He says, there's three functions social architects have, is to create context why we're gathering, initiating, convene the space so the conversation can take place. Then, listen and pay attention.

His argument is, we've overcomplex the development of leadership, and it doesn't need to be that way. We need more community, social architects in our societies, because the work is so broad and so deep. I'm just curious, for you and I who spend our time delving in these deep thoughts and stuff, here comes Block, and he's reduced it down to some three specific focuses that list a lot of depth of work that's associated with each of those is not easy stuff. What do you think? Are we overthinking this thing sometimes? Is it, can we get it simpler so that people can get grip on it and they can get some work done?



**[0:42:17] NE:** Yes, it's big question. Depending on which camp you sit in, I think it can be, particularly people that are very passionate about the situation as it is. For me, I think, at least from what I hear from a lot of people is, what is this? Can you make it simpler? I feel like we are, to some extent, boiling the ocean. I think it's with all good intention, though. I think, we're trying to get it right. I think in the process of getting it right, we're trying to – we are in that experimentation, making it a little bit convoluted, unnecessary. I think you're right, but I think on the other end of the scale, then the trap is that we make it so simple, and that it doesn't create a gap for people to step into to learn. I think it's a really tricky thing. I think, yes, we need to make it really clear, and have models, and frameworks, and tools.

I don't know about you, but for the last few years, I've just been creating tools and building tools for leaders to be able to be more effective. But what I think the challenge is, is they struggle to pick that tool up when they need it, and then to deploy it effectively. I think that's the biggest, I think struggle is that we've created a lot of tools. But what happens is that, [inaudible 0:43:37] struggled to know what to do, or how to deploy it.

I think, obviously, Owen talks to this as about, in terms of education, there's not enough training. Owen [inaudible 0:43:46] talks a lot about executive education, doing a lot of – it provides enormous amount of support to helping people building people's capacity. But actually, it doesn't give people the training, in the sense that they need, and even at the most senior levels. I'm working across a large organization, where we need people every day to exercise leadership in their role. We need everyone to see themselves as a leader. I think we get trapped in this scaling issue about how do we do that in a way that's simple enough, but then also, enough to give people a sense that this is grounded in something. This is just not coming out of thin air.

**[0:44:25] RT:** You lead me to the next question that I had. Not everybody can go to Harvard, I studied this stuff at Business School at Oxford. There's some challenges with that model for a lot of people in terms of their ability. So, let's give people some specific things that they could work on, and actually maybe build a practice. Because at Harvard, they call it the art in practice. What would you say are some essential starting points for people if they want to start to build some capacity, not only in this specific, but in the structure. I think, your learning model helps with some structure here. But where should they begin if they want to start to have better grip on using themselves to lead? What do you think's top of mind for you?

**[0:45:11] NE:** Well, I think they've got to start with the – not start with them. I think Ronnie gets this right, Ron Heifetz in terms of his outside in versus inside out. What I mean by that is, is that, we're going to start with the issue we're trying to work on. I think that's when we then – we understand what the issue is, which is a diagnostic issue. I think building your ability to observe is essential for any for anything tangible. Noticing, observing, and being able to separate that from interpretation. I think that is probably, if you don't do anything else, practice observing. You don't need to necessarily say anything, but you could be in a meeting, and you could just lean your chair back a little bit, and just observe who's doing a lot of the talking, or who's talking after who, what are some of the dynamics, who gets shut down, whose idea gets currency.

I think these are the things, this ability to observe is an essential activity of leadership. That's something you can be doing every day, all the time, and you're building that skill of observation. That's key to leadership, I think.

**[0:46:18] RT:** Okay. We're coming to our close here. What's ahead for you? What's top of mind? What are you trying to get done here? Now, that you've done this great work, you've created this model, what's up for you?

**[0:46:29] NE:** Well, a couple of things. At the moment, I'm currently enrolled – well, I'm about to enroll in a PhD. So, a glutton for punishment really. Just completed three years of study, and about to start a PhD. That PhD is going to be looking at case in point, and looking at comparing formal kind of leadership learning methods and practices with case in point, and what is more successful in helping build people's leadership capacity. For those out there that don't know what case in point is, case in point is the leadership methodology or learning methodology that Ron Heifetz, and Marty Linsky, and others have built and developed, and evolved over the years. Really, it's about using the group as a case, an example, to illustrate an idea about leadership.

That really, it's very experiential, it's more emergent kind of learning. It's trying to replicate the real world. Creating in a classroom the real-life experience with the real stakes. So, I want to understand, and building on the work of Sharon Parkes who wrote a book called leadership can be taught, who looked at Ron's – spent a lot of time in Ron's classrooms over many years,

trying to dissect how the efficacy of the model, what was going on in these rooms. I think people are still kind of – we don't have enough evidence and evidence base. So, I think that's the real opportunity that I'm – that's where I'm turning my attention to, is looking at how do we compare Case in point as a way of teaching and using cases, and how does that compare to more formal learning.

I'm not saying that case in point isn't formal learning, because I think there are elements of case in point that are more structured activities, more formal, sitting on the more didactic end. That for me is just trying to understand, actually, can we compare and contrast these things, and really come to an answer about what actually is more effective, what works, and how might that inform other leadership educators about how they might use, apply, deploy, this pedagogical method. Which for me has been a profound way to learn about how I deploy myself as a leader, and how do I move, and mobilize people. That's where I'm turning my attention to, other than like, getting my hands dirty in different forums, in different groups working with leaders every day, to help increase their leadership. Yes, that's my main, where I turned my attention to next.

**[0:48:56] RT:** Well, Nick, I want to thank you on behalf of practitioners and other people who are delving and spending time in a leadership development space. Because your continued contribution of research base, and well thought out ideas, and points of view have been essential to a lot of people. To know you're decided to take the deep end of the pool academically and become a doctor of case in point is going to be pretty dang cool for the rest of us. So, just get on with it, would you, because we need the work. So, thank you very much for coming to the swamp and much appreciated.

**[0:49:28] NE:** Thanks. Thanks so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:49:32] 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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