EPISODE 76

[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.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is a podcast where we have conversations with individuals who have made decisions in their life and in their profession to lead, and we're interested in having conversations with them to see what they've learned from that, what we can learn from them, and what the challenges are and what the wonders are of choosing to lead in this crazy world we live in right now.

Today I'm quite pleased. I have a friend and colleague on, Graeme Findlay, who is calling in from Australia. And Graeme brings a very nuanced and full professional experience around leading, and I'm going to let him tell that story here in just a minute, but let's get him into the conversation. Graham, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you.

[0:01:01] GF: Great to be here, Rick.

[0:01:02] RT: Before we get into my questions, what do you want people to know about you, you think will help establish some context for what we'll talk about after we get going?

[0:01:11] GF: Yeah, thanks, Rick. I guess the main thing to bring out in terms of my professional endeavors is I'm an Associate Fellow at Oxford Saïd Business School. I work with the business school, and I work specifically in the area of leadership development. That role is multifaceted. I'm both a program director and a teacher on programs.

As a program director, the bulk of my work has been in the space of teaching major project leaders, people doing very large, difficult, complex problems, solving big problems in order to build infrastructure or build larger capital works. I've done that in Australia for many years, but

also in Hong Kong. I run a program. Program director on a program in Hong Kong. As well as probably my most recent endeavor in that space, and one that I am proudest of, is a collaboration between Oxford and the University of Queensland, here we run an executive leadership program. The program consists of local modules here in Brisbane and then an international week where we take the cohort to Oxford in order to expose them to the big brains that we can have access to when we base ourselves in Oxford for a week. That's where I come from if, I guess, I talk about what I do. But I also teach, and that's really important to me.

I teach on the programs that I program directly, and not extensively, mainly it's actually the curation of the program. And I see that as a separate skill to the actual teaching is the ability to actually pull these programs together. But I will teach, for example, a day on those programs. But I also teach independently on some other programs, specifically, lately, actually, interesting, in the health space, which, when you hear a bit about my background, there's a bit of a curiosity, because that's not my technical background. And that's important because what I teach is leadership, and leadership in the most general sense. That's where I come from.

I like to say, Rick, that I'm from Oxford, but I'm not from Oxford, as you can tell from my accent. And the fact that I'm dialing in from Australia. I don't fit the stereotype. If your stereotype, which is totally incorrect, by the way, but if the stereotype is to be from Oxford, you had to grow up in South Kensington, go to Eton College, and live in the Cotswolds, then I literally do not fit that mold.

I grew up in country Queensland. It's not the Outback, but it's on the way to the Outback. And I went to the local high school in a country town, and I did my first university degree in engineering in Queensland. That's sort of a very different background, I guess, from what you'd expect.

[0:03:46] RT: Well, we should be very transparent here. You and I know each other because we both attended a program at Oxford on change. We were not in the same cohort, but we are involved in the same alumni group. And so we met in the alumni groups over years ago. And if we can't shake the dust of Oxford from our shoes, we just have to embrace it and go forward here.

All right, so let's get into it a little bit. But before we get into everything you describe what you do now, you had a pretty long career in the corporate world, and you were a leader in the corporate world. What I'm interested in as a starting point is what that world taught you about leading, because that's our conversation to focus. Your starting point begins in that environment before you evolved, and we'll cover the evolution here. But take us to the beginnings and how you shaped yourself as a leader, what influenced you, and what were your thinking leading was at that time in your life and career.

[0:04:35] GF: Yeah, that's a great question, Rick. If I actually think of that transition and how it kind of ended up there and what it says about me and why I do this work, I think that's kind of important to portray. Because, as you can imagine, coming from a farming country, Queensland, where my father's idea of the road to paradise was paved in pigs and peanuts, to ending up here, there's been a few turning points, and I think those turning points are important.

And when I talk about turning points, the one that most people think of when they think about my journey is when I gave up working in the oil and gas and energy industry and made that transition to go and study at Oxford and take up this new calling of teaching leadership. But to me, the real turning point was very much earlier, and it comes back to your question about my experience as a leader in a corporation. Really, that turning point for me was finding myself working in a job in a refinery, oil refinery for BP.

I joined BP after a couple of jobs and a bit of adventure out of university. I joined BP thinking I'd take the job for three months, a little oil refinery in Brisbane, Australia, and subsequently ended up spending more than 20 years there at BP. And the reason I spent 20 years there is because it wasn't the same job, every year was a new job. And it was projects that defined my career largely.

I did spend quite a bit of time in operations as well. But if you look at the sort of the progress of my career, it really was around projects. And the turning point for me was when I found myself in the job where I was responsible for my first what BP call a major project. A major project being multi-hundreds of millions of dollars. And given how long ago this was, the numbers don't really matter, but it's a very large project.

At the time, the largest project being done in the BP refining portfolio, being done at this little refinery in Brisbane. I found myself having been promoted at least two levels above my level of competency, and I was really struggling. And the refinery, I guess, had what you'd call very, very old-fashioned sort of leadership model or management model of how they developed people and looked at people.

But a new business unit leader turned up. His name was Colin McClain, and his impact was profound. Certainly his impact on me was profound because what he bought with him was this commitment to leadership development that I had never seen before and probably no one in that little business unit had ever seen before. And he arrived with this commitment and immediately noticed, I guess, what should have been bleedingly obvious to everyone, which was the struggle that I was personally having. And he had faith in me.

And one of the things he did, which was remarkable, was he put everyone on that project, this big project that was being done, both the people working for BP, but people working for our partners and people working for the contractors through a leadership development program with his favorite set of consultants that he bought with him. And damn me if it didn't work.

