

EPISODE 14

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:05] 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]

[00:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and welcome back to 10,000 Swamp Leaders. The podcast is a leadership conversation exploring what it takes to lead and address complex, wicked, messy problems or what I call swamp issues.

Today is a cool day for me because I have a friend, a colleague, a good family friend, a professional colleague and friend, Dennis Vergne, who is a consultant in London, a Dutchman who's, I think I can say this, Dennis, has actually lived in the UK longer than you've lived in your homeland at this point in your life.

[00:00:52] DV: It is.

[00:00:53] RT: And I asked Dennis to come on the show after I figured out how to do this podcast well enough, because I didn't want to mess this one up. But mostly because I think he's a phenomenal consultant both in terms of outward-facing with the clients and also as a leader where he doesn't really want to have attached to himself. But he certainly knows how to form up a consultancy of people who get great work done. And so I want to ask him questions about how he does that and what his philosophy is of leading change.

So, Dennis, welcome to the show. and I'm going to let you just start by telling people about yourself, and then we'll go from there.

[00:01:28] DV: First of all, thank you for inviting me. I'm glad that kind of your swamp was almost dry and you couldn't find anyone anymore. And then you came to me and you got like –

In the Netherlands, there are plenty of people in the swamp below sea level. So you dragged me out. And here I am. So much appreciated.

Yeah. So I'm from the Netherlands. That explains the accents. That explains sometimes my double Dutch talk. It also means that I have some experience of interesting cultural activities in the Netherlands where people are proud of being meritocratic. And one way or the other where everybody stands at sea level and you can't actually put your head higher, otherwise it gets chopped off.

And so that is part of being Dutch. And I try to take that into the UK where, as you pointed out, I've been for a while. I am working in a consultancy called Basis, and a thing called Impact Basis, which is kind of the Dutch branch. And I worked for enormous amount of consultancies, 31 years as somebody recently calculated. And I can't still believe that. But I started that even as a student. I started doing some kind of consoles as a student. And that was a little bit strange because my first proper job was as a youth worker for the **[inaudible 00:02:51]**, otherwise known as The Hague municipality, a city in the Netherlands. Where, as a youth worker, it was my first proper job after washing cars and delivering newspapers, et cetera, where I got pension, where I was part of a foremost structure. It was part-time. It was still quite serious. And yeah, I really enjoyed that. Then I lost my way. I did some studies. That's always a mistake. Then I lost my way even further. I became a strategy consultant. Then I lost my way tremendously, and I joined one of the big consultancy firms who, just after I left, it had to change its name even. And then I found my way into London. This was around 2000, 2001, where I joined one of those firms that, for the first time, kind of did some Internet work. This was the first internet boom years. And we're trying to set up new companies. We're trying to change old ones, etc. And we had no idea what we're doing. But I also got exposed in that world, too, a thing called Agile. How do you do iterative development?

And then something clicked with me and I thought like, "Wait a second. This is exactly how I did my youth work so long ago." And then I slowly went from consultancy to consultancy until I was fed up and basically went like, "Let's set up my own," and to do more and more kind of public sector work that was of interest to me and I think is worthwhile. And essentially, really becoming that youth worker again right at the beginning, as I mentioned one interview, "People in their first jobs shouldn't really like it. It should be a terrible job. It should be awful. You should desperately

want something else." My first job was brilliant, and since that time I kind of, yeah, trying to get back to that.

[00:04:39] RT: We're in a conversation about getting back to your childhood, folks. That's what he's really saying here. So we'll just follow this road for a little bit. And somewhere in there is where – Somewhere in 2006 and '7 is when you and I first met. We met in a master's program at Oxford and **[inaudible 00:04:56]** on change. And I will say that there are many things that attracted me to you. But one of them was you had a willingness to try things live with clients that hadn't been actually tested in a safe space before. And that appealed to me because I'd been doing that myself. And I just didn't know too many people.

And just as a framing mechanism for people to listen and think a little bit about both what you do and a little bit about what I do, I harken back to the day that we did a one-day scenario planning project, you, me and Benjamin Taylor, for all the council libraries in the City of London. And for those people who know anything about scenario planning, the first thing you know is you can't do scenario planning in one day. It's not possible. It's not achievable.

And we didn't buy that conversation either because we thought we could do something useful, which I think we did think, and we actually did do. But also, maybe we're a little naive. I don't know. But there was something about doing that work in that situation with those people that produced something that was quite useful for them. We know some of the libraries actually acted on that, that enliven the idea of consulting. And for me, I decided I needed to keep hanging around with you because of the willingness you had to take risks in pursuit of helping clients.

[00:06:15] DV: And I thought you'd just like me. It's been hard to hear now, Rick.

[00:06:20] RT: Yeah.

[00:06:23] DV: You're just hanging around to learn stuff.

