

EPISODE 77**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:05] 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 people who've made some decisions in their life and in their work to be involved with helping people in society, I would say at large, deal with difficult challenges.

Today, I have Paulo Quattrone, who is a – Paulo, you've got a lot of stuff going on here, so I'm just going to run down a few of your bios, and then you can fill in the blanks. You're the Professor of Accounting, Governance and Society, and the Director for the Centre of Analysis and Investment Risk at Manchester Business School. You are an Associate Fellow at Saïd Business School. You are also, I think, still the Honorary Research Fellow for the Italian Studies at Oxford, which I'd love to hear more about. And you're an Editor of Organizational Studies. Prior to that, you started your work in Madrid. First of all, welcome to the podcast. It's really cool to have you here. Thank you.

[0:01:14] PQ: Oh, thank you. Thank you, Rick, for inviting me. It's a pleasure.

[0:01:17] RT: You're welcome. Before we get into some specific questions, what do you want people to know about you that you think will help them understand context for our conversation?

[0:01:27] PQ: That's interesting. Maybe I want people – because I'm an accountant. I want people not to think in stereotypical terms of an accountant. I'm an accountant, but I tend to do all kinds of things related to accounting but not necessarily boring in a sense. Because when people think about accounting, they think about boring things. Maybe a couple of things. I always say I'm very proud of two things of my academic career. The first one is that I am the

world expert of the administration of the Society of Jesus. And I said that because there are not many people around in the world who are experts of that. And so it's an easy thing to achieve.

The second thing is that I'm proud that one of my articles on the history of accounting, I've been told, is used at Princeton in the PhD in history. And of course, Rick, if you know that that is not true, don't tell me. It's very nice to believe that that is true. But these two things are related to each other because, in a sense, my work on the Jesuit or my interest in the Jesuit was prompted by the fact that the Jesuit, whatever they did, dealt with the unknown, where he's mysterious, where he's uncertain. When they were going to missions, they did not know what kind of people they would find. When they were innovating in accounting, they were investigating the mystery of value and so forth and so on.

They were doing that through very specific practices, which were rhetorical in origin. And this is why I think the article on accounting history is used at Princeton, because I show that accounting emerges from the translation of rhetoric into a new field that was the administration of larger states. People think about rhetoric in pejorative terms these days, while for me rhetoric is actually a way of investigating the unknown. It was a series of techniques used to make an inquiry into what we do not know. The mystery of God, the mystery of value, the mystery of whatever in early world times.

And so going back to your question, I would like that people do not stop at the very superficial level of my title when they think about me. Accounting is not a boring thing. It's actually quite interesting, especially if you look at its history and if you look at its history from a broad interdisciplinary way.

[0:03:48] RT: Okay. In preparation for our conversation, I admit that I initially thought accounting, how interesting can that be? Well, I was completely wrong when I started reading some of the stuff you'd written and some of the other things that you had links to. And I do want to get to the Jesuit conversation here in a little bit. But what I was intrigued by was something that you had said that this function of accounting helps deal with a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty that helps people navigate through some difficult challenges. For people who have a narrow view of accounting, can you expand on how does accounting help people in organizations, and people have to make difficult decisions around challenging things? Navigate

that so that they can make maybe the best possible decision they got, even if it's not the one they want.

[0:04:35] PQ: There is a need to go back to the history of accounting. Because while, nowadays, accounting is seen as a measurement tool. And so as a measurement to provide information for making the right decisions. And so as an answer machine, we would say. It's not by chance that Oracle, where accounting is nowadays ran, is called Oracle, because you interrogate the Oracle and the Oracle gives you the answer. But this is not why accounting was designed, accounting was designed to make sure that you could ask the right questions instead. And so how you can exercise judgment.

And so, particularly in this moment in time, where everything is ambiguous and everything is uncertain, you need to recover that function of accounting, a function that faces you with a choice. And so accounting is made of dichotomies, expenses and revenues, assets and liabilities, short-term, long-term, and that was related to, again, its rhetorical origin.

You can also think of the relationship between a chart of accounts and a maze. A chart of accounts is like a maze. The maze was a typical rhetorical figure where you face a wall and you have to decide, "Do I go right or do I go left?" I stop there and reflect, and I make a judgement. And then you gather your thoughts, you gather your information, you decide to go right. Then you face another wall, and you stop again, and you gather information, you reflect, you express a judgement, and then you go right. And then at the end of all of these decisions, you are amazed. This is the origin of the word "amazing". It comes from being out of the maze. You have escaped the minotaur, and you saw the light.

