

EPISODE 79**[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. We are the podcast where we have conversations with individuals who have made a choice in their life and in their career to use themselves to lead and to have impact in the world. Our goal here is to learn from them, and their wisdom, and their ideas, and maybe even some of their mistakes.

Today, it's kind of cool for me because I get to have a conversation with somebody that I've known for a long time, but I've not spoken with for a long time as well, Kelly Indira Buis, , who is in the Netherlands, in the Hague, and she's joining us here. Kelly, first of all, let's get you right into the conversations. Good to have you. Welcome.

[0:00:57] KIB: Thank you. Good to be here.

[0:00:59] RT: Okay. I come with questions, as you know. But let's begin with you. In order to give people orientation for our conversation, perhaps, what do you want them to know about you that you think is important at the start?

[0:01:10] KIB: Yeah, it's such a nice question as well, because I think what often is very important to know is everything but work, mainly the kind of story of how people came to where they are at the moment. Like many, it starts in my childhood. And I think there are two things to kind of tell that make me the person who I am today. One of them is, I grew up in the 1990s in the Netherlands with parents who loved to travel the world. They've done so a lot before I was born. But ever since I was brought into this planet, they just took me with them. I've been seeing quite bits of the world from a young age onwards. And I think exploration has always been part of who I am. I love going to the most remote, unfamiliar places on this planet because I really,

really want to learn and understand, and also because I'm fascinated by people. That's the one thing.

The other thing from my childhood and upbringing is that my mother, she used to work as a special needs teacher, so children with educational needs, disabilities that required different kind of education system. As a kid, I already saw what it was like if it's not as easy to study and learn, nor – I come from a very, very lucky position in the sense of how I grew up, the country I grew up, where I grew up. But, of course, even in the same country, in the same neighborhood, there are kids who don't have that luck.

I think it got a very realistic view of the beautiful sides of life, but also really the hardships that the world brings and that humanity faces. And so people always ask you, like, "What motivates you and what makes you angry? And for me, that's always been inequality and unfair treatment. I think that comes partially from that upbringing to do a really, really fast speed up till now. My fascination in people and that drive to do something about unfair treatment and equality, and even the tiniest bit.

I studied international relations with a focus on conflict studies because I did not understand how people after a conflict live together again. What happens post-conflict? Peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives. What happens there? How can people turn that black page in history? And I especially focused on the Middle East and North Africa because that was the region I least understood in the world. I graduated about a decade ago. And ever since, I kind of worked in, let's say, the social impact field. This is a bit about me in a nutshell.

[0:03:42] RT: Okay. Let's crack open some of the nuts then because there's a lot there personally and professionally. And we're talking before we started the recording that there's a weave and a holistic sort of connective aspect to who you are and what you do as a person, not just you, but me and other folks. And so there's oftentimes no accidents here. But I think what led me to, among other things, one, have conversations with you is it strikes me that who you are and what you do is more purposely designed these days and by accident. And so you have some orientations here about where you're headed and what you're doing, and I think that's useful for people as well. Let's kick that around a little bit.

But to do that, let's put a little bit of context in around the work that you do so that we can then swing back and forth here. You started an organization called The Adaptation Company. I'm curious about why you did that, and what it's about, and what you're trying to get done there in the world, because you are purposeful about bringing yourself to the world through this platform.

[0:04:39] KIB: Yeah. About three years ago, I started freelancing by accident, completely by accident. But it's very interesting how even a path that you didn't intentionally chose still leads to something that makes sense after a while. What I do with my own company is that I help organizations get the work done that really, really matters. And I would love organization, and that's also what is kind of my mission, to help organizations become more adaptive in the way they work. They're really, really able to navigate everything that happens around them. Because as a conflict analyst, I am very much aware that today's context can become completely different from tomorrow's context. If you write a proposal today on how you want to make a certain change, the reality can be that tomorrow that plan is no longer useful.

In that mission of organizations becoming more adaptive, I also like them to become more collaborative in the way they approach the work. And basically, for people who do really important work, also work that's frustrating, work that's super stressful, work that is also very tiring, talking about conflicts, that's depressing, right? And working in that context and on these issues. I also would like them to kind of get the busy work out, get the work to matter more. Get the stress out, get the frustration out, so that when they're at work, they're actually able to do the things that actually matter.

And as I said, I didn't start freelancing intentionally and deliberately. But now, after three years, things are really falling into place. I do so sort of from four different angles. One of them is that I come in an organization as a project manager, to really help organizations for A to Z. Get something going, get something done. The second thing is I come in as a facilitator, guiding the conversations that are needed. Thirdly is as a community builder. Helping organizations bring the people together, convene the people, and build communities around the people that should be part of the conversations and should be part of the processes. And then the fourth way is around ways of working.

Actually, how do we do the stuff that we do? Because often it's very clear what organizations do. The technical experts are there, the vision is there. But how are we going to get there? And I advise organizations on how to do that on a team level or programmatic and project level.