And so its impact on me was profound and really took me from a place of really, really struggling. I was in a situation where I felt simultaneously ambitious and fear-ridden because of the inadequacies that I could see in myself in terms of what I was trying to – the difference between what was required of me and what my capabilities were. For me to come out of that experience, that was a big turning point for me, a much bigger turning point than, ultimately, years later, giving up my corporate executive job and transitioning into the wilds of trying to get an income from this field of leadership development.

I'd carry that forward as something. But what created in me as well was this huge curiosity about leadership. And from that time forward, I thought, "Wow, if someone can do that for me, I wonder what my role in this is." And I have people working for me. What's my role in their development? How can I develop this team in order to do this work? It tends to become very much a theme for me moving forward.

[0:08:45] RT: Okay. A critical distinction you're making here. And I want to play with this a little bit because you were there. There's this mythology that leaders are born. And you're putting pay to that fantasy. Do you mind talking a little bit about the profoundness of the actual learning experiences that you're having at that point in your career, and how those shaped you, and how you started to build leadership craft so that you could use to advance the projects and the work you're doing?

[0:09:12] GF: Well, I think you've nailed it, Rick, and that is that I guess I had that mindset. I would look up my organization and I would look to leaders and what they did, and come to the conclusion that they were actually born like that. They were just born differently to me. And as I say, it's simultaneously being ambitious, but looking around and saying, "Well, I can't do that. I wasn't born like that. I come from much more humble beginnings. And I'm carrying all this, whatever baggage, whatever you want to call it. That's really not me."

Part of it was just building that understanding, working from that cognitive understanding that leaders are actually made, leaders are developed in the main, not born. Just starting with that. As you know, there's always a gap between knowing something cognitively and actually getting it emotionally and getting it to really stick. That kind of became my craft myself.

I think what drove me in that was my observation, because what I wouldn't like to leave you with was the impression that overnight I went from being completely incompetent leader to being some sort of great leader. That was not it at all. It was just a start of a journey. But what I did notice pre and post that sort of engagement with doing that program with the consultants was the difference it made to the people who worked for me. And that was really, really important in terms of the drivers, and still is for the reason that I do the work I do. Because it occurred to me in my own experience and watching these people work for me, your experience of working for your boss, your relationship with your boss is actually a really, really important factor in your fulfillment in life. If you're having a shitty relationship with your boss, you're having a pretty shitty time generally. Other things might be perfect. But if you're having a shitty time with your boss, that's really impactful. That is the kind of hidden power of leadership.

The reason I do the work I do is because I feel like I can make a difference, and I can help people actually be better leaders. The multiplying effect of that is that the people that work for

them live happier and more fulfilled lives. And it's my contribution, I guess, to improving society is the thought that I can help leaders actually create more inclusive and more generative environments where people are really challenged by their work, but simultaneously satisfied and really fulfilled at the end of the day.

[0:11:42] RT: Okay. You're raising a bit here that I didn't think that I would come to. But let's just go with it for a minute. Talk a little bit about the journey, the practice, the work that you did to begin to build your craft of leading, so listeners who might be in the situation you were in before you met this person and started down this road can understand a little bit that it wasn't by accident, it's not random, it's not hit and miss. There's some things that got put in place that you could follow, I'm assuming, we'll call it a practice for the moment, that you followed to build your pace and your capacity at a manageable level, I'm guessing. But you tell me.

[0:12:21] GF: That's such a difficult question to answer. It's a great question, but difficult one to answer because leadership is so multifaceted. But maybe I'll just start with the one that in some ways continues to be the most impactful and continues to be the most difficult for me, and it's the answer to the question that rarely gets asked, which is, "Graeme, if I can just improve one thing, because I don't have time, don't have the money to go do one of your programs at Oxford, I can't sign you up as a consultant or a coach, just tell me one thing that I could do that would improve my leadership." And I think potentially the only universal answer to that question is listening.

The profound power of being able to actively listen, I think, is really, really important. It's really, really important for me. I had no idea that listening was something more than sound processing, right? To have that pointed out to me and then taught some very basic skills, it's not a difficult concept to grasp, but it's an incredibly difficult practice to keep, is to listen actively.

Because by nature – I'll say we. But actually, let's talk about me. I, very stingy listener, very, very selfish listener. I listen for utility. I listen for what I can use. I listen for ammunition. Or I don't listen at all. I'm just checked out. And unfortunately, and fortunately, perhaps, it doesn't stick. You can't just have that knowledge and suddenly have this transplant of your brain. You need to continually practice it. And sooner or later, you find yourself falling into your old patterns of not listening and not understanding.

The whole aspect of actually seeking to understand and understand people, understand relationships, understand context that you're working in, at the core of it all is this capacity to listen. That's probably where I'd start, Rick, in terms of something that is particularly impactful and continues to be part of what I try to build into my own practice. Because it's amazing that you can teach and teach effectively and build that practice, and then find yourself falling into the same traps that you're warning us, the people that you're teaching about.

[0:14:26] RT: Yeah, it's a good council. And then this is sort of roughly where you and I start to cross paths. Somewhere there, you decide to go back to school like I did. You ended up going to the same place, Oxford, Saïd, and program jointly shared with HEC Paris about change. Why did you go back to school?

[0:14:44] GF: I'll tell you the real story, Rick. I could tell you the kind of politically correct story, I guess. Look, the journey to Oxford is an interesting one. The first place I should start is that many years later, the original program that I'm speaking about that was a turning point for me, I went and did a program with BP at MIT in Massachusetts. It was called the Projects Academy. So it was the top project leaders throughout BP who were all put into cohorts and put through a program at MIT. And it was an amazing program, a really amazing program, focused around leadership and focused around the leadership of major projects.