And so accounting originally was designed for making you face these choices and express judgment. While nowadays, we interpret accounting as a system that provides you with objective information. And so it takes the judgment away from you, while instead it was designed to make sure that you had a tool that facilitated that judgment knowing that the world is ambiguous, knowing that the world is uncertain. And this is why I say nowadays, more than ever, it's important to recover that spirit of accounting. Not a tool that gives you answer, but a tool that helps you raise the right questions.

[0:06:53] RT: How do you go about that? My closest friend is an accountant, and I'm pretty sure he thinks the way that you're describing, assets, liabilities, costs, profit, those kinds of things. It's very binary, very black and white. What are we losing here because we don't have these distinctions? Or maybe it's even a willingness to live in an ambiguous state for a while while you're trying to sort out. What's been the cost, from your estimation, to us as a society by bifurcating a function that really seems to be harmonic?

[0:07:28] PQ: The interesting thing is that this bifurcation now generates a polarization. So you go either for black or for white, right? But the reason why these dichotomies were invented in the first place is to make you concentrate on what is ambiguous in the middle, in between them. I'll give you also some examples. Do you know the etymology of the word data?

[0:07:52] RT: No.

[0:07:53] PQ: It comes from Latin. I always say to people who come to my classes and lectures, "At the end of the lecture, you will know anything new about accounting or anything new about program management." I teach a lot of program management." But you will know a lot more about Greek and Latin." Data comes from Latin. Latin is a smart language because in many instances one word has got two opposite meanings, and this is the case for data. It comes from datum, which means that the data is given. When you look at data, the meaning is given. But it also means that the meaning of that data is attributed, like in your given name, okay? You attribute the meaning or you attribute the name to that person. Data or datum is never given is also attributed. The interpretation, the meaning of that data is attributed by the observer. What that etymology suggests is that the truth is somewhere in that ambiguous zone in between data as given and data as attributed.

The same thing happens with fact. Fact we think in modern times, fact is something which is given, is a fact. There is no ambiguity about a fact. But in Latin, the word comes from factum, which means made. A fact is fact. But a fact is also made. So it's created. And so the truth again is in between the two. And this is why accounting has got this dichotomical design. Assets and liabilities, expenses and revenues, income and losses. And you have to understand what is in between rather than focus on one of the two extremes. They use the extremes as an excuse to

investigate the ambiguity and uncertainty of what was in between these two opposites. This is why I say that accounting is not about measurement, but it's about judgment.

[0:09:45] RT: About judgement. Have we drifted from your perspective towards this binary? I just see my experiences that we tend to want to have things clear and simple so we can move on. From your perspective, what's going on with us that reduces our tolerance for ambiguity to be able to stand in the unknown for a while and ask better questions? How are we getting here?

[0:10:09] PQ: It's part of the modernity. I mean, the trend in modernity is to move towards what is black and white. I think one of the reasons for this drift is speed. You want to act as speed. Not necessarily speed develops wisdom and develops just decisions. I have an article where I say is the introduction of digital technologies in accounting a good or a bad thing? I think it will make people do the same mistake, but at a much greater speed.

[0:10:40] RT: faster.

[0:10:40] PQ: It will make it faster because there is less room for judgment. I want to challenge the listeners to this podcast. I mean, this podcast is about leadership. If you ask a leader, or if you ask a person who has to handle complex problems, they will know and they will live on their skin the fact that life is ambiguous, that life is full of uncertainties, that managing major programs is a trip into the unknown.

Why would they then want a technique that provides them with certainty when there is no certainty? What they want is a technique that provides them with the right tools to interrogate the ambiguity and uncertainty that they face. That is actually very coherent. Most of the teaching that I do is exactly that. I mean, because we had the tendency then to fall into the trap of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity by using the models and approaches that we know. And those models and approaches that we know are not useful for coping with ambiguity and uncertainty. They're all about alignment, fixing objectives, and things of that kind.

While you know when you lead major programs, you know when you lead a country, you know when you lead a complex situations, that normally in organizations, alignment is a miracle. The normal situation is misalignment. The normal situation is ambiguity. The normal situation is

uncertainty. What this view of accounting does is to provide you with tools to manage the misalignment.