[00:06:25] RT: There is a like factor, too, for sure. But let's go there. So what is it about your nature that has you take these kinds of chances? Meaning, your view, I think, then and is still now, we're going to learn more about how we can help the client by doing some work with the

client even though we don't know exactly what we might end up producing. But we need to get at work and play with something real rather than talk about it. Where did that come from?

[00:06:49] DV: First of all, I think that we, as the generic professional consultants, kid ourselves and kid our clients way too often. We also say, "Yeah, yeah, this is exactly what you need to do," while crossing two fingers behind our back and then kind of closing our eyes. So if we're honest that we might have some processes or some ideas and maybe some facilitation techniques to help them, actually don't have exact answers, that's already a step forward. So that has come from work in public services and other places.

Where, take that example of the London libraries. So this is for greater London, all 33 kind of municipalities who are needed to work better together and figure out what to do with their libraries. They wouldn't have time no money for months-long scenario planning process. They had some outcomes that they needed. And we were very open with them to say, "Actually, we've never done this before. But let's give this a go." And they were happy to have a go. Now that needs some trust. That needs some honesty. That needs a whole bunch of other things maybe rather to ask those clients.

And then you are not secretly experimenting with them, but you're actually, yeah, jointly experimenting with something new. So you get everybody into the room and trying to figure it out. So quite often, this is how we do our work with clients. We don't necessarily have all the answers, thank God, or even pretend that we have. But we'll try to get into the room and try to experiment together with them to get to those right outcomes.

And when they realize, they don't always, that they're often dealing with real, complex, wicked problems, they also realize that they need everybody in the room. And you need to be inclusive about it. And if we then show up as the arrogant consultants, then we just alienate them, and we won't do good work. We really don't do good work. So how do you get into the process together? How do you roll up your sleeves together and bit by bit try to figure it out? Yeah, that doesn't sound like very sexy consultancy. But that's genuinely what I think we do.

[00:08:56] RT: Right. So sexy or not, what do you actually do then? If you don't come in with your fingers crossed behind your back, if you don't flash them with some fancy consulting terms, and you give them a white paper that nobody's ever executed on, and they're willing to say,

"Okay, you sound different. You even sound honest." What actually happens then? Take people a little bit down the road about how you then get to work with the client? What can they expect from you and your team?

[00:09:21] DV: Let's take an example of children's services. A local authority in the UK will have a lot of statutory duties to keeping children safe within their boundaries. Helping them, supporting them, whatever their issues are. Now, these folks who are working in there are incredibly busy, are incredibly stressed-out. If we come in and say, "This is exactly how you identify children that might be at risk. And this is what you need to do." They won't believe us, because it's not true. They know a lot better. It's been a while since I was a youth worker.

If you come in and you say, "We might be able to make changes faster that will help those young people and children because we have some expertise on the process of the change." And they're going, "Okay. Maybe. Let's give it a go." And instead of selling or trying to get them to commit to a 10-month-long project, they kind of say, "Well, let's try it out for a month."

And then in the olden days, it would be on a whiteboard with a whole bunch of Post-its up. Otherwise, we'll do it on Miro boards or other things online. And you're trying to work with them in different processes, where you say, "You know what? Over this week, which changes can we make?" Real agile system. Which changes can we act? Okay, great. What can we discover? And then maybe by week two, you got like, "Okay, what is a minimal viable service? What is a prototype that we can set up? What is a different way that we have one team or one individual who, one way or the other, does some interventions differently with a young person and their family?" But do it in a risk-free environment, yeah? Safe to fail. If you fail, we do the safe way.

And then they give it a go and we learn something from it. And some things will work. Some things will not work. But they've only tried it then for, I don't know, a day or a couple of days and then they try it again. And then we add things to it, we learn from it. And we add things to it.

So we are essentially getting organizations through much quicker learning cycles and conversation cycles and decision making cycles than they would usually do that. So changes that otherwise might have taken a couple of years will then be done in the space of a couple of months.

[00:11:32] RT: And when that process is happening, you and they are working together. You're not the consultants bringing in processes that you put in place. You're teaming with them, and they have to be active in in the work themselves in order for this to have any impact. Is that a fair way to say it?

[00:11:50] DV: And also, in an honest way where sometimes you have consultants who say, "You know what? I'm only a coach. I can't give you any answers." And if the answer is overt, or you have seen it before, you are allowed to go like, "Why don't you try this?" So we help with the process. But we also will say, "Well, yeah, here's an idea. And here's an idea." Yeah. But instead of forcing it on anyone, it's just one of the ideas that as a group we consider.

[00:12:20] RT: Okay. And so share with people – Because you've been at this quite a while. So share some successes. How this process that you brought into different services, what are some of the results that you've been able to help them produce the points to the effectiveness of the process you're describing?