A few years later, not that many years later, I actually moved from BP. Another story. But anyway, moved from BP into another oil and gas company called British Gas. It's the BG group, and they owned some assets down here in Queensland, and that was the reason for the change, was one of the most exciting developments in the world in the field of energy was happening in Queensland, in the coals and gas industry, and I wanted to be part of it, so jumped across.

And BG then also had a Projects Academy. Only theirs was at Oxford. I went to Oxford for a week and did their Projects Academy there. I kind of had this direct comparison, I guess, between having done it at MIT and having done it at Oxford. And really, the only thing common between the two experiences was the name, which was Projects Academy. The curriculum couldn't have been more different.

When it came time for me to choose where I was going to go to, to actually move into this field of teaching leadership development and working with leaders on developing themselves, it was kind of an easy choice, not because Oxford is better than MIT, because it actually gelled better with my fundamental driver, I guess, which was curiosity. The Oxford program that I did was very much curiosity-based. The MIT program that I did was very much knowledge-gaining, essentially, if you wanted to put it in very broad terms. Both brilliant programs. And under different circumstances, I would have chosen to go back the other way. But given what I was trying to achieve, it was this whole aspect of curiosity, which really, really drew me in.

The choice of facility was right, was easy for me because of that. The real reason that I didn't, because I guess I had enough experience by then to have seen a number of people leave executive positions thinking that they would be just brilliant as consultants, and that everyone would love to have their services, and they'd just be overwhelmed with offers the next day. Only to find out that their value outside the organization was actually more to do with the role they had or held than their actual personal super capabilities, believe it or not.

[0:17:27] RT: No.

[0:17:31] GF: I was a realist when it came to the fact that after I gave up my title inside a company that my phone calls might not be returned as quickly as they were returned when I was inside the company and held these executive positions. I really needed to re-establish myself in this field. And I had what in practice had been effective for me in a theory around leadership and leadership development. And it worked very well for me personally in terms and worked very well for some of the people that I mentored and who worked for me.

And I thought I had something to offer in that space as a consultant, but I really needed the letters behind my name. And if I'm going to get some letters behind my name, Oxford seemed pretty good. Oxford HSA obviously is the other half of the equation there, the business school in Paris, and as it's a joint program between the two facilities. That sounded pretty good. But more specifically, well, it could help me with this overriding curiosity about leadership because the program is basically curiosity-based. So let's run with that one.

What I didn't figure on is just how transformational that decision would be for me. I can't quite remember, Rick, but Jake's probably been made on this forum before because you have interviewed a number of us who've run that through that program. But because I'm flying, I think, eight times, I flew between Australia, and Oxford, and Paris to do this program, and the cost of the program itself. I've spent $150,000 to do this program only to end up more ignorant than when I started because, it turns out, there's a lot more to this than even as an established practitioner than I thought. It was a very humbling experience from that point of view. And if anything, just sort of supercharged my curiosity.

[0:19:15] RT: Okay, so let's transition down this road because that's where I begin to get to know you. But I know in the program, we had an opportunity to write a dissertation. Most everybody took that opportunity. You're one of the few people, and there aren't others beside you who kind of carried that assignment a little further out and turned the work into a book. When I crossed paths with you, you just finished your book called *Evolve: How Exceptional Leaders Leverage the Inner Voice of Human Evolution*, which is quite a mouthful, and it seems very sophisticated and complex to a guy from a Navy town up in the state of Washington. But I have read the book. I've read the book.

Let's transition here because you become a consultant, you strike out, you leave the mothership, and you're going to make things work for yourself. You've got a book. Tell people about the book. Why this book? What this topic? Why it matters? And maybe a little bit about how it's directed your future work. And then we'll get into some more detail there about the model.

[0:20:12] GF: Yeah. You've hit the nail on the head with the connection to the dissertation, which was – going into the program, when I discovered that I had to write a 20,000-word dissertation in order to graduate and get my master's, that was quite daunting. It was 20,000 words. Now, to put that in context, I actually worked out that the longest document that I'd written since high school at this point in time was a board paper, three-page board paper, because there's a restriction on how much you can put forward to the board.

The idea of coming up with 20,000 words of my own about this subject of leadership and having it academically based and properly referenced, all that sort of thing, was really quite daunting.

They're like, "Look, how the hell can I write 20,000 words?" And of course, pattern that again is oft-repeated. And by the end of the program, I'm trying to write my dissertation and the equation has completely changed, which is how the hell do I say what I want to say in only 20,000 words. It's not enough. That's really where the book came from, which was total dissatisfaction with what I came up with in terms of my dissertation, because I hadn't set a fraction of what I wanted to say. That's where the book came from was essentially just working from a draft of my dissertation and expanding it out the way I wanted to expand it out.

Of course, this is a never-ending and unsolvable equation, because when my editor said my word limit on the book was 85,000 words. Again, I'm sitting there with 120,000 trying to work out how to cram that into 85,000 words. It feels like this is not a problem to be solved. This is one of those paradoxes you just have to work with, right? That was the reason that I went on to write the book.

And thank you for reading the book, Rick, because when I give the book to people, I say, "This is a two-part gift." The first part of the gift is, "I'll gift you the book. The second part is I'll gift you the right not to read it, or at least not to read the whole book." Because it turns out it's not a very good book for people seeking to develop their leadership. And I say that to people. I say, "Well, what is it that you want to work on?" Because, potentially, I can recommend a much better book.