When I teach the example of the Jesuits, for instance, I do an example of the way in which they manage the cash account and the chest of their college. The chest of their college had two keys, which were in opposition. One was kept by the accountant, by the procurator, the equivalent of today's CFO. One was kept by the rector, who was, let's say, the equivalent of today's CEO. He was in charge. The first key was kept by the accountant, who was the spokesperson for financial matters. The other one is the spokesperson for non-financial matters; missions, teaching, religion, fundraising, whatever, purpose. And clearly, they are not aligned because otherwise, you would need only one key. They are misaligned. Those two keys symbolize the fact that misalignment is the norm in organization, but it's also something you can profit off. Or you can profit from it because you have attention between these two different points of view. And the truth of what the right action is, or the right decision is, is in between these two points.

One symbolizes the means, money, cash. It's the means for pursuing an end, which is the other key. And so they had very clear the idea that the moment in which you want to pursue, for instance, in their case, God, or missions, or education, you cannot do it without money, but you lose God the moment in which you pursue only money. The current corporate governance is completely wrong because it confuses purpose with means. Money is not a purpose, it's not an end in itself, it's a means towards an end. But now we have missed completely this division that was quite important. And this is why I say that, in modernity, we tend to polarize. And so we do understand that actually pursuing means as an end is wrong, and pursuing ends without thinking of the means is also wrong. But people tend to make things easy and polarized in either one or the other.

[0:14:18] RT: You write pretty clearly about this distinction of purpose and outcomes or money. Every organization that I've ever been around has some kind of purpose statement, some kind of mission statement of doing good in the world. And in reading some of your writing, you challenge the notion that you can actually pull that off to the degree you're espousing while you're having to run the operations of the business and the work that's involved there. Speak to

that, if you would, for people who may not even make those distinctions right now. But the challenge is pretty clear when I read your writing about what's at play here.

[0:14:55] PQ: I see a tendency, which is also in line with what you were saying before, that people want clarity. And so now people have understood that pursuing money and maximizing shoulders value is wrong. And they want to substitute that with another purpose. It would be minimizing CO2 emissions or whatever.

And I think that that is equally wrong. In a sense, I would say, having no purpose is better than one. And I'll explain that. I'm doing some work on one large public holding in Italy, which was called IRI. And that was the institution that managed the funds of the Marshall Plan after the Second World War. Most of the leaders, or at least some of the leaders of that company, were very Catholic, were profoundly Catholic. And they were also linked to the Vatican very closely. In particular, there was the vice director general of IRI who was the economic advisor of Giovanni Battista Montini, who was the secretary of state of the Vatican, who then became Pope Paul VI. The link between the two institutions was very strong.

In the early 40s, the Vatican understood already the fact that the Mussolini entered the war was a huge mistake. And so they start to plan for what would happen once the fascist regime would have collapsed. And so they charged this guy, it was Sergio Paronetto, to gather all the Catholic intelligentsia and to define the contour of what would be a modern social democracy.

Paronetto started to invite to his apartment in Via Reno. Those people then became president of the Italian Republic, prime minister, governor of the Bank of Italy, members of the Constitutional Assembly, the most important Italian politicians of the Christian Democratic Party. And so they start to think about what should inform the behavior of a Catholic state and of a good Catholic. A good accountant, a good politician, a good Catholic politician, a good Catholic accountant. And they define this principle that there is in whatever Catholic do, that Catholic should do the common good. And that would sound like substituting a purpose with another one. But they define the common good in a very ambiguous way. They say pursuing the common good means to allow individuals to pursue their personal interests.

You cannot really know what the common good is. You have to generate practices to mediate and interrogate what the different people want and to find a compromise. And this was the way in which the Italian constitution was designed, but this was also a way in which the accounting system, the budgeting and planning system of IRI, ENI, and NL, that were all owned by the state, was designed with the idea of value added rather than profit.

In calculating the value added, you had to understand what the different interests were, and you had to mediate between these different interests. The moment in which you have to distribute the value added generated by a firm, you ask yourself, "Okay, which part do I have to give it to the workers? Which part do I have to give it to the capitalists? Which part do I have to give it to a state? Which parts do I have to keep invested in the firm, which was the institution, which was the platform where this mediation happened?" Common good is a purpose without a purpose.

[0:18:27] RT: Without a purpose.