[0:07:15] RT: When I was getting ready for our conversation and I was looking at your four elements, the question that came up for me was, is there one of them that tends to be the lead that finds your way into an organization? My background assumption here is project management is kind of a cognitive analytical process that lives outside of us as a flow and a process. Whereas facilitation, community building, you're getting into the hearts and souls of individuals in the collective community, et cetera. And that can be a little more difficult point of entry as opposed to establishing relationships and trust through a context like project management. That's my assumption. But I don't know if that's the case. I'm just curious. For you, which of these ways tends to find you into the organization, or does it even matter?

[0:08:05] KIB: It's a very, very good question because I kind of see it as a manual of options. And I'm just telling organizations, this is what I could potentially do for you. Let me know where it is that you need the assistance and the support. It really, really varies. Some organizations just really need someone to get things done, so project management it is. But of course, because – and I come in as a project manager. I still facilitate, right? Because every gathering, every meeting, every conversation needs some sort of facilitation. But I also help them with the ways of working because we're going to design a structure around how we're going to get this project going that also involves these ways of working element. Even though I come in for one specific thing, I of course bring the rest in when I think it's useful. As for the question, in a couple of words, no, there hasn't been one single entry point. It's really around what organizations need.

[0:08:59] RT: I want to get into the slight facilitation weeds here for a little bit. And I say that because – well, for a couple of reasons. One is I think that that is oftentimes in my experience the work that you're sort of on a wire without a net, because you're managing a room of people to some place and trying to help them journey themselves. And you're more like a sheepdog and a herder than it is a guide and a leader. What do you know about facilitation that matters? That if you'd say these things need to be present, I need to be present in a certain way. There's

structures and processes that need to be present in order to have a chance to help people move in some direction that matters to them, that they're not getting to on their own.

[0:09:44] KIB: Yeah. Well, in your introduction, you mentioned let's also talk about failure. Why don't we do that right away? Because I think that will clarify a lot. One thing that I really learned for me as a person, as I've said, is I think everyone has their own style and their own needs. I'm of the kind I really want to be well prepared. I want to understand, even before going into the room, I want to have an understanding what's actually happening in a team, in an organization, in a network.

And of course, you talk to a couple of people who are the organizing team of whatever gathering is happening, but that honestly doesn't give the full picture. If possible, I would really, really like to have, even though if it's only a short 15-minute conversation to get a sense of what's happening, like a one-on-one. This is confidential. This won't get out of the space that we're in. I really want to have your honest input.

Talking about failures, there's one time that I worked with a leadership team, and it was one person I couldn't get a hold of in the preparation, in that phase, and run up to it. And yeah, that showed because I had sort of a relationship with everyone, I had an understanding of who they were, what they were facing, what got them really mad as a person, both in general, as well as a teamwork, what they desired. But there was just one person I'd never met except for a picture on the website, and that's what I noticed. If you don't have a complete picture, for me, that's, "Oh, my god." All the insecurities I have as a facilitator, they come up right there and then. That's for me to have a proper understanding. And of course, you won't go below the surface. It's impossible as an external in that short period of time, but at least have an understanding of what's going on from all the perspectives. That for me is really, really essential.

[0:11:47] RT: All right. There's people who listen to podcasts who are facilitators.

[0:11:51] KIB: Yeah.

[0:11:51] RT: I need to represent them here in this little vignette you just gave.

[0:11:54] KIB: Okay.

[0:11:54] RT: What did you do to compensate for that, given that you had a voice in a room, you didn't have information on, and now you knew that was having an effect? How did you manage that?

[0:12:06] KIB: Great question. To be honest, I don't think I handled this well, because this is the one thing. If everyone asked me to give a facilitation failure, this is my to-go-to case study. Because in my attempt to make her – because she also arrived half a day later. There were all kind of issues happening that I wasn't aware of. I tried, in the breaks, during lunch, to build some kind of rapport, to have an understanding of who are you, this person I've only seen on the website. But of course, lunch and breaks are also for them as a team to get together and just have some chats and informal conversation. Don't want to do the, "Hey, what's your story?" kind of thing.

I think what I did and what I really learned never to do again is to overcompensate, try to make her be part of the conversation way too much. It became more a focus on her instead of a focus on the entire team. Yeah, that was a great learning not to do this again. I'm also, by the way, a big, big proponent of talking about failures because I think we can learn way more from that than any kind of, "Oh, I'm so amazing at this facilitation gig. And I'm also quite the biggest critic of myself in the world." Those go hand-in-hand.

[0:13:26] RT: And I want to go to – you said something here about being organized. And I want to talk a little bit about that from the context of doing work. But I want to start with a story that you and I met, I'm going to guess about six years ago. I can't even know if it was pre-COVID or after COVID. Somewhere in there. Way back when.