But it's an incredibly important book for me. It's incredibly important for me that I wrote the book. What I discovered along the way, right back at the start of trying to write 20,000 words in a dissertation, or even before that, just trying to write the essays, which I think were 3,000 words every time we kind of had a week-long intensive. What I discovered was that the level of thinking required to write coherently about a topic is a level above any other, I think.

It's certainly above having the knowledge. Having the knowledge is one level. Being able to tell someone to portray that knowledge is another level. Being able to teach is another level. But above that, again, is to actually have a fully coherent written text really requires for you to resolve all the loose ends that you otherwise don't have to resolve. It's actually incredibly important learning experience.

Because as you write and you read it back to yourself, you say, "Well, I've just left a huge hole there. I need to fill that hole, right? I need to tie that loose end. I need to explain that more succinctly." Just taking six pages to write. How can I write that in one page? That was the process that I went through. It was an incredibly important experience for me.

And I still find, and recently just had a little aha moment to discover that I hadn't been writing recently. And I think when I'm not writing, then I'm not being fully effective at learning. And that's the process, that's the reason I wrote the book. The book, though, the reason it was so powerful for me is because it was an example of a concept which I think is like to get to leadership development capabilities and capacities.

I think there's a kind of almost an uber capacity here, which is the ability to reframe. I think reframing is a capacity that all leaders need to work on. And it's a thing that I teach. And I teach right up front when I'm given the opportunity to teach, I almost always start with the capacity of reframing, whatever that may be, reframing the current context, reframing leadership, reframing myself inside a system, all of those things, I think, the capacity to reframe. And that's where the book was for me, is using multiple frames to look at leadership.

[0:24:47] RT: Right. Let's help people here. When you're saying reframe, can you use a context or an example of a reframing? I know from reading your book and some other things that you've written, reframing has a very kind of specific sort of process here in the context of leading as opposed to other contexts, perhaps. What's getting done when something is reframed?

[0:25:09] GF: I think the thing that I've come to realize actually quite recently is – and it's associated with working with a new colleague at Oxford. Her name is Megan Reitz. And she's awesome if you're looking to look for some new materials somewhere. But she introduced me to the work of Iain McGilchrist. And so he is a neuroscientist and a philosopher. What a good combination. He's medically trained, specialized, but also trained in psychology and philosophy. He has a very, very broad view on the way things work.

And it really brought together this concept of reframing for me and the reason why it's so powerful. Because he asks – look, I've dabbled in neuroscience in sort of – again, if you're curious about leadership, sooner or later, you're going to find yourself thinking about

neuroscience. And I've done a program subsequently at MIT actually on neuroscience. But I've always found it interesting in terms of the curiosity piece and actually understanding, but I haven't found it very useful in the classroom because it really doesn't resonate with participants or students very well. It's too abstract, right? What's going on inside my brain? What do I do with that, right? Let's work with something more practical.

But he asked a question, the most powerful question always is why. And he asked the question, which I think is an amazing why question, which is why is the brain divided? Why is there a left hemisphere and right hemisphere? Now, millions of people have looked at this over the years, right? And a few people have actually asked that fundamental question, "Why would evolution have favoured a divided brain if it was just about neural connections?" I mean, that's its function, is neural connections. Why would it be divided? Why wouldn't it just be one mass? Because there would be more neural connections closer together. What is it about having a divided brain?

And importantly, the two hemispheres are connected by the corpus callosum. And from an evolutionary point of view, it's been shrinking. It's been getting smaller over time, the connection between two hemispheres. Again, evolution has been favoring this. And the conclusion to cut right to the chase here is that the two halves of the brain from an evolutionary point of view have been specialized for classical Darwinian reasons to pay a different kind of attention to the world.

Now, attention, it's easy to underestimate the power of that because we can think about attention as just another thing that we do with our brain, right? But attention is the world. Our brain is not connected to the world. It's only connected to the world through the attention that we pay to the world. If we change the nature of our attention, we change the world we're interacting with. That's how powerful it is. And the left hemisphere has been developed for narrow-beam attention. It's all about focused on the detail. It's about satiating our desires. It's about grabbing and getting. It's about utilizing. It's about getting something.

The left hemisphere exists in the service of manipulation. The right hemisphere, its attention is broad, right? It's not narrow focus. It's very broad focused. It's coherent, it's vigilant, and it's uncommitted as to what it might find. It's out there. It's the thing out there looking for what's different rather than what I already know. This is very powerful stuff, and this comes to reframing

because our natural attention is left hemisphere attention. It's about the detail, and it's about – for those of us trained in technical fields, and when you get down to it, most of us are trained in technical fields in one way or another. Mine was engineering. There's other scientists out there. But if you're an accountant, or a lawyer, or a medical professional, you are trained technically, which is honing this ability to focus in on things.

If I want to understand something, what do I do? Well, I zoom in, I pull it apart, I deconstruct it, I organize it, I categorize it. Because when I organize and categorize, I get to know something and then I zoom in until I'm looking at it much closer, and then I put it under a microscope so I can see it in even more detail. This is a kind of a stepping in, zooming in attention.

Reframing goes the other way. Reframing says, "Instead of zooming in, I zoom out." I put the thing in the context in which it is, and I'm engaging the right hemisphere to look for what for what else is going on? What's over the horizon? What's coming at me from afar? What is it that I don't notice when I zoom in? When I zoom out, I see all these other things. But when we zoom out, there's a problem because there's an overwhelming amount of information and data that we can't possibly process. We need to kind of break it up a little bit, and reframing is a way to do that.