[0:18:27] PQ: That's not defined. It cannot be calculated. You can calculate the numbers, but you always interrogate what that number means in terms of the purpose, that contingent situation you have to pursue. In one moment, it means to make the trade unions that be. In one moment, it means to make the capitalist that be. In one moment, it means to reinforce the financial situation of the company. In one moment, it means to pay more taxes to the state. It means many different things. It cannot be used to one single purpose.

And so my advice to a wise leader is not to fix the purpose, but to generate practices which help you to understand what is the right thing to do when you face that situation. I always say having targets, having an incentive is wrong because you define what is good before you find yourself into the concrete situations where you will have to make a decision. Because defining the incentive decides upfront what is right. And you do not know when you will find yourself into that situation what is right. It may look right when you thought about it, but it may look wrong when you find yourself in.

And so I always tell my program managers, for instance, if you define a target, in the same moment you do that, you define the opposite one. And so you understand, in pursuing that, what do I gain and what do I lose in that pursuit? And so you create that space in between to regain

the opportunity to exercise judgment and to understand that the world is never understandable in black and white.

[0:20:06] RT: You said something here that you're having these conversations with leaders who are probably predisposed to have a purpose and targets. And you're coming in saying that's essentially the wrong way to go. What's been your experience with people who've decided to embrace your ideas? Let's help people think a little bit about what is the practice that they might design to begin to unhook a little bit around certainty and clear purpose and live in this ambiguous state and build some muscle of ambiguity so that they could more effectively do that job. What have you learned about how they build that capacity?

[0:20:42] PQ: Yeah, I'll give you a few examples. For instance, I teach a course which is called Major Project Leadership Academy, where all the senior civil servants in UK participate. Those who have to become program director or SROs of major programs have to attend this course before or during they are taking their roles. And adding class people who organize all sorts of things, including the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. They operated their cash with two keys. There was no ICO and a treasurer, but there was a CEO opposite to the CFO in order to create that tension between purpose and means. Okay.

But there are also other solutions. In terms of designing your data visualizations. I teach how to design dashboards, for instance. And I have an example that I used that is very, very useful. It's a dashboard like anyone else. It was used to program manage the construction of London Heathrow Terminal 2, which by the way is one of the few airports which have been delivered on time and on budget, okay.

And you have four areas in the dashboards. And one is cost, one is risk, one is schedule. Cost, risk, schedule. I forgot the fourth one, but it will come. And it looks like any other dashboard. And it seems that by looking at that dashboard, you get information on the status of the delivery of the program. But the interesting thing is that these four quadrants of that dashboard are in a continuous state of tension.

The first thing is safety, by the way. If you want to go faster, if you look at schedule and if you want to go quicker, you put the life of people who are working there at risk. If you want to cover

all of your risk, your cost goes up because you need huge contingencies. If you want to increase safety, you can increase. But of course, increase safety has got a reflection on speed. That dashboard is designed not to give you an information, not to give an answer on what it's right to do, but to face the tradeoffs and oppositions that you have to try to grapple with when you find yourself in that situation.

The design of the dashboard is indifferent. It does not prefer costs versus safety or schedule or risk. But it's indifferent, so that you can make a difference the moment in which the decision has to be taken. Because in one particular moment in time, it's important to take care of safety because we had a critical accident yesterday. And so that thing needs to be fixed. Give me the money. If, in that particular case, the airport was to be delivered on time because it was the new door to the UK when the Olympic Games were hosted in London. You cannot really delay the project that much. And if you see that that was going to happen, then you ask for more money, or you risk a bit more, or you compromise safety a bit more. And then you always have to balance the different objectives and the different targets that you have set up in front of yourself. There is not one. There are four that are in a continuous state of tension amongst them. And so the system does not provide you with an answer. The system asks you to decide what is important for you in that particular moment in time.

[0:24:04] RT: Yeah, you're a teacher. When you're propositioning this shift from kind of a binary way of operating to this nimble flex, in this case, maybe four different ways you can go, what have you seen about human beings and their ability to – because we're not necessarily wired that way in the society we're in right now. What have you learned about what it takes for a person to actually make that adjustment? What are their challenges that they have to overcome and bring themselves into that new world?

[0:24:33] PQ: There are a series of challenges. The first one is institutional. The institutional arrangements in which they work are not prone to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty. They want certainties. This happens in large corporations. This happens in government projects and programs. Because people don't like ambiguity even when you communicate your results.