[00:12:38] DV: Yeah. So it's not my success. Definitely, they did the real hard work.

[00:12:43] RT: Right. They did the work.

[00:12:45] DV: They really did the work. Yeah, by going out to a London authority, a municipality, a whole bunch of people will have been there because it's where Heathrow is. So they at least will have visited. These municipalities are 250,000, 300,000, sometimes 150,000, people kind of – Yeah, as inhabitants. And they have a reasonable size, and they they need to figure stuff out. So they figured a bunch of stuff out. They probably made savings as a byproduct of those changes of over 50 million pounds. But most importantly, they got – They help their folks a lot better. They help their residents a lot better.

Now, what is specific? So take a project, another project around homelessness. You can imagine that if somebody says, "I'm homeless. Can you help me?" It will take a while to see if they're really homeless or not. And then they get into temporary accommodation or emergency accommodation before they go like, "Yeah, this is right. You get the proper accommodation."

In this case, in some work with their teams, they figured out what they had to change and how they needed to change it. So instead of taking 90 days getting from somebody saying, "I might be homeless," to actually, "here is some accommodation where they, with their family, can be in a stable way," would otherwise take over 90 days. It was now three or four days taking it down to.

But that's purely on the basis of the commitments and the creativity of teams who are working there on the front line. It's not like – The old saying is you're either part of the problem or you're part of the solution. We often say, and you also say, you can only be part of the solution if you're part of the problem. And a lot of people in those services say, "You know what? Yeah, I need to change something. I need to do something. I need to help those folks out there. So, yeah, let's get everybody on board and figure this out."

[00:15:03] RT: This conversation, this podcast, is about leading or at least influencing. And you know my point of view on leading. There's a difference between leading and authority. They're not the same. Most organization charts are a map of authority. Not necessarily a map of leadership. Because everybody's had an experience where they looked up and said, "This is a time for leadership," and it didn't show up in there and they didn't experience it.

And then there's all sorts of experiences. I know you've had a lot of them yourself, where without the requisite authority, you still raised your hand and decided to lead on something. Meaning, you chose to try and get into some action to address some challenge. Maybe bring some people along. See if you can get them involved with that. Create a bit of a small movement and maybe something happen.

So you, as a creator of a consultancy, which means you attract other consultants to come in and join you in work. So what's your process? What's your thinking? What are you trying to do when you're trying to build a group of people so you can leverage more talent to have more impact? What the Dennis Vergne philosophy about what you want on a team so that you can do good work? Because you're effective at it. You've been successful at it for a long time. So it's not magic. Something's happening by some deliberate design.

[00:16:22] DV: So the first rule is don't lead.

[00:16:24] RT: Don't lead.

[00:16:24] DV: Yeah.

[00:16:25] RT: Say more about that first.

[00:16:26] DV: Don't be a leader. And we've been going on about this for the last 15 years together. I get itchy, the word leadership and all that. So I know. We all make a living out of this. So the principle around that is that leadership still implies hierarchy. And to some extent, it is a failure then of an organization that is well-organized, with purpose and with trust.

So if the organization doesn't have purpose and trust, you need leadership as a kind of a surrogate for it. That's – Sorry, Rick. But how do you enable this is a different things.

[00:17:18] RT: And, of course, my argument is I think you're saying you need more authority. But let's keep going. Let's keep going with this. This is good. This is good.

[00:17:26] DV: The way that's at Basis and before also with Benjamin Record and was organized was not out of I need the title of Chief Exec or whatever else title on my badge. But I looked around and got like, "Can I change the console that I'm part of from the inside?" And at a certain point, it just became too hard. Like, "Let's try it ourselves then." Because I want to do the work, the right work with the right people having some fun.

So better enable it myself just to have that, which also means that within the organization, people do figure stuff out together. And people are incredibly blunt and direct with each other. And I think you mentioned, and a lot of other people mention, it's like sometimes it's not really clear where is the leader or who's boss, official boss? And I had people who either interns or contractors who got like, "Yeah, where are you again, Dennis, in the organization? Yeah, are you reporting this guy. Who then reports to her?" And I go like, "No. Yeah. Who knows? Yeah."

So to some extent, we are trying to replicate a much more self-managing, self-organizing structure with a lot of innovation. There are a lot of people who love to kind of just try things out. Almost internally, prototype on it ourselves, because we need to keep our skills completely honed because we need to help those clients who are dealing with really wicked problems. And

they can only do it if they're less hierarchical. If they're incredibly hierarchical, they'll completely fail.

[00:19:13] RT: So I think it's important to be very explicit here, I think, in what you're saying, which is in order for Basis or Impact Basis to have real impact with clients, you must be operating the way you're advocating they operate. Not just because it gives you a practical experience that you can use. But it's an integrity issue, too. You're completely clean with what you're advocating that they consider doing because you're doing it yourself.