[0:13:46] KIB: Pre-COVID.

[0:13:46] RT: You were working for the Hague Academy, and I was working for you. I was with Matt Barnaby, and I was working for you. And I didn't know you. You and Matt knew each other. And I think he'd done work with you in the past. And so we come into this room and we had some time to get to know – you and I connected a little bit, not a lot. And often, we went and we

got done, and we did whatever our debrief was. And when Matt and I were on our way out and moving along, I'd probably never told you the story. I said to Matt, I said, "That is the most organized woman for a client I've worked with in the last seven years. Just stellar in every way, shape or form, holding space, keeping track of time, having a touch with what's going on in the room, tending to your team, and tending to the people who are doing the work, and managing it all with a kind of style and flair. And has stayed with me ever since as a kind of an emblematic way in which holding space in a room can be done well, and the consequence is positively that it has on the people who are trying to do the work. I'm going to put you on the here a little bit. I want to know how in the world you know how to do that, all right? I can still learn from you.

[0:15:08] KIB: Oh, how I do that? My initial thought is that wherever I go – and this is a blessing and a curse at the same time. But wherever I go, I am so aware of my surroundings. I see everything. I once did a little game with a friend who didn't believe me. He said, "I can just change one small thing in your living room and you won't notice." And I told him, "I will notice because I make snapshots of my surroundings." Even if I see a participant in my left eye corner kind of bowing down, I'm like, "What's happening there?" And then I see someone on the right side corner laughing. I'm like, "Okay, what kind of laugh is that?" It's super tiring, but it helps as a facilitator.

By the way, living room story, I had to close my eyes. He changed something in my living room. I think he swapped two books. And I was like, "You swap those books." It helps when it comes to facilitation. It's not so nice if you want to relax on a weekend, and you're still very much aware of everything that's happening around you.

[0:16:12] RT: All right. People who listen are – a lot of people are facilitators. Let's give them some coaching, some tips, some ideas about how to build the capacity of being present, notice what's going on in the room. What do you know that you can lean on when you walk into a room of people that will be useful to keep things moving as a facilitator?

[0:16:32] KIB: Yeah. I don't want to worry about anything but the people. I make sure that when the organization comes in and make sure that my sanitation toolkit is there, that technology is working, that the catering knows what they're going to do when – that everyone knows where the toilets are, all of that. That needs to be taken care of.

And I'm also a firm believer that the moment people enter the room, that's not the start of the experience. There is something that has happened before. Ideally, I've been able to talk to everyone. But if I haven't, there's at least an email for me sort of setting the tone of what is happening, what's going to happen, what they can expect, what I expect, et cetera, et cetera.

When everything has been taken care of, I can kind of be a host in the beginning. When people are coming in, I want them to feel comfortable, and I want them to already feel connected. It's about personally welcome everyone and not me still hanging up the posters or the pens. That's done. So I can really be present with people. And it's about those kind of informal chat chats, check-ins, "How's your travel? How have you been?" Da-di-da-di-da. And I really think it helps to get a sense of the dynamic in the room when people not only enter and do the traditional find your seat, get some coffee and tea. But they enter and they're immediately put to work.

And it sounds really harsh, like, "Oh, count those four people. Just get arrested." Might have traveled there. It's not the kind of hard labor I'm imagining. It's the communication that I want to get started among them. That often means that there's some sort of very low-key kind of soft-landing activity that kick-starts conversations between participants. Imagine you come into the space, I welcome you, and I was like, "Well, if you would like to, there's a check-in question over there with some post-its. Have a thing. Write something down if you want. And if you feel like it, start exchanging with someone else perhaps you don't know yet about your answer." And that has been such a nice way for people to land softly and already connect to a person that they might not know. Because I think getting voices in the room allows people to become way more comfortable and confident in participating during the rest of the gathering, or the session, or the workshop, or whatever it is. But it also allows me as a facilitator to already get a sense of what's going on in the room and what kind of characters are on it.

[0:19:14] RT: Mm-hmm. Fair to say then that when you start a project and you reach agreement with your client that you're going to do some work, the work begins at that point with the participants.

[0:19:25] KIB: Yeah.

[0:19:25] RT: And not before they ever get in the room. There's things that you're going to start doing with them in some way, shape, or form that gets them ready, so when they walk in the room, that's not the cold start that began earlier before they were actually there.

[0:19:38] KIB: Exactly, exactly. Because if you only talk about with, let's say, the client or the team that's organizing stuff, you miss 90% of the information. Yeah.

[0:19:49] RT: Right, okay.

[0:19:49] KIB: Get everyone involved right from the start.