Though reframing says, "I step away. I look at the bigger context." Instead of looking at the brain as how can I zoom in and find out what neurons do and what neural connections and neural pathways we make, which is classically how you study the brain, how about I do what McGilchrist did and actually step away and ask, "Why? Why is the brain fundamentally divided? How does it interact with the environment? How do the signals from the world get to the brain? And what do we do with that?" It's a very different sort of attention. It's a very different way to think.

And in leadership, it is just so important. And you, Rick, as a leading practitioner I would say in the field of adaptive leadership know this well. This is getting on the balcony, right? What I see when people get on the balcony is they take the same attention to the balcony, right? They take the same frame. They have a fault frame of the way they look at the world, right? And so you might be on the balcony, but you're still looking if you like through. You still got the blinkers on. How do we take the blinkers off? Well, we reframe and we look from a different perspective.

[0:31:03] RT: Well, this is interesting, Graeme. When I was getting prepared for our conversation, and I was reading some stuff that you've written in one of the pages you wrote, and I pulled this out and I have it here. I hope this doesn't put you too much on the spot. You wrote, "I'm a hypocrite because I had been extolling the virtues of right-brainness. My own professional practice is in the exhaustible slide to the left hemisphere. I have become enslaved to the machine." What you're really saying is just conceptually, you're looking to find freedom here, my words now, by finding better balance between left and right. You have more moves to make, more nimbleness, a better way to see the world from up close and further away and steady. Is that a fair sort of –

[0:31:43] GF: That's absolutely fair. And yeah, the hypocrite moment was really you need to find these frequently, right? If you're not finding them, you're probably not getting on the balcony enough, right? But yeah, what I noticed was, as a program director doing the work that I do, there are a million things that you need to be paying attention to.

Left hemisphere, focus in all the arrangements, all the details. Who's teaching when? What they're teaching? How they connect to the other parts of the teaching? What the logistics are? What flights I have to catch? And above all at the moment, very focused on recruitment and how we can get more people on the program and the finances of the program. A million. Just like everyone else, that's my dance floor.

And if I get stuck there, if I get stuck there – and what I identified was that, yes, the first thing I teach when I get the opportunity to teach is reframing. Yeah, all of a sudden, I had this little aha moment, which was catalyzed by just having a lunch with a friend and a series of incredible coincidences, which then caused me to start even in that sort of narrowing in and saying, "Oh, what are the chances of that coincidence happening? Maybe I could analyze that. And I could put probability across it." And it's, "Oh, that's like a one in 50,000-year event that we had those coincidences." And it's like, "What the hell am I doing? Right? No one's asking that question. No one cares. Right? What fundamentally you're doing, Graeme? Right? Why would you reach for that tool?"

And in doing so, fail to just appreciate the wonder of the moment, right? And fail to appreciate just the world in all its richness and ignoring that because you're just too focused on just trying to get into and do some sort of analysis, pull something apart. Understand something from the perspective of the machine or the mechanics rather than actually thinking about it as an interconnected and rich and beautiful system. That's the little moment that I had personally.

And I think that just reflects participants that I work with. These people are incredibly busy. Their executive lives are unbelievable. It's not just confined to the office. Their life is filled with busyness. We're kind of busy sick, right? Because we don't get this. And this is why I'm loving the work of Megan at the moment, because she teaches this concept of spaciousness. What is the leadership capability to create space? What's the leadership capability to give permission to pause in order to reframe and think differently? Because left hemisphere thinking is so utilitarian. It's so goal-focused. But it's also very much driven by the circumstances, right? It's the driven by the world that turns up in our inbox, by the meeting schedule that we have. What's the leadership capability, which is how do I create space for people? How do I have permission to pause? Because only by creating space can we start to think about being creative in our solutions, about thinking differently, about bringing innovation, and about bringing new thinking. And asking the fundamental question of, "Are we doing the right thing?"

[0:35:01] RT: Yeah, exactly.

[0:35:02] GF: All these goals that we have, all these KPIs that we have. Are we actually fulfilling on our purpose? To quote a mutual friend of ours, Irwin Turbitt, it's like, "Are we so busy hitting the target that we're missing the point?"

[0:35:15] RT: Leave it to Erwin. I want to take you back to your own work here because I think you wrote a book that I mentioned earlier, *Evolve: How Exceptional Leaders Leverage the Inner Voice of Human Evolution*. And you are the only one that I'm aware of who's published something that distinguishes about six voices and counting, I'm guessing. And every time I look at your model, you've added another voice there. But that's cool. So to help people understand – because you put a lot of time into this. This is something you know something about, and it has some value for people who are listening and leading. And so they may be able to pick up some things, including something you've written about it. Give us an overview or as much as

you think is necessary to get a kind of that flow and the hang of these different voices and why they matter for leading.

[0:36:02] GF: Yeah. So if there's a very valid criticism of my work, Rick, it's that I keep adding – there's lots of moving parts, right? But I don't apologize for that because I don't think leadership is simple. I really don't think leadership is simple. I think you need to think, you need to apply at least complicated thinking, but probably complex thinking if you're in a position, a leadership position these days. The world doesn't show up as ready for us to make these grand changes just on the basis of us having the will to do it. We need to think holistically about it.

Where did this come from? This came from the very arrogant point of view of thinking – what I want to create when I do this piece of research and when I write this book is almost theory of everything when it comes to leadership. It's kind of trying to answer the fundamental question, "What is leadership? Why does it exist? Where does it come from?" That's really the human evolution anthropology side of things.

One of the reframes that I did around leadership in order to get there, and there were a number, but one of the ones that was probably very influential was Harari's book called *Sapiens*, which traces human development anthropologically in terms of group sizes. He references heavily Dunbar's work. I know you've had *The Social Brain* people on, Tracey and my other colleague from Oxford who wrote *The Social Brain* book. Very good book on group sizes.