[00:19:39] DV: I will not mention names before I get sued. But a few big consultancies that I know gone into some other or puts out proposals, they say, "You know what? We can make your organization completely teal, very self-managing, etc."

And then you look at the consultancy itself, and it's incredibly hierarchical. And they go, "Like how can you implement something that you or yourself not?" Or working in a proper agile way. There are enormous amount of consultancies and training companies out there who try to help clients become agile. But when you scratch them a little bit further, you see what's there and how they're organized. They're not. So we really need to do what's on the tin or what we're trying to proclaim and have the authenticity. But it's also a way to stay sharp and to hone our skills.

Running workshops, you can ask anyone within Basis, Impact Basis, running internal workshops and getting stuff done yeah is incredibly hard. If you can get us organized, you can get anyone organized.

[00:20:52] RT: And I'm going to attest to that having been powered into having to do a workshop for you. I think mostly so you could laugh at me to see how it would go down. But I learned a lot. It was good.

All right. There's another interesting occurrence that we have actually not talked about in any detail, but I've been wondering about. So two plus years ago, Basis was doing the work that Basis has been doing for a while. You, and Matt Barnaby, and I set up a entity in The Hague called Impact Basis. And we had these ideas about global conquest through spreading these consultancies and doing all this kind of work. And then March of 2020, Covid hit.

And I've been fascinated. I'm interested in hearing from you what was going on for you, because you completely changed in a dynamic and significant way the focus, purpose and offers that Basis and Impact Basis were going to make based on the pandemic. I mean, it was a remarkable transformation. Remarkable body of adaptation. So take us through what that was like, because you saw something. You moved on it. You kept your team together. You kept the business alive in the face of this deal. And it took out a lot of other consultancies. And I think it's one of them the more remarkable stories. And I don't really know how you did it.

[00:22:18] DV: I mean, I'm not saying it out of humbleness or anything. But I didn't do it. The team did it. The team kept the team together, etc. Now, how the team did? I'm happy to talk about that.

[00:22:28] RT: Hang on a second. Because I love this part, because you're just like me. You're always giving me a hard time that I don't take credit for stuff. And you're the same way. I think that's why we're going – So yes, I agree with you. That's a better way to say it. The people need to know that's how you got through it, the team got through it. So what did you all do together? And how did you read the world and respond to it in specific forms that you thought the world will need this now, not that?

[00:22:54] DV: So first of all, the idea originally, which was an anti kind of Brexit move almost by setting up an office in the Netherlands, was to do public sector work, a lot of public sector work like we're doing in the UK, but then within the EU. And you then need to have a foothold in the EU. It turns out that the rest of the public sector in the EU goes like, "Yeah, any examples from Britain?" "We don't take that as an example." "You've done work in Britain? Yeah, that has no residence here. We're special. We're Dutch. We're Belgium. We're French. We're whoever. We're Danish. Yeah, we might learn from a case study. But, yeah, yeah. But otherwise, yeah, yeah. Let's not use any of them as a great example. Definitely not the British. So, yeah. So that idea really didn't work out.

So we were moving into working for IGOs, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, international NGOs, where that's slightly different. And then, yeah, Covid hit. And all of a sudden, all our clients, all our public sector clients, any clients, some UNICEF work, others, they kind of said, "Sorry. Yeah. Can you call back again in six months' time? We have no idea where –" And they

were in emergency work. They were just trying to keep people alive, trying to get masks, trying to do whatever it was needed. And they themselves had to figure out how to work from home.

So we had a choice as a team to kind of go like, "Okay, what do we do now? Do we take government grants and go on furlough? Or do we try to do something else?" Now, we kind of said, "You know what? Let's take our own medicine." And this is something that a lot of organizations do when there is a lot of chaos around. You have very quick feedback loops. You try a lot of things out, and you experiment like crazy.

So the whole team got going. Okay, why don't we, yeah, very quickly learn how to do things online? Where do we find our partners? Okay. We found some great partners. How do we do this? How do we build our skills? Let's give stuff for free and build our skills. Let's do it ourselves." And every single day we had a morning meeting and say, "Okay, yeah, what did we try yesterday? These were the ideas we tried yesterday. What might work? What might not work? How should we pivot it? What are we going to try out today? Or what are we going to continue to try out that might have worked?"

And we've thrown away a lot, and we kept on going with other things, and we just kept on practicing, the volume of it, the practice of the volume of it. And we figured out that a lot of the good facilitation skills, a lot of the agile skills that we have, because agile teams often worked in dispersed teams already. That those processes, yeah, could be translated really well online. But we needed the skills to do this, to have that. And we needed to get that credibility out that we could actually do this. So with Judy Rees and Steve McCann, we joined up. We worked on their credibility. Judy Rees has experience from before. Yeah.