[0:19:52] RT: Okay. Let's drop the work thing for a second here. We'll come back and we'll tie it back together. I want to go back to your intro of yourself about how you were raised, and the diversity of experiences, and seeing the world. I know that you've carried that forward all the time. You're a traveler. And so let's talk a little bit about – and particularly, the places where you have had interest, the Middle East and developing countries. It's a bit of a crazy time in the world. And so share a little bit about what you see out there and what matters to you. What catches your attention? Maybe places you think you could be useful out there in that part of the world doing who Kelly is and does. How do you see it right now?

[0:20:36] KIB: Well, that's a big question.

[0:20:38] RT: It is. I need a really simple answer, too, okay?

[0:20:43] KIB: Right, right. Let me start by what I can do in the regions. I would say very, very little. And that's because I don't believe me coming back to Lebanon, a country that has a very special place in my heart, where I went during my master's to do field work, or at least to research post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives. What civil society was able to do on a local level, bringing groups together, given that there was no sense of accountability or justice after the civil war. And also, that's a very segregated society.

The people I've met there were incredible. The facilitators there, that's literally why I'm facilitating, because I saw people holding the space a hundred times better than I will ever do.

Because they were in those – and I'm talking about local facilitators, Lebanese facilitators, Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians, it doesn't matter, but people who really, really understand the culture. They were bringing groups together of youth, because I think that's a great, great group, an age group to start with, very tense conversations. Because there's so much pain and there's so much trauma, so much history, but very little organic encounters between groups.

And then I'm talking about because of different religions, because of different socioeconomic status, because of different neighborhoods where people live. But once you bring these groups together, you need to be skilled. You need to be so incredibly skilled for both groups to kind of, in Dutch we say, smell each other. Have a first sniff at who the other person is. Because, of course, during the first meeting, you can't start talking about, "So what happened to you? What happened to you?" No. It's a magical process. And I saw them at work, and that's why I was like, "Wow, facilitation."

But it also reminded me once again, because I went back to Lebanon the second time to improve my Arabic, which at the moment is nearly non-existent, unfortunately. But I realized you need to understand a context like no one else. And that includes language. Me as a Dutch person going to Lebanon, back to Lebanon to do the work, doesn't make sense. Yes, I studied the region. Yes, I know a bit about the culture. I've lived there. But I think it's also about being humble enough to realize that that's not where I should be. To answer a very big question and a couple of words, again, that's not my place. The Middle East is not my place. What I can, of course, do is support organizations that do the amazing. And that's also something I'm way more comfortable with at this moment in life.

[0:23:33] RT: Interesting answer. Interesting, that's not a very useful word here. It's a provocative answer because I think there's a – in our world of facilitating, coaching, teaching, there's a lot of hubris that my knowledge is sufficient enough and broad enough and depth enough experience that I could drop anywhere in the world and probably be helpful and useful. And you're pushing back on that assumption that there are deeper elements at play that can't be circumvented just by experiencing a narrow technical field of consulting, or coaching, or something like that. What does that leave you then in terms of where you do the work?

[0:24:11] KIB: Yeah.

[0:24:11] RT: I mean, you've committed yourself to this kind of thing. Where do you go?

[0:24:16] KIB: Maybe to nuance my answer a bit in a sense that I do think we can bring value, but I don't think I'm the person that can bring most value. I think that's the difference. For example, if an organization asks me to train the trainers on facilitation, I'll gladly do so if I don't know anyone else already in the country who does the work there. But there's always this need for tailoring and making sure that it fits the local context. But it does bring up a very interesting question and sometimes a dilemma.

For example, I've been asked to come to Kenya to facilitate a team gathering. So many questions come up. First of all, Kenya, huge country. I know a lot of Kenyans who are incredible at what they do. There must be a local facilitator that can do the work, right?

[0:25:09] RT: That's what I'm thinking.

[0:25:11] KIB: Yeah. Also, a compliment to me that they want to fly me all the way across the world. But that's the second dilemma, right? I'm going on a plane to the other side. Well, not the other side of the world. To Kenya to facilitate a couple of days. That just does not make sense. I think it's very good to be more intentional with that. Am I the right person? Or is this an ego thing? And of course, I really wanted to go to Kenya. I've never been to Kenya and I already saw myself going to the Safari afterwards. I go, "Of course." But I think it's good to ask those questions in terms of local knowledge. Is there? Use local knowledge, but also the whole CO2 impact of flying there.

Yeah, still is not an answer to your question. I've been thinking about this a lot. And it doesn't mean I only want to work in the Netherlands. It's, of course, the country I know best. It's where I was born and raised, the language I speak fluently. But I've studied international relations for a reason, right? Yeah, the constant internal conversation, let's say. What I'm now doing, I work with a lot of organizations whose headquarters are in Europe who do amazing work elsewhere, but who really, really work with local partners and then support organizations, sort of capacity strengthening, so they can do the actual work on the ground.

[0:26:36] RT: Okay. When you left the mothership of an organization to strike out as a freelancer. But let's start just with that transition first before anything related to work. What surprised you about being on your own? And yeah, let's start with there. What surprised you about it? Kind of the area where if I'd known this, I might not have done it.