Well, I was interested in what are the different leadership capabilities associated with a cooperative group? The fundamental premise here is, wherever there's cooperation, there's leadership. Now, it may not be a leader and followers, but there is leadership, right? Maybe there's distributed leadership, different sorts of leadership. But nothing gets done by a group without leadership. What is the leadership capability? And I thought if I could answer that question charting the development of human cooperation through larger and larger group sizes, something that no other animal has achieved, that I would understand a little better about that and might be able to bring that into practice.

Where does that get me? It gets me to basically the old premise, I guess, of situational leadership. That the leadership that is required of me now depends on the context that I'm in.

And if the context is different, I should be doing different things. And where did this come from? Another curiosity, which was I had a couple of experiences in BP very early on of leadership vision. And one of the things that these consultants taught me was leadership is all about vision. Taking a stand in the world, personal stand in the world, and speaking the future into existence.

If you had taken a strong enough stand and you express that stand powerfully enough, then you would change the world. It's kind of a JFK, man on the moon, Martin Luther King, go to the mountain, multiple examples pulled from ancient history now, and very somewhat outdated now view of what leadership was all about, and totally incorrect. And by the way, which is part of where you get to.

That reframe was curious to me. Because I also saw these other things, brilliant, brilliant pieces of research, Amy Edmondson, Brené Brown, Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, psychological safety, fantastic. But I also thought about something else, and that was, "What would happen if I went to work and that's all I did?" If I went to work and all I did was psychological safety all day, well, I wouldn't last the quarter out, right? There would be so much that wouldn't get done if that was all I'm doing, right?

It's brilliant work. It has its place. But when does it not have its place? When should I be doing something different? When should I be doing psychological safety? When should I be focusing on relationships, focusing on teamwork, building inclusiveness, valuing diversity, giving people safety to speak, being able to fail safely. But when should I be using my leadership power? When should I be instructing? When should I be insisting? When should I be demanding? When should I be focused on delivery? And then other circumstances. When should I be the adaptive leader? Under what circumstances should be reading Heifetz and turning up and trying to turn up the heat and change the music? Again, if that's all I did was turn up and do the principles of adaptive leadership, I would be missing a trick.

[0:40:38] RT: Graeme, I appreciate your modesty about your book and thinking – basically, you told me it could have been better. I pushed back a little bit, because when I read your book, and this has continued to be the case since then, I am regularly going into your book when working with a leader, because they don't understand this framework you put together, they haven't read the book. And there's something about being able to offer another way for them to take action

through one of the other voices. We've not talked about the voices. I want you to give some voice to the voices here.

But what I think one of the great utilities of the book is it provides different moves for people who have leadership responsibility to make progress on whatever they're trying to get done. I don't know about your experience, but my experience is most people, in spite of their success, only have a couple moves.

[0:41:32] GF: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:41:33] RT: You're coming to the conversation with at least five, six, maybe more. Speak a little bit about the voices, because I think that's a nice distinction. Because, among other things, leading tends to start with voice, which then leads to action. This idea that we're going to use our voice to sort of mobilize for a particular context is important. You've given them different strategies to do that. Talk a little bit about that dynamic.

[0:42:00] GF: The different voices that I point to, and I'll get to the reason why I use voice in a little bit, but just think about it in the first instance as leadership. Heartfelt leadership is a foundation. I start with heartfelt leadership, which is about psychological safety. It is about emotional intelligence. It's about building team. It's about building relationships.

Then I layer on top of that another block. Think about these as building blocks. That's a foundational block. Then there's a building block, which is delivery leadership. Delivery leadership is about delivering results. It is about the responsible use of my leadership power. It is about being demanding about the way we operate. It's about building operating rhythm. It's about discipline. I think if you don't have those, you really don't get permission to play in other spaces, right? You've got to have the foundations right.

On top of that, I lay a structural leadership, right? Structural leadership is about the use of leadership power, but there's a temporal shift here. Whereas delivery leadership is about delivery of outcomes today, structural leadership is about what do I need to put in place to improve performance tomorrow. It's about planning. It's about systems of work. Importantly, it's about continuous improvement. It's about expertise. Because up to this point, we're still dealing

fundamentally with tame problems, not complex problems. What is it that I need to put in place? What structures do I need to put in place to drive the behaviors?

That's heartfelt, delivery, structural. Then we get to sort of starting to work in the complex space where the rules change, where the world is not cause and effect, right? Where a structure won't change behavior because the embedded mindsets are so strong. The next one I put in place is pro-social leadership. A lot of the adaptive leadership principles of Heifetz sit in here. But also, I put in here the whole field of the whole social sphere. What is it about creating a community, and particularly the psychology field of social groups and the power of social identity? The whole social identity theory.

And then on top of that, I layer futurizing, which is about vision, because vision sometimes does work. Usually doesn't, because all of the other blocks are not in place. They say you can take the boy out of engineering, but then you can't take the engineer out of the boy. And I put these together, and I actually built it as building blocks. And the construct thing that if I pull one of the lower-level blocks up, so if I try to do all this leadership stuff but I'm not doing heartfelt leadership, the whole stack collapses, right? And that's been born out many times over about the importance of psychological safety is think about the Google Aristotle project, which identified psychological safety as the only common capacity that they could come up with in terms of high-performance teams. That's the voices that I teach, too, which is getting to the point about voice.

Voice is about what we say, but it's also about what we do. That's the reason that I use word voice. But I also use it because those are the outer voice capabilities, right? That's the things that you can witness in a leader. But we also want to think about the internal. What is it that we have as a leader as an inner voice, which often can be quite disabling to our outer voice? So that's the other sort of part of the equation that I deal with.