[00:26:19] RT: So explain to people who Judy and Steve are.

[00:26:21] DV: Judy and Steve are a couple of experts in online work, and pre-Covid. Yeah, for many years, Judy was one of the people who I think probably ran the first unconference online even and has been working with – Working in the news and working in agile teams with lots of distributed teams. Steve worked in emergency worlds of NGOs and IGOs. And they, as a company, Rees McCann, figured out how to do things online. They became very busy. Our principles fit it. Our focus, our kind of mission fitted. And we started to work with them.

So we got credibility through them to do some of the work. Great. We also kept on practicing and tried to translate what we did for ourselves. And again, yeah, we went from, in agile terms, sprints of a day. What do we change every day? To sprints of a week, to sprints of two weeks. Because it was more predictable now. We could do things longer. It was less chaos, chaos involves.

And clients came to us, our old clients, and said, "Oh, wait a second. We have enormous amount of people who are even hungry. We need to organize food banks. So we need to organize all kinds of things." You know how to organize stuff online. We have a whole bunch of people who, within children's services, yeah, who do not necessarily know how to interact with families and children now partly online, etc. Can you help us out?

And we generally closed. And we gave them a little try. We tried to work with them, etc. And then we got more and more kind of credibility And now it's turned into a whole business, to a significant business, to the extent that nobody wants to work from an office anymore. Everybody wants to work from home.

[00:28:09] RT: You're also not – You haven't included yet that you played a significant role in the evolution of technology platforms for holding functions online. Bear in mind, not long ago, everybody was either on Teams or Zoom. That was it. And you all, through some network connections, I'm imagining, made some contacts with innovators who you helped co-create some more functional platforms for large group gatherings, right?

[00:28:37] DV: Yeah. So I think, at a certain point, everybody's looking for, "Okay, who are the experimenters in here? Who know a little bit more? And who are really willing to cooperate?" Instead of I– don't know. Yeah, you are a partner, and let's have five pages of a contract. So how we organize our interactions? No. No. No. With the agile mindset, you're saying, "Okay, you're a provider."

Take Remo, Welo in particular. Great platforms. They kind of said, "You know what? We don't know either yet. But we need users. And we need experimenters like you to help them figure it out and give us some advice and work with it."

So in that same mindset of, yeah, easy cooperation and easy exploration come great partnerships, especially when the world is a little bit in turmoil. If they would have knocked on the door of Accenture, they had to go through, I don't know, five different departments and sign I don't know how many contracts before they could start an experiment a little bit with them. With us, it was a few conversations.

[00:29:51] RT: So once again, your history and your repetition of practice in iterating through agile philosophy paid dividends under pressure in the pandemic to pivot and design new ways of working. So now we're stable. We got vaccines going on and all this stuff. Relatively stable. But it's pretty clear now that we're actually moving into a quasi-permanent state of hybrid work.

So you've been in this exploration for a long time now, two years. It's like years in Covid years. So what's your views on the future of work based on everything you've been doing? What's it look like, say, over the next few years for people?

[00:30:32] DV: So part of the problem is that during lockdowns, etc., those organizations who couldn't figure out how to work online, they've now given up and they kind of go like, "You know what? Yeah. Okay. You can you can work every now and then a day in the office, or two days, or three days in the office and the other days at home." But they haven't really figured out hybrid hybrids, or they haven't figured out proper online.

Now, one of the things that we experimented with and we thought was incredibly valuable was, during the start of the pandemic, we recognize that the human interaction, the connection that we have is of the utmost importance. That's the relationships, keeping the relationships and understanding each other needs to be at the forefront.

So we quickly understood that we, every single day, instead of thinking about the work, we also have to think about each other and check in with each other to give each other space. If somebody was a little bit down, then, yeah, give them their space, or help them, etc.

And the connection – And by the way, I want to thank Zoom, because they're still the one that shows kind of online, in terms of the timing, etc., connection, the best. I think it has prevented a lot of depression and a lot of – There is already a lot of mental damage done to the world. But, yeah, thank God for Zoom to make that a little bit less. But a lot of other platforms are not good

enough, are just not good enough yet. And I say yet. But also the practices of organizations to make sure you keep that human connection going.

Now, coming out of that, now in a hybrid fashion, those organizations that haven't figured it out yet might give up and go like, "You know what? We did online. Great. Somebody can sit on – I don't know, with Teams or whatever else at their home and every now and then do a meeting on Teams. And then other days they come home. They haven't properly thought about the practice on how do you, on a daily basis, connect with each other? And even put extra effort in to really ask, "How are you? How are you really?" Let's do measurements on how you are between one and ten. Yeah? How are you really feeling? Oh, I'm feeling like this."