[0:26:59] KIB: Oh, if I had known anything about freelancing, I wouldn't have done it. I was so ill-prepared, but I think that was a blessing in disguise. Because had I known, I don't think I would have the guts to do it. The reason for me was I left the organization, I quit my job not knowing what I wanted to do next. But that's a recurring theme in my life. That's always how I've done things. I wasn't really afraid about that. Also, because I had savings.

Let's be honest, savings make a life a lot easier. I don't have to go back to live with my dad, right? Pandemic savings. And I had no clue. And it was actually Matt who kind of threw this fellow founder, reached out to me saying, "Hey, I heard you quit your job." And I was like, "How do you know?" Because I haven't told a lot of people. And he's like, "Well, the Hague is a small city. But I actually need someone with your background." And that's actually how it started because they gave me a contract for the first half year. And I was like, "Well, at least I can figure out whether this freelancing thing is something for me. Because by the time, I only had, what, seven or eight years of work experience. That's not, in my field at least, a moment where a lot of people start freelancing. Normally, it's after three decades of niche experience.

I think a lot of things surprise me about myself. I think a lot of things can be surprising on freelancing itself. But I was confronted with the fact that I actually love knowing what to expect. And I love having a sense of security. And I love stability. Well, freelancing is one thing, neither of these three things. In all honesty, it's taken me at least two years to navigate the uncertainty and not knowing. I think that was most surprising in a way, sort of the confrontation with myself.

[0:28:50] RT: Let's stay here. Because a lot of people do some version – I know in my life, I've worked with a lot of clients who have left their organizations because they thought, "I could do a consulting or freelancing thing," et cetera. And they're woefully unprepared for it. And within very short period of time, they've returned to some kind of stability of a predictable life in an organization. And you do reach those moments of truth where you have to decide, "Am I cut out for this? Or do I return?"

And no shame in returning. But it has to be an honest conversation with self about – because you understand now what's really at play here and what it takes to make this thing work. How did you address that for yourself when you realized the full breadth of what was involved here to make this thing work, and you're in it, and you kept going? What was that reflective process like? What were you seeing? And how did you sort of step up to keep going with something more than what you brought already?

[0:29:46] KIB: The realization that I couldn't do it on my own. And that is very counter – not counterintuitive. But it goes against my nature. Because I think I asked my dad the other day, "What is one thing that you wanted to teach me?" Right? "What is one of the values that you wanted to instill in me?" And he was like, "Independence." Which is great because now I solo travel and see the world on my own. But it also means that I'm so used to doing everything on my own, or thinking that I have to do everything on my own. And freelancing is the one area. Even though it seems like you're a one-woman show, it's anything but.

There was a moment that I did not like freelancing at all. It was like, "I think I have to go back." That was last year, actually. One year ago, exactly. I was like, "I need to go back and have a team around me, have structure, and just have people tell me what to do." And then I realized what I actually miss is having people around me that I can brainstorm with that can help me get unstuck. And that's where community is coming. I'm such a big fan of communities. Whether it's freelancing communities, whether it's community for female entrepreneurs, it doesn't really matter. But those are the kind of spaces where you can ask for help.

I did kind of reverse entrepreneurship or reverse freelancing. I just started a couple of days after I was being asked to join a team. I hadn't even registered my own company, and I just started. And it was the greatest landing ever, because you already have an assignment, and you're not officially even set. Then the real work comes in, right? Because what are my services? What are my offerings? What do I actually have to bring and contribute? But also, how does everything work behind the scenes? Administration, the bookkeeping? Then my, yeah, least favorite thing in the world, sales. Making people kind of – or convince people that who you are is what they need, or what you present is what they need. And even the tiniest questions. Like, "How have

you done it when you're stuck and you don't know what to do?" And that's why I love communities.

Every time someone comes up to me and asks, "What's the first thing that I should do? Because I'm just going to start freelancing." Find your communities, find your people, find your tribe, find the people that can help you think. Because, yes, you do freelancing on your own. But behind the scenes, there's a whole community that supports you.

[0:32:19] RT: And what are some of the required elements of the tribe that you're trying to plug into to make that work? Because there's lots of tribes, there's lots of communities. Your experience now is – if somebody is listening and says, "Okay. I want to nudge out there." What would you coach them on about what are the attributes or elements that you think you should be searching for the tribe that you can plug into?

[0:32:41] KIB: People who are willing to have the honest conversations. People who can actually share the good, the bad, and the ugly of what they've been through, who are not ashamed about that, and who are willing to let you learn from them instead of having to reinvent the wheel. Because we all know these sort of networking places or networks where you go and everyone is the most successful person in the world. Well, those aren't the spaces that are going to help you, right? Because it feels more like competition than support or collaboration.