[0:45:23] RT: I hear what you're saying here, but let me make sure I'm tracking you. I could be doing a serviceable job shifting from heartfelt, to delivery, to structural, pro-social, depending on context, moment, time, etc. But if my internal voice to myself about how I'm doing is poor, it has a knock-on effect on how I actually utilize these external moves through the different voices. Is that a fair assessment?

[0:45:49] GF: Yes, well stated, Rick. That's exactly the construct that I use, which is the inner voice is something which is not particularly well studied, because it's very hard to do objective study on it. And lately, I've been thinking about inner voice and, not surprisingly, the connection to left hemisphere, right hemisphere. Because the inner voice is very clearly located in the Broca region of the left hemisphere, right next to – it actually uses as the same mechanism as our physical voice.

Our inner voice, the voice we hear only inside our head, speaking to us alone, uses exactly the same part of the brain as the outer voice, when we actually speak. And it's in the left hemisphere, not in the right hemisphere. There's something there that I don't understand yet, and it's something I've got curiosity about. But what I can relay is the experience of a lot of people, which is that my inner voice can be disabling. My inner voice can be an inner critic. My inner voice can be telling me that I'm a phony, or that I'm not up to this task, or who do I think I am doing this. And whenever you allow the inner voice to actually do that, it can be quite disabling to us as leaders.

Again, because it's trying to be a model of everything, and it's not a model at all, I didn't set out to do it. And to create a leadership model, that would be a mistake. There are academics to do that, who do that very well. I'm not an academic. I don't do boots-on-the-ground research. I'm more drawing on their work. What I'm trying to put together is a framework to allow people easy access to the material they need to identify their strengths and weaknesses in different areas.

[0:47:25] RT: And I think that's the plus plus of the book, to be honest with you, having read it. You're being self-critical on your own book. I understand that I was raised by a newspaper writer. The book does provide some very useful distinctions I don't think most people have ever thought of before. And just having more moves to make an understanding of the context in which you'd use them. And then, obviously, developing some craft at using those specific voices because we probably all rely too heavily on one of them at the expense of the others. There is some work to be done in building up balanced leadership muscle around these voices. But I think you give a good playground for people to run experiments and work on that. I'm an advocate of it.

[0:48:07] GF: Yeah. And if I could just finish that off by saying there's a couple of aspects to what you just said. And one is to think about it as an incomplete leader model, which is there is no one who is good at all these voices. There is no one who is 10 out of 10 at emotional intelligence, use of leadership power, structural leadership, adaptive and pro-social leadership, visioning, futurizing. Humans just aren't built that way. But being aware of that is so, so critically important.

A, from a development point of view, I can improve my practice in that space. I need to work harder at holding people to account. This is one that we've kind of lost along the way, I think, the old management training of holding people to account. And I really enjoyed your podcast with Keith Grint saying we've forgotten about management, right? We have forgotten about management, right? Do you know a good leader who's not a good manager, right? The management stuff as well.

[0:49:01] RT: Leave it to Keith, the reminders of that, too, by the way, right?

[0:49:05] GF: Yes.

[0:49:05] RT: All right. Hey, we're coming down here, and I'm going to ask you the question that you called me out on. People don't know this. But I'm asked to put it on. You should have saved it. But I do believe this is a fair assessment that we tend to learn more from our failures than our successes around leading. When you reflect on your entire long career, both being a leader in an organization and then teaching leadership and coaching people in leadership, would you share an experience where you didn't do well leading and how that informed you for the future?

[0:49:37] GF: Yeah, to do that, Rick, it really completes the story that I started at the start, which was kind of how I got here. How is it that I found myself promoted to levels above my level of capability? And it was a crisis, and it was a bad experience that actually created that. And yeah, I have noticed some people on your program struggle with this question a little bit. But for me, this one is very, very clear. I can geolocate it, right? I can go to the very spot where it happened and the timeframe that it happened in. And it was to do with doing a project in a refinery. And one of the things about doing projects in refineries is that you have to shut the refinery down to do it. And so during what's called a turnaround, you've got to complete your work.

The refinery had been shut down. I'm doing my little project, which was actually rather a large project, but building part of the unit that was shut down. And then all the maintenance work was finished, and they're just waiting on Graeme to finish his project. And project is a long way from being finished. And yeah, a lot of time for the turnaround has come and gone. Very rare for this facility to run over on its turnarounds. Almost unheard of. It took great pride in finishing its turnarounds on time. But now Graeme's project is the cause of the turnaround running over.

And it was my fault. When I say Graeme's project, it's not Graeme's project, it was BP's project. I was just looking after for them. But the cause was directly attributable to my actions or my lack of actions leading into that. So I had failed to sort of hold, I guess, people to account. I'd failed to control scope. I had failed to drive to conclusion in milestones, in time. And we carried a lot of work into the turnaround, which we shouldn't have carried in.

And so I was holding that responsibility for my poor performance. And I'm working stupid hours, like hundreds, literally over a hundred hours a week. 16-hour days, seven days a week. I've worked for 30 days straight. I'm completely shattered physically, emotionally. And I'm driving down the road, just driving down to get some lunch that I've forgotten to order because I was too busy.

And the thing about when you run over a turnaround is there's a dollar figure put on every day that you're late, and it escalates. $200,000 first day, $250,000, $300,000 for the next day. And now it's half a million dollars a day that we're looking at every day that we're late. I'm feeling this mounting sort of pressure of cost escalation that I'm responsible for. And I'm driving down the road, and just my whole world just sort of collapsed in a moment. And I burst into tears. And I remember just banging my hands on the steering wheel of the car and pulling over to the side somehow. Emotionally, I was a complete wreck. And now I can look back and say it was kind of like I was on the borderline of a complete breakdown here. That's the degree to which it had affected me.