I always say you have to develop an ability to manage your stakeholders in different ways. There are stakeholders who would not like ambiguity and you give them some kind of certainty,

but there are certain occasions where you can use ambiguity to mobilize, for instance, your team or whatever.

The first one is institutional. We always see this in the MPLA. People buy the story when they come to class and then they have difficulties in bringing the lessons to their work environment because their work environment is driven by different kind of criteria. The second thing is the practices. They don't have practices to deal with ambiguity and to make sure that you embed the lack of certainty into the decision-making and governance processes that you develop.

My job is actually to give them and to make them aware that there are practices and techniques which are pretty coherent with the fact that you can live with ambiguity. But again, there is then a conflict with what they've learned and what they find when they go back to their job, which is institutionalized. And of course, practices are a key component of the institutionalization, which are institutionalized in a complete different way.

And then there is a third aspect, which is the maturity, maturity of the person, but also maturity of the environment in which you operate. To gain ability, to gain that ability to live with ambiguity and uncertainty at ease, it requires a bit of time. I always say, I mean, to become a Jesuit, it takes 12 years. To become a members of faculty at Harvard, it takes 12 years. To become a partner at McKinsey, I've been told, it takes 12 years. To get used to that different approach to life, it takes some time.

I'll close this point with an anecdote. It's not true that I'm the only expert of the administration of this Society of Jesus, because now there is another colleague with a former Jesuit who is in Warwick, and it's just a mental asylum, and we are actually writing a book together. Because when you have an enemy, you make that you're alliance. So we decided to collaborate.

But he shared some experiences and some anecdotes on his training as a Jesuit. He became a Jesuit, and then he left the order. And he told me, "Look, Paolo. When we were doing our training, I had a room and I had a mentor. And if my mentor came to my room and he realized that I was collecting books, I was growing a plant, I was putting a picture of my family on the wall, he would take these things, throw them away and move me to a different room because I

have to develop that ability of becoming different, which is the Jesuit at the moment. When you take decision, you have to develop an ability of being indifferent.

I'll tell you also what it means to be different. To get used to ambiguity, to get used to uncertainty, you have to be trained in order to do that. And I'll tell you why the indifference is important. That dashboard, in a sense, is indifferent to what is right, okay? But indifference in Jesuit terms means being in the middle of difference. It does not mean I don't care. It means exactly because I care. And I care about the different people around me. I have to develop that attitude towards indifference. Meaning being in the middle of difference and being able to cope with that multitude of interest that I have to somehow satisfy through compromise. And so there is no one best way. There is always some solution that has to mediate between the different interest, but that cannot be the best solution. It's the reasonable solution. There are no rational solutions, but there are solutions that are best can be reasonable.

[0:28:54] RT: Okay. You've mentioned the Jesuits a few times, and you've wrote this wonderful paper, which I thoroughly enjoyed reading 'Jesuits in the Boardroom'. And we'll put a link in the show notes to these resources. And as a kid who went to eight years of Catholic school, a Jesuit school, I learned a bunch of stuff about the Jesuits I did not know about. But let's start sort of back up. What drew you to the Jesuits as a platform or a model for teaching some of the stuff that you teach? What are they known for? Give people an understanding of what this group's about and why they're relevant to the topics that you're working on today.

[0:29:32] PQ: Yeah, I got close to the Jesuit because they were innovators in accounting. If we got the accruals, which is the technique through which you divide the income between two different years, it's because of the Jesuit. They were the first to systematize the technique into a book that was published in Palermo, in my hometown, in 1636.

I started to get close to the Jesuit for technical reasons. I wanted to understand how accounting evolved. And they were innovators. But then my attention was drawn to other things and to things that helped me to understand how accounting works in a much more profound way. For instance, people think that inventory is an accounting word. Inventory is about looking at what goods you have in your warehouse.

But inventory is not an accounting word. It's a rhetorical word. It comes from "inventio", which is the first kind of rhetoric. And when I looked at that book, the structure of that book was structured into three different sections. The first one was "L'inventario", about the inventory. And of course, it's a book about accounting. You think it's normal that that book – the first part of that book would be called "L'inventario". But the second one was called "de ordinatione et dispositione de conti". Of the ordination and disposition of the accounts. Now already, if you have a sensitivity for different things, I was trained as a classicist in my high school. I know Latin, Greek. These things are familiar to me. That is the second kind of rhetoric, the *ordinatio* and *dispositio*. The structure of that book was a rhetorical structure.