And I think I've been very lucky here in The Hague. We have a couple of wonderful communities that I think, as a sort of foundational value, have support. If you're not here to support and help and get each other unstuck, this is not your place. And that's wonderful. Because in the beginning of our conversation, I shared a facilitation failure. I am so okay with sharing my failures. And it's also more fun in a way than share my successes because they come from a very Calvinistic background. We don't talk about successes. It's also easier for me to talk about failures. And I think it's super helpful. I've learned a lot from other people just telling them, "Yeah, the worst thing that happened to them." And I'm like, "Don't do this." And, "Thank you so much for warning me."

[0:34:05] RT: I think you also build some robustness of trust in the community when you go first and share failures rather than successes. People get it instantly, "This is going to be a safer place to hang out than what I thought it was."

[0:34:15] KIB: Yeah. Yeah. In general. I think, also, when it comes to facilitation, as a facilitator, we're not just a process person. I'm very okay with also making fun of myself in a healthy way, or just bringing in something that I've experienced that did not work just to give a bit of a human touch to things.

[0:34:35] RT: Okay. You and I, when we were getting ready to do this, I passed a thought onto you, which I'm going to say to the public here, which is I find that you are one of the few people who somehow figured out how to make LinkedIn as a communication platform work. And I say that because, A, I think most people just don't know how to use LinkedIn at all. And then there's a subset for whom they turn it into some kind of weird marketing mechanism for something in a very direct way. You, on the other hand, are doing something on LinkedIn with content, and ideas, and provocation of questions. And Lord knows what else. But all I know is that's always cool when I see that you posted something. But it's an important platform. And you know something about how to make this thing work a little bit. So do you mind sharing some of your insights and understandings about how a platform like LinkedIn can be beneficial for you professionally?

[0:35:32] KIB: Yeah. Again, this has been through trial and error and a lot of mental obstacles. Because, yeah, LinkedIn, you kind of either love it or hate it, right? There's this one side of LinkedIn, which is all about, "Oh, I'm so fantastic. I've done this. Oh, transfer news." That's not the side that I love about it. I mean, yes, we should celebrate each other and each other's achievements. But I'm way more interested in the other side. Namely, staying connected, first of all, to an international network that I don't see every day. I think it's a beautiful way of keeping in touch with people you've met along the way. And I also think it's a wonderful platform to learn. And I think it's not used enough for that.

I think, literally, every person I've ever met has something to say that we can learn from. But, yeah, whether you use it or not, that's the big question. And I think through trial and error, I just started posting and kind of trained myself to not care as much anymore about the responses of

others. Of course, there's a very intentional crafting process of what I want to share, and how I want to share it, and why I think it's important. But what I really needed to learn is to not care about potential responses or lack of responses thereof.

And once I was able to hold on to that "I don't care", it led to the most amazing conversations. Because what I see happen a lot is I post something, a couple of people like it, or respond, or whatever it is. But the magic actually happens in the direct messages. People who've never interacted with any of my posts reach out saying, "Oh, I love that you're posting this. Can I use this tool in my work as well? How would you approach it?" And then that's a beautiful conversation because I'm really, really happy to help them, give them some facilitation tips, or how they can use it.

But in all honesty, I have a so-called "spartner", like a partner that I use for brainstorming and questions that we both have. She's also a freelancer. And I always ask her, like, "Every now and then, can you just check in with me and just ask, 'Are you still shameless enough on LinkedIn?'" And I need that question. Because if I feel I'm not shameless enough, I'm not even near where I want to be.

And just to say for the listeners who don't know me, I don't post shameless content or shameful content, but it's a nudge that I need to get over all the mental obstacles that I would say a lot of women my age have. Like, "What do other people think of me? Am I too visible? What's the potential backlash?" And all of that. Again, communities, or through a community, they are there to cheerlead you on. And that's beautiful.

[0:38:33] RT: Okay. You posted something the other day. And I think maybe this is in the context of what you're saying. You had this fantastic picture of a post-it note, or a Rolodex, or something that just said MAD on it.

[0:38:44] KIB: Yeah.

[0:38:45] RT: But that stands for something. But what I was intrigued by was the – I mentioned to you before we got talking, my father was in a newspaper business, and he used to coach me when I had to write papers. And he'd always say, "You bury the lead. You got to have the lead."

The lead is the start of the thing. You got to draw people into the conversation, into the piece you're writing. You bury the lead, they won't follow you."

And I read that, I saw this, and I instantly chased after whatever you were writing because of this provocational word in this image. And so, a little craft here, I think, for coaching for people on LinkedIn. What have you learned about how you present the thing you want to talk about, the thing you want to put in front of people visually and sort of in a concise way so that they stay with it long enough to decide if they want to go deeper? Otherwise, it's just noise. You know something now as a content director and an editor of some form to things you must do in order to provoke people into the conversation. What do you know?

[0:39:43] KIB: Yeah, very funny. I feel like I'm a LinkedIn content creator expert. I'm not.