And so here's where reframing would have been really useful, right? Reframing would have been really useful if someone had said to me, "Yeah, Graeme, five million dollars. And you're responsible, right? That's part of what you do." But let's put that in the context of how much

money BP is going to earn this year, right? Is that worth it? And by the way, let's put this in a different context. We need to get over yourself, because you're just a little bit self-absorbed at the moment, and actually learn from this event, then to learn and put those learnings into practice in service of BP, you would save BP hundreds of millions of dollars in the future, right? Just by taking those lessons on board. And you have this opportunity to learn from this, apply that learning into this much bigger space that you're going to end up playing in, running multi-billion-dollar projects, not just a little million-dollar projects down here. A piece of reframing would have really –

[0:53:34] RT: Really helped that, yeah.

[0:53:35] GF: This is a turning point, as I said before. And it's quite elegant in retrospect to think about it, but it was a fork in the road moment. And the fork in the road was actually literal, because I'm driving back to the refinery, and there's a fork in the road, and I have to turn right to go back to the refinery to finish the project. But if I don't turn right and kind of continue and sort of veer around to the left a little bit, then I'm on the back road through to the freeway, and I can be on the beach in an hour having left this whole mess behind me. And I left that decision so late that I actually drove out onto the gravel in order to take the corner. I missed the bitumen turn. I nearly gave it all away and went to the beach. I don't like to think about where my life might be now if I hadn't turned back.

There is a hero of this story. The hero – because no one seemed to be on my side. But of course, there was someone on my side, and that's my wife Alison. And she could see what was going on with me. When I said, "I think I need to get away. How about I take this job in Indonesia?" She said, "Right. When do we leave?"

[0:54:42] RT: When do we leave?

[0:54:43] GF: Two little kids, right? Carrying them across the world, living in a third-world country. In retrospect, that was the break I needed to do that piece of reframing. But what I also needed when I came back, because I thought I'd left that behind me until I drove back into that refinery. because the next major project in BP, it was back in that same little refinery that I'd

always been in. And the moment I drove in the gate, I worked out that I hadn't really dealt with it. I just sort of put it aside and hidden it.

That's kind of part of what sort of generated this interest in inner voice. Because that disabling inner voice, when you find yourself as an imposter, everyone else – I've been promoted in the time I'd been away. I mean, "What the hell?"

[0:55:28] RT: I got to go back there and deal with this again?

[0:55:30] GF: Can no one else see this, right? That's where I learned from my failure. And doing the leadership development program helped me deal with that and rewrite the story. And I say rewrite the story, and it sounds like a trivial thing to do. No, it's about taking responsibility for what you did and what you didn't do. But taking it in balance and being able then to, as I say, apply those lessons to your practice. And actually, have some confidence in yourself and develop confidence in yourself through your actions and the feedback you get from the world.

As I said, very, very powerful learning moment for me as it turns out and one that I look back on as an experience I'm so glad I had. Because in some ways, it's kind of that turning point, that fork in the road when I veered to the right rather than kept going, that has set me on a path which I'm just so grateful for.

[0:56:26] RT: We're coming to the end here. A question I have for you now is what's ahead for you?

[0:56:31] GF: What's ahead for me is doing this as much as I can. I don't know if anyone else has been tempted to feel this at the moment. But leadership is such disarray, right? And it's easy to feel helpless in this situation, right? It's easy to feel like this is just all too hard and to wonder whether you're making a difference.

My driving purpose is about leadership development because of the broader impact that it has on the world. And the things that I personally do, the trace of that will be lost almost instantaneously if you look at it broadly enough. People will leave my programs, whether I've taught them or whether I've been program director on them. And most will do some things,

some will do nothing. For some people, it'll be transformational. You'll get that spread of outcomes. But they'll go back to work, they'll do their thing. And trace back to my input is there's no trace there. But if we all do that and we all do that together, right? You, Rick. That's why this program is so important, I think, and the audience that you have is for us to have that support base. Because without that, the outlook is quite dire. And collectively, our individual traces might disappear quite quickly. Collectively, we are having an impact. Collectively, we're making a difference. And I'm just so pleased and proud to be part of that. And so, keen to continue to do that work as long as I'm making a contribution.

[0:58:07] RT: Last question. You get the last one. You get all the questions. What the heck am I saying? Any final thoughts you want to share with people about the world you live in, the potency of anything? Anything you think you want to give wisdom and counsel to?

[0:58:22] GF: My final thoughts are leadership is such a brilliant social construct, right? Something we create. Leadership is something that we create socially, that we build, that we have the capacity to develop. And the impact of that is exponential. The ability, as I say, to make an impact on a leader is to make an impact on the leader's team, is to make an impact on the leader's organization, is to make an impact on the world. Hold that as we move forward. Whether you're listening to this podcast as someone in the game of what you and I do, which is work with leaders on this, or whether you're actually a leader in an organization yourself. Observing to a point that you make quite frequently. We're all potential leaders in our organization no matter what our rank.

Leadership is not confined to those with an authority position. Leadership is a calling that anyone can take up at any position in any organization. And if we spread that knowledge, spread that word, give people a confidence to operate in that space, then I think the world is a better place for those efforts.

[0:59:31] RT: I agree with you completely. Graeme Findlay, thank you for coming to the swamp, spending time with me. I truly appreciate that.

[0:59:38] GF: It's been a great pleasure, Rick. And really enjoyed that chat today.

[OUTRO]

[0:59:43] 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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