And the moment that you get a culture where people actually share that kind of stuff and they share what's on their minds and they had a crappy, I don't know, morning, or they had a crappy evening, or they had a brilliant evening, if they really share their personality in their individuality and everything else. Yeah? Online can be more connecting than, every now and then, passing by in the office.

[00:33:28] RT: So this is wonderful that you're describing this. So I'm going to share the situation you're very familiar with because we're both in the same alumni group for the graduate program we did. And for those people who are listening who don't know, that group is made up of members from 20 cohorts. Meaning the program's been around for 20 years.

And prior to Covid, that group would meet twice a year for about a three-day conference, Paris and Oxford. And we thought that was great. It was great. We're meeting in-person. We're having a lot of good times. Covid – And I agree with you. I think Zoom saved us. And we ended up holding initially just gatherings for people to connect because they were hurting. And then this group, they quickly said, "If we're going to meet, let's learn something." So that evolved a little bit.

But I've arrived at a place to think that this community that we're part of is closer together because of that process than we ever were when we were actually meeting in person. And I agree with you that – And we've held all of them essentially on Zoom. And I agree with you that I still think that that platform gives us the best shot to stay sticky together, if you will, through this period of time than anything else. We tried a few other things and we just kept coming back and

coming back. But fundamentally, we are closer together as a community because of that process than we ever were in person. Now we're going to go back to in-person. But in our case, just a community. But we will now remain a combination of live gatherings and online connections. We won't give that up ever.

[00:35:05] DV: It's simple, but it's very difficult to get there. One, yes, you need the right technology. And you can buy that. But then the second thing is you got to have the right practices and routines in your organization, in your community, to be able to make the effort to properly connect and do all these things.

[00:35:26] RT: Just give people two or three of those things that are important. If you got the technology thing in hand, what are the top three things you would say, "You got to do these things if you're going to make this work." Maybe you got more than three. But give them something specific.

[00:35:40] DV: Let me explain the practice that we do. And we keep on going with it even now that we're well out of lockdown. We, every morning, at nine o'clock, there is a half an hour session where most people can make it. If they can't make it, they can't make it. But it's not compulsory. But people will like to go there. Where the first 15 minutes is just checking in with each other and just having a chat and seeing, "How was your last evening?" But it's a little bit facilitated. Like, we check-in. Everybody needs to talk. And everybody needs to express. And if somebody is being a little bit quiet, "Like, is everything okay, Rick?" And just see what's happening.

Now, that's 15 minutes of just nonsense talk. And we can talk about – Or properly checking in with each other. Or we can talk about the football. It could be anything. And then the next 15 minutes is, "Okay, what are you going to do today? And are you blocked on anything? Do you need some help on anything?" And then we get into work mode. So we shift from the informal into the work mode. And then, yeah, the work starts.

We do exactly the same at the end of the day at five o'clock, but the other way around. We then first 15 minutes talk about what have you done? How was it? Any good things? Any lessons? Any frustrations? Any success stories to tell? Or, yeah, whatever it might be. Or any practical things that might be of use? And then we go into, "What are you doing the rest of the evening?"

Or, Huh? I hear you're trying to train for X. How's this going?" Whatever it might be. And then we go into the informal.

So we have a routine of twice a day checking in with each other. We also have a routine where we often sit in a virtual office. That sounds a little bit strange. So the second thing I can recommend is to be really clear when you're doing your deep work and you say, "You know what? I really don't want to be disturbed." Yeah, if you ping me or whatever else, it's got to be really urgent. And then you probably need to phone me. But otherwise, yeah, I'm in the zone. I'm working."

And it might be that I'm in the zone working not just by myself, but in a workshop or whatever else, doing something for clients. Then you have a middle thing where you say, "You know what? I'm doing some operational stuff. And yeah, a bit shallow work. But, yeah, if you really want to, you can disturb me." And you can physically sit in the open space in that bit at a table and then somebody can join you at the table and all the videos go on.

[00:38:30] RT: So you're referring to a technology platform that –

[00:38:35] DV: A technology platform, yeah, yeah. It's called Welo. You have other versions. We use Welo. And then you can also go into another area, which is the kitchen area. And if you place yourself there, it's just like you're in the office and say, "You know what? I'm just having a coffee. Yeah, I'm keen to talk. Yeah." And then people will go like, "Hey, Dennis. What's up? I wanted to –" or it might be a serious question. "I wanted to ask you this." Or, "How are you doing?"

So you have different zones of working almost from deep work, really concentrated work, to lighter work, to I'm not really working. I'm just having a cup of coffee or checking some stuff out. And people know that. People know the signs. So similar to, yeah, some open office cultures where if you put your headsets on, people know that you're working. If you've got your hands up, you might disturb them. If you go to the kitchen, yeah, you're definitely up for a chat. So we're replicating that. Also, while everybody's working from home, or a cafe, or wherever else it is.