[0:39:48] RT: You're dang close.

[0:39:50] KIB: Well, someday. Your dad was right. In a sense, there needs to be something that hooks people in, that intrigues extent. But that's a strategic part, right? Of course, the visual that's attractive, the hat line that works, that makes people want to read on. We can learn all of that, right? There are numerous people who have like 10-step plans on how to write amazing content.

The other part, the other side, I think, is more interesting and sort of the what of your message. And you already said it needs to be concise. Yeah. Because, unfortunately, our intention spans are so, so limited these days. I'm a person who writes a lot. You give me something, and I can write five paragraphs about it. I think that is the art to get out, "Oh, I got to kill your darlings." Get out every item that's not necessary, and really get to the core and make the core super clear. And of course, it helps everything that I write about is linked to one of the four aspects that I worked on.

That helps me to also give myself feedback. A, is this helpful, or is this just me trying to show off? It needs to be helpful. Because I don't want to add to the noise that's already out there. And then, yeah, the second question is how can I write it in such a way that it's at least slightly funny, but hopefully also plans the seat? And people, months, sometimes months down the line, they

reach out saying, "Remember you posted about this and this? I've used it, and it's super helpful. Thanks." I think those are the best messages to get.

[0:41:29] RT: Those are. Okay. I'm from the school that leading is a choice and an activity, not a position and a role. And it can come from anywhere, anybody, anytime. And history will tell us that's often how social change happens. How do you purposefully use yourself to lead in your life and in your work?

[0:41:54] KIB: That's such a good, but such a difficult question. I'm going to answer this super indirectly. Hope you'll forgive me. Yesterday I was working with a group of other freelancers, and I was kind of preparing for our chats. Not in the sense that we needed to be highly scripted, but I just wanted to read about your background because I kind of – like, "What was it again?" And also, about leadership.

I was working with a group of women, and I asked them, "What does leading and leadership mean to you? What are the first words that come to mind?" And it was so interesting because I actually give the same answers if that question is being asked. So I wrote it down. So power, influence, both physical, mentally, men, suits, hierarchical structures. And I think that is still – when we think about leadership, unfortunately, that is still what's a lot of – well, let me talk about my circle. What a lot of women in their early 30s think about leading and leadership.

Even though you taught me that supervised lesson, that it's not connected to role, leadership as in action. Years ago, or 2019, I'm still not able to kind of say, "Yes, I'm leading," which is fascinating. It means, Rick, you still have a mission. You still have a lot of work to do. But how would you – maybe can I ask you first. How would you say you're leading?

[0:43:36] RT: Well, let's start with the contrast that you're just described with this group of friends are these people you're with in the descriptors that they came up with, which is not surprising to me at all. But I'm also clear that those are all attributes that represent authority. And it just goes back to the fundamental premise, which is we've confused authority and leading ad nauseam for thousands of years. And in the structure of an organization, we need both. And the org chart is not a map of leading though. It's a map of authority. And each position has a position

description, and it actually expresses probably in very specific terms what the authority responsibilities are for that position. And they may even tangle it with some things about leading.

But if you're in your organization and you have a position description and you sit in a box in your organization, you quit today, and I take your place tomorrow, I inherit all that authority. And when you walk out the door, you don't have it. That's a description to say that we confuse this all the time. And that leading, it's hard to get our heads around it, I think, that leading is a choice and an activity that can come from anywhere. Because that puts the onus on me to stop complaining and do something. Use myself in some form for the thing I say I care about. That can be personally confrontational to my own wiring system.

Because I think what goes part and parcel with that is, in choosing to raise my hand to lead on something, I can get hurt. If you're in an organization, you can truly get hurt because you've now broken out of the scripted bonds of how this hierarchy works. But you can get hurt in the larger context because you're – I believe, whatever people have chosen to raise their hand on is the start of some kind of community or movement that they want to do in some way shape or form to create a change that they care about. And so you can't do it by yourself, so you have to figure out, "How do I get other people to come on this journey with me?" That's a learned skill.

We know how people – and we have so many role models about how they fostered movements of social change. We know it's doable. We know it's risky. But we know there's craft involved as well. And so we don't have to think and figure it out for ourselves. We can just do some research and reading and figure out, "What did Martin Luther King do? What did Gandhi do? What did Nelson Mandela do?" And those are the big ones. But in every community, there's people who have made a choice to do that and they're doing it in their own form, in their own way, locally.

I think that that distinction is the critical distinction that we need to keep a grip on. Because if we don't, we do get hurt, or we don't get anywhere. The last thing I'd say is I think it's a brilliant but important function that you have allies that you can sit with and talk with about the things you're going to do. I'm trying to lead on this X, and here's what happened, and here's how I got hurt. And those people can help me make sense of it, so I don't do damage to myself, but I learn from it. But we can also support each other for the next round of actions where there could be activity of something good happening and something bad happening.