The third part of the book was about the style that you choose when you communicate your accounts. And the third kind of rhetoric is *elocutio*, the style that you choose when you have to give a talk. I started to get interested in looking at the accounting solutions of the Jesuit, not for their technical matters, but for their rhetorical structure. And that is important because the Jesuits in wherever they did, in the missions, they were going outside and not knowing even what kind of animals would have killed them because they explore new territories without a compass, without a map. Sometimes they have to draw them up while they were exploring the territory. They were dealing with the unknown.

They were the first – if you have classrooms nowadays in our schools, it's because of the Jesuits. They were the first who organized teaching in homogeneous groups organized per year. And so they had classrooms. And why they were interested in teaching because they were interested in knowledge and the mystery of knowledge. They were interested, of course, in the mystery of God. And they were interested in mystery in general.

And so I was drawn to them. And just to give the listeners a few information, the Jesuit Order was established in 1514 as an instrument, in a sense. This is the conventional story. The story is a bit more complex. But as an instrument to fight the Kantor reformation, okay? There were an army at the service of the Pope. In fact, the Jesuit take four vows. One is obedience, chastity, poverty and obedience to the Pope. In theory, they could not become pope. This last pop that we had, Pope Francis, is the first Jesuit pope in the history of the Catholic Church.

In whatever they did, they dealt with ambiguous and uncertainty, and they also have the ability to persist. They've been there for 500 years. I'm interested in looking at organizations that are able to persist. And so I'm interested in religious organizations. I'm interested in universities because it's a long-standing institution which I think at the moment is going through some serious problems, exactly because now they define very well what the purpose of the university is, making money. And so the moment in which you define that, everything starts to crack, okay?

I was lucky enough when I was at Oxford of being associated with a college. That was a combination of a cathedral and an academic institution, Christ Church. And I also have a paper on the governance of Christ Church that was about exploring the mystery of what that institution was about. And it's interesting that that institution persisted for 500 years. This year is the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the establishment of Christ Church.

I was interested in understanding how do you cope with complexity? How do you cope with the unknown? How do you manage to anticipate the changes and adapt to the changes that happen around you and you still go? Interesting, a close here, "success" is another interesting word. It comes from "succedere", Latin. And "succedere" originates two words. One is succession. A monarch is dead and then you have to make sure that the other succeeds. And so there is continuity in the institution.

The other word that is originated by a successor is success. Success means to happen. If something happens, that is successful. An institution, an organization that is able to persist for a long time is successful because it has been able to deal with the complexities, with the ambiguities, with the uncertainties of the world.

[0:35:07] RT: Thank you. In the time we have left, I want to take us in a slightly different direction here. I noted that you're quite a prolific writer. I'm curious, what's your writing practice? To be able to produce the volume of stuff, books, and papers, and articles, what can people learn about writing from you that you've learned the hard way?

[0:35:27] PQ: I wish I were so prolific as you, as you think I am. There are colleagues are much better than me. There are different approaches to writing. My approach is I'm very instrumental

in what I read and when I write. I tend to concentrate the reading. And then once I've got everything clear, I write. All of my papers have been written in a week.

[0:35:52] RT: Oh, really?

[0:35:52] PQ: That article that you read was actually written in a day. I tend to read a lot. And then, boom, I write. And that helps me. Sometimes it is a problem because, with becoming increasingly busy with other things in my life, I do not have chunk of times that I can devote entirely to reading. And then, boom, write immediately after I have things relatively clear. Also, when I write an article or when I'm writing, for instance, now the book, I want to have the structure very clear before I start writing. Once my structure is clear, the writing happens very quickly.

But other people have other habits. There are people who write every day. For instance, I don't write every day. But those who are really – probably, if you think about writing, they say that they write every day. They devote an hour to writing every day. There are different ways. For me, the constant writing doesn't work. Because if I do not know what I want to say, I cannot write. I need to learn first, clarify my mind. And then, boom, I'm a pretty fast writer when I write.

Then, of course, I rewrite. Then, of course, the process of rewriting is also very long. But the bulk of the first draft of the paper, or a chapter, or a book, or whatever happens very quick. The preparation for that very creative moment is very long. Also, I write at night and early hours of the day. I normally start at 7pm and I finish at 2 or 3am.