We also we also have – We realized recently that people were not taking up breaks. So we have a break celebration kind of channel on Slack where people are posting ideas for breaks. They're lying in the grass. They're playing with their dog. And there are all kinds of other things. So people really take a proper mental break from their screen and just go off and about.

[00:40:06] RT: So you're deliberating your design in structure, in timing of these activities to keep people stuck together. Anything else that you see in the future here for how people are going to work together based on your experience?

[00:40:19] DV: So the world, a lot of organizations have being sleepwalking into a big revolution in their organization.

[00:40:27] RT: What's the revolution?

[00:40:29] DV: A lot of people don't actually want to go back into a command or control my bosses are looking over my shoulder if I'm working hard enough in my big open plan office. A lot of people really don't like that anymore. And there are being so many bosses who say like, "Yeah. How do I get my employees back into the offices? Do I force them? Do I not?" There's a revolution bubbling up. People don't want to go back anymore. People will change jobs for that same reason. People will now change jobs. They have tasted something else. And they want a different way of working.

So I think the hybrids or the online working thing, it's not a technology thing. It is not even a work practice thing anymore. It is a way how organizations are completely changing and being organized differently. Less command and control, less hierarchical. Lots more delegated teams. A lot more easy, frequent contacts with lots of people. Much more inclusive, instead of, "No, no. I'm always with these colleagues." But, yeah, it's still a practice. That's what we opened up now. The genie is out of the box.

[00:41:45] RT: And I think what you're also inferring here is that organizations are learning that maybe the degree and the dose of middle management was way overstated. Not a value add to the organization in a lot of cases, in the real-life, and the pandemic have revealed it for its shortcomings.

All right. So we're kind of coming down to the end here. So a question around anything given our history together, what should I have asked you that I didn't know enough to ask you?

[00:42:13] DV: I'm always tempted to go into ideas and concepts. And what I like about your podcast is when people tell stories. I'm not sure I told enough stories. So what kind of story is important? I think that's what you haven't asked. What is your light motif in terms of story in your life? And I don't have the answer. I'm asking that question, but I don't have the answer.

[00:42:43] RT: Ask the question again.

[00:42:44] DV: What is the story in your mind of your life that you thought is the most important in your professional life?

[00:42:50] RT: All right. So why don't I take a shot at that and then that'll give you time to think?

[00:42:53] DV: Yeah, go for it.

[00:42:54] RT: So what is the story in my life that I think I heard you say basically informs my work, or I'm using my work to –

[00:43:03] DV: What's that pivotal moment where things just changed a little bit? Otherwise, you would have done this. And now you've done what you've done. What's the narrative behind that?

[00:43:14] RT: What it immediately comes to mind, and listeners are probably going, "Really? I have to listen to this story." So I began my consulting world in the insurance and pension business. And I was young and green and didn't really know anything. But I was blessed with having a guy who was a mentor named Ted Ward. Ted's passed away now. And he was the first digital nomad I'd ever met, that we didn't use that phrase then.

He was a fly fisherman. He and his wife sold everything they owned. They bought a big motor home. He kitted out the inside of his motorhome with a fly-tying bench. He had a library of fly-fishing books on the top of his motorhome in a bin, and 50 fly rods under his bed. And he would travel around the country and set up offices for this company that we worked for.

And his wife was from New Jersey. And so we ended up with a contract with Shearson and Dean Witter and Kidder Peabody to do their pension administration for their brokers. He was a one-armed paper hanger in New York City trying to get all these offices set up. And he needed help. And I was talking to him one day. I was working in Seattle, living there, and he was talking about putting an ad in the Wall Street Journal to hire somebody.

And in the spurt I said, "Well, why don't I come back?" And help and he said, "Are you serious?" And I said, "I think so." I was single. I was all alone." And he goes, "Well, let me talk to the folks in Sacramento, our home office." And he called me back an hour later and he says, "It's done if you want it to happen." And the next thing you know, I'm moving to New York. Just like that.

And so we worked together for three years. And I worked out of my house, or my apartment. And he worked out of his motor home down in New Jersey. I was in Connecticut. We covered the tri-state area, Manhattan, Long Island, New Jersey. I was on the road every day, every day driving.

And then our company just changed. And we were thinking, "What are we going to do here? And we now had an office in Tacoma, in Seattle. And I thought, "Well, maybe I'll go back there." And we were going fly fishing up in the Catskills in his car. And we're sitting there driving along talking about this. And he looks at me and he goes, "You know, Rick, once you've worked this way, you can never go back." And that went by me like a bug on the windshield.

And it wasn't until two years later when I was back in Seattle working, it came back to me, and I thought, "He was right." And he was really teaching me remote work way back in the mid 80s. And from that point on, I basically worked for myself. And I think I'm still in pursuit of the the harmony of that, finding the right tone.