The other thing I think that's important about that group is when something good happens, you've got somebody, a place to come back to, and celebrate, and replenish the juice, and acknowledge the sort of leading muscle that has been built because of that effort that you did. I stand on a higher place with more capacity and more wherewithal because of what I did, and I got affirmation and confirmation from this group. Which is to say, if you want to go alone, or you want to go far, go alone. You want to go big, go together. You need that. It's just essential.

[0:47:30] KIB: Yeah. It's beautiful in the way that you mentioned about allies and groups. It's connected to communities, right? Whatever we do, it's so relational. We're so in it together in a way. And I think, to still then answer your question, I really like what you said around training the muscle of leading. And I honestly believe that there are so many things that we can train like muscles. For example, being courageous, or being fearless, or being curious. There are all things that we can train.

And I think perhaps my way of leading is by training at this moment in time by training my fearlessness muscle. In a sense, doing the things that I'm really scared of. Every time I go on a solo travel, I'm like, "Why do I want to do this again? Why do I want to go to the other side of the world on my own with a backpack, without knowing the language, without knowing anyone?" And it's fantastic.

Other way I'm doing it is by putting myself out there. That's why, as a freelancer, you also need to show the work that you do. Even though I've been brought up in an environment that you only do. You do the work, you don't talk about the work. This is me trying to be fearless in the way of showing the work that I do. Because hard work won't tell the story in itself, right? I need to share.

It also means that I'm doing assignments that kind of scare me. Am I able to navigate that team, or that dynamic, or that project in that context? Someone the other day said, "If it doesn't scare you at least a little bit, are you even growing?" And I think that is such a good question to ask yourself.

[0:49:22] RT: Can't show it to you now. We've moved into a new house, and I've got stuff piled up here. But I was just going through it the other day. And my daughter who's now 31, 32, painted a thing in an art class that she gave me when she was in high school. And it says, "Everything you want lives on the other side of fear."

[0:49:41] KIB: Yeah, beautiful.

[0:49:42] RT: And I thought, "Man, I'm getting this from my 14-year-old daughter," and I'm thinking, "Really?" But I found it to be empirically accurate.

[0:49:52] KIB: Did she come up with it herself?

[0:49:53] RT: I don't know. But wherever it came from, it's incredible how often that bangs in my head when I'm confronted with something. And sometimes the fear is justified, "No, I shouldn't really do this. I could get hurt," you know? And other times it's like, "Oh, yeah. This is invented and made up. And what I'm going to do about it?"

We're kind of coming to the end. Let's end with a couple of things here. What are your gifts and talents? And you kind of spoken to them a bit. Just be tight and specific here. Brag a little bit. This is a place for that.

[0:50:25] KIB: My talents and gifts is that I really want to learn. I really want to understand. And that means saying yes to a lot of things. Private life as well as work lives. And by doing that, I'm being exposed to so many wonderful things. But I think being able to say yes and doing things that make me slightly uncomfortable on a daily basis is, again, it comes back to training that muscle. I think that's a gift that I'm really happy with. One that I need to train and one that doesn't come super naturally. And the ability to literally have a conversation with almost anyone just by asking questions. That's such a beautiful thing to do. And see what the conversation brings.

[0:51:14] RT: Okay. What's ahead for you?

[0:51:18] KIB: What's ahead for me? Nothing. That sounds really radical. I'm so used to living months ahead, years ahead. What I'm actually trying to do is – and it sounds very cliché, but to live now. And that means that I have to navigate a lot of internal restlessness because it's so easy to take the train to the other side of Europe and go on another adventure. But what I'm really trying to do at this moment in time is to be okay where I am and see whatever comes my way. That's maybe not the most adventurous answer. That's where I'm now.

[0:52:01] RT: No, I think it's a cool answer. Okay, so you get the last word here. Anything you want to say that you haven't said to be complete?

[0:52:10] KIB: Well, first of all, thank you again for reminding me about the difference between authority and leading and authority and leadership. I think that's something that an average person is not aware of. And I need to be reminded of it every single time. And then also for reminding us that, to be a leader, you don't need to be the Nelson Mandela of this planet. And I think that that takes away the pressure of, "To be leading means I need to do A, B, C." No, leading also means just leading by example, doing whatever it is that you want to try. And I think it often comes down to training something, whether it's a courage muscle, the curiosity muscle, or anything that's on the other side of fear. I think that's a beautiful way wisdom of your 14-year-old daughter at the time.

[0:53:03] RT: Thank you. All right. For listeners, we will put some links in the show notes for resources and ways in which you can get a hold of Kelly or things that you've got, your website, et cetera. Kelly, thank you so much for doing this. It's been really— it's really been fun.

[0:53:18] KIB: Yeah, it was. Thank you, Rick.

[0:53:21] RT: Take care.

[OUTRO]

[0:53:23] 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.

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