When I write, my day changes. I don't do a lot of work during the day, and I do a lot of work during the night because I need calm. I need silence. I also write when my family is away. I'll tell you an anecdote. It was a difficult time in my life. And always, the Jesuit had helped me. And so I had two very young daughters. They were one and two at that age. And so we lived in a smaller flat than usual. I didn't have my study. Now I'm much like it. I have a wonderful study here where I'm recording this. I told my wife, "Okay, now you take the kids, you go back to Italy. You leave me alone for 10 days, and then I'll write a paper that will give me an opportunity to leave the place where I am." And that was the Jesuit paper that was published in ASQ. It was written in a week.

[0:38:17] RT: My father was a newspaper writer. I'm always curious about writing practices. What drew you to academic life?

[0:38:24] PQ: A mistake. I always wanted to become a medical doctor. Until I was 17, that was the dream of my life. But then I had two parents who were actually old. Or I thought they were old. It's basically the same difference in age between me and my daughters. And so now I don't feel old. But from my point of view, they were quite old. And so I said to my father, "Look, dad, that medicine will take too long. God knows where you will be by the time I finish the degree and get the specialization. It's too risky for me to invest in medicine. Because by the time I finish, you will be gone." And so, "Do what you do."

And what he did was he had a small accounting firm. And so I decided to do economics law and management. That was the degree that I did. And I was enjoying it until my fourth year when my father was not well. And so I suspended my study for a year and I helped him in the practice. And I realized what accounting in practice was. And so I thought this is not the job that I can do for the rest of my life. What do I do now? The only escape was becoming an academic.

And so when I won the scholarship for doing a PhD was the first day in a new accounting firm where I was doing my training. And so I went there and said, "Okay, thank you very much, but I'm done with it." And I became an academic. It was the only way of escaping the accounting profession.

[0:39:56] RT: Okay. I asked this question to everybody. We tend to learn more from our leadership failures and our successes. When you look back on your career, where you're in places where you're using yourself to lead, any failure that you're willing to share and what you learned from that's helped you down the road?

[0:40:13] PQ: It's a difficult question because I have a lot of failure. Which one to choose first? Maybe not a specific one. But yeah, understanding that it would have been nice to very clear and to know very clearly that what Jim March teaches us, that organizations are political arenas. And so the moment in which you start with passion, a particular project or whatever, you have to understand that having passion, having ideas is not necessarily what will help you to succeed in

that job. Being also a political animal is pretty important. And of course, you will learn this only when you face the situation.

But I can tell also that the big important successes happen when there is passion, ideas, and politics. If there is only politics, you are not a good leader, you are a bad politician, actually. The good things happen when you can mix. And there is a kind of genuine match between ideas, passion, and politics, and managing the political complexes that every organization faces. If you have only politics, you are a manipulative leader.

For instance, we have talked about ambiguity for the entire podcast. And I say there are different kinds of ambiguity. There is Jim March who says organizations are ambiguous and there is nothing you can do about it. There are people who talk about strategic ambiguity. People make you believe that things are ambiguous, but they know exactly what to do. And this is the bad use of ambiguity. And then there is ambiguity. I truly believe that things are ambiguous, and I try to manage those. And this is the ambiguity that I like. I make things coherent from an institutional point of view, a practical point of view, but also a personal point of view. Making sure that you do not use ambiguity as an instrument to manipulate the others. That is the worst use of ambiguity.

[0:42:07] RT: Okay. What's ahead for you?

[0:42:10] PQ: Sabbatical. You asked what is my future. Yeah, in August, I finish my term as editor of organizational studies, which has been a great honor. And I was lucky that this coincides with my term of sabbatical. And I have to thank my school to give me one year of sabbatical. And so I will work on a few things, including a book on how to lead with ambiguity. And so how to be at ease with ambiguity, with invisibilities, with things that you cannot make transparent and objective. I have to finish a few papers that I'm writing. One is on accounting and magic, for instance. But it would be a good result if I finish my sabbatical with this book on how to manage and situations where ambiguity is unavoidable.

[0:42:59] RT: Great. Thank you. Okay, I'll give you the last word. Anything you want to say to be complete here?

[0:43:05] PQ: No, because things can never be complete. They always have to be left incomplete. That's okay.

[0:43:13] RT: There may be a part two here. Hey, thank you very much for spending time with us. I truly appreciate it.

[0:43:17] PQ: Oh, thank you. Thank you, Rick, for inviting me. This has been a great play.

[OUTRO]

[0:43:23] 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.

[END]