And we've talked about this over and over lots of times. But that idea that you could be – And I agree with what you said. We couldn't change those folks. They weren't going to change. But I wasn't as articulate as you were at that time to say, "Well, I'm going to my own thing." But I just knew I couldn't do that.

And so it's been an evolving process my whole professional life to find that right rhythm. And I think that you said it well, it's really important to have fun with the people you're working with and the work you're doing. There's no fun. If you don't have that, there's no point, in my opinion.

And I've been blessed, honestly, by you and the team to be included in the work that you do. And it's been a hassle in the pandemic to not be able to be over there more. And it's falling away a little bit due to time zone differences more than anything else. But I think that it was a significant rediscovery when I started hanging around with you and Ben at the time to go, "Yeah, it's possible." It was like hanging around with Ted Ward again. Slightly different. I will say with Ted, there was always whiskey at the end of the day. So that hasn't changed. So, yeah, that's my long-winded answer for people who probably could care less about it. But that's my answer to your question.

[00:47:23] DV: That's really good to hear. By the way, please come over soon. And, generally, me and the whole team – Yeah, the whole team kind of got like, "come on, Rick. Come on over."

Yeah. So I don't have such a such a great story. But I talked about kind of youth work right at the beginning. And that still stays with me, because it was one of those moments where you are in secondary school and everybody always has the answer. And because, yeah, you're reading out of textbooks and you go like, "This is what it is."

And then I got a job as a 17-year-old at The Hague council. And every now and then I did the weekends and other things. And they said, "Dennis, do you want to be engaged in a fuller program?" "Yeah, great."

So, well, we got this new development in The Hague. They got rid of a whole bunch of all our buildings, and they did kind of a new development social housing. And lots of Turkish, Moroccan and Antillean kind of immigrant groups in the Netherlands kind of moved in there. And, yeah, one way or the other, the whole community there is not integrating enough. It's just not working.

Now, we have a hypothesis, is that if we get the kids to play, maybe the community will slowly integrate. Like, okay. I said, "Well, are you able to be here weird days? Tuesday, Wednesday

and Thursday at either four o'clock or something, from four till seven, to organize games?" I said, "Okay. Yeah, great."

I got a big bicycle, but one of those Dutch ones with a big container in front where you could put all the games. So I went to pick it up at the council. And I cycle that over. I was there. And then I go like, "Okay, what do I do now?" Some children are playing. Like, yeah, "Come on. Come here. Some games." Etc.

And I asked my mentor, Mariska. And I asked her, "So what do I do? What's the plan?" She said, "There's no plan. Let's figure it out." "What do you mean?" It's like the big outcome of getting this whole community to engage, like me standing there with a couple of footballs and a rugby ball and whatever. I was like, "How do I get from there to to there? I have no idea."

And yeah, slowly – Yeah, together, she helped me. But I tried to figure it out, and tried to figure it out, and tried to figure it out. And I got some of the community organizations involved. And slowly, children were interested. And first, the younger children want to play games. And then the older cooler kids really didn't want to. And they still stood by the side. But when I introduced proper football, and I introduced rugby even there, and nobody played rugby there. They were really kind of getting excited. And before you know it, yeah, there were children every evening out there organizing games.

And then the parents showed up. And then it was dinner time. And then they called them at home and then they said, "Oh, no! We still want to play." And then, slowly, some of the parents brought food over. And then the parents started to talk and share food with each other around that community a bit.

And I have no – Yeah, there is no plan for it. And I thought Mariska was cruel to me to not give me a plan, and that I had to figure it out. But I had to go. And I think that always stayed with me. And it was so different from doing school work, "Here's the solution. This is what you need to do." There was no solution for that. You kind of had to figure it out. And that's what I meant by, yeah, going back to my old roots and still trying to become kind of that young – Going back to my youth and becoming a youth worker again.

[00:51:10] RT: Yeah, it's a great story. It just reminds me, I just value listening over talking and questions over answers in our work. I know that you're masterful at facilitating a space of people to – They actually have to run experiments with that sometimes because they're so unaccustomed to it. They are trained and rewarded to have answers to problems. And a lot of the problems that they're now facing are immune to those quick fix answers. And so just having this exposure.

Hey, man, this has been pretty good, at least for you and me. I don't know if anybody else liked it. I think they will.

[00:51:44] DV: I enjoyed it myself.

[00:51:46] RT: I think they will. I think they will. So anything you want to say to be finished here before we jump out of this?

[00:51:53] DV: Not at all. We should have a whiskey now. That's the only thing I wanted to say.

[00:51:57] RT: So, everybody, I want to thank my friend Dennis for joining us in the swamp here. And I look forward to having you back, because we barely scratched the surface. And if people found this at all interesting, maybe that's a motivator to come back again. So thanks very much for doing this.

[OUTRO]

[00:52:15] 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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