

Federal Judicial Center
In Session: Leading the Judiciary Episode 18
Great Managers Are Made, Not Born

Jim Chance: Coming up:

Julie Zhuo: The key thing is the manager needs to be able to use the levers of purpose, and people, and process to be able to get to that North Star of success.

Jim Chance: In today's episode, we'll discuss how to be an exceptional manager with our guest Julie Zhuo, co-founder of Inspirit and former vice president of product design at Facebook. Julie argues that the most important job a manager has is to help a group of people achieve a common purpose. While this idea sounds simple and straightforward, to do it well requires careful planning, regular expectation setting, and near constant feedback. In Julie's experience, management is a highly personal and never-ending journey best pursued with a growth mindset.

While at Facebook, Julie led the teams behind some of the world's most popular mobile and web services used by billions of people daily. At Inspirit, she works with senior executives to design products that solve problems and enhance organizational culture.

Julie also writes about technology, design, and leadership on her popular blog *The Year of the Looking Glass*, and in

publications like *The New York Times* and *Fast Company*. She graduated from Stanford University with a degree in computer science and is the author of *The Making of a Manager: What to Do When Everyone Looks to You*.

Our host for today's episode is Lori Murphy, assistant division director for executive education at the Federal Judicial Center. Lori, take it away.

Lori Murphy: Julie, thank you so much for joining us today.

Julie Zhuo: Thank you. I'm so glad to be here, Lori.

Lori Murphy: Julie, as I read your book, one of the things it seemed to me that you are arguing is that to be an effective leader requires being an excellent manager. What's the difference in your opinion?

Julie Zhuo: I think about leadership as a quality or a trait and I think about management as a role. So I think that, if you look at our lives, we're oftentimes in positions where we are leaders or we're followers. So, leadership can also be quite contextual. I think, for example, let's say you are at the mall and an incident happened and then some store clerk says, "Hey, everyone, we need to evacuate. Come with me. Follow me. We're going to go this way." That person is acting as a leader in that situation. Leadership is really the act of being able to help direct other people in a way that you're

trusted and others will follow you. So that's what I think leadership is.

Now I think about management as a job. It is a kind of role. It's like saying someone is a teacher or a heart surgeon. There are actual specific accountabilities in that particular job. So the job of a manager is simply to get great outcomes from a group of people. That's what the manager should be judged on and that's how we should say whether or not a manager is performing. So to be a successful manager, I think you absolutely need to be a great leader, because if nobody wants to follow you, then it's going to be very difficult for you to get those great outcomes.

The distinction for me is that people who aren't managers can also be leaders. In fact, whether or not you're an individual contributor or in a management role, there are likely opportunities for you to grow and lead that will be wonderful for your team and your organization.

Lori Murphy: In your book, you define the essence of management as helping a group of people achieve a common purpose, which I really love. Originally, my thought was that sounds more like leadership than a manager's task. But is that really the case based on what you just told us?

Julie Zhuo: I think about the fact that, as a manager, one of the questions that I always had when I was starting is like,

well, what makes me great at the job. It's actually easy to look at maybe particular tasks. Like hiring, or just giving feedback, or doing meetings. But those are all things that kind of contribute to what we're really trying to do, which is getting a group of people to accomplish some goal together. Whether you're part of a company or a part of an organization or a nonprofit, there's likely a reason why that structure exists. There's something that is what the group considers success.

So the key thing is the manager needs to be able to use the levers of purpose, and people, and process to be able to turn this group of people and all of their talents into how can we actually get to that North Star of success.

Lori Murphy: So many people think when you become a manager it's a promotion. Usually that's the case. And you prefer to think of it as a transition. So help us understand how new managers can transition into the role successfully.

Julie Zhuo: I really like the word transition because I think it helps convey what I really believe management to be, which is it's a different job. Previously, as in my case, I was writing code; I was designing. Once I became a manager, I oversaw people who designed and who wrote code. I supported them. I helped that group become more effective. But I was no longer doing a lot of the day-to-day designing or coding. It is a completely different job.

In fact, to be a great manager doesn't necessarily take the same skills as what it took to become great at your individual contributor role or what you were doing before. So promotion sort of makes it feel like you've gotten to the next level. Somehow you're better or you've acquired these skills and you've leveled up. Whereas, transition I think more accurately describes that it is a different job. Now you have to actually learn different skills. To be good at it, you're going to have to do maybe different things than what you were doing before.

One of the key things that I think about in what makes a successful transition is taking a step back and actually getting to a very clear understanding of what the expectations for success are in the job at different timeframes. So when you first become a manager, it's great to sit down with your own manager and to actually create a kind of a framework. Right? Like what does success look like in my first month? What does success look like in three months, in six months, and then finally in a year or two?

You have to, I think, have that conversation with your own manager because probably everyone's understanding or expectation of what is it that you're supposed to do and what does it mean to do a good job might be slightly different. I found that a lot of misunderstandings or kind of people thinking somebody else isn't quite doing it right can be addressed if there's a

lot more of that conversation upfront. Just like if you take on any new role, sit down and understand what it means for you to be successful in that role and what are the kind of guideposts to success over different timeframes.

Lori Murphy: So how long does this transition take? Because it sounds like what you're really describing is a process and over time. And then how do you know you've transitioned successfully? Is it just that your manager thinks you're doing a good job?

Julie Zhuo: The transition is going to look a little bit different, I think, for every person in every context. So, as an example, if you are transitioning from being an individual contributor to a manager for the very first time and you've never managed before, that's going to look a little bit different than if you are transitioning from like one team to another or from one company to another company but you have managed before. It also depends on have you ever hired somebody before, have you ever run a meeting before, have you ever been in a situation where you've had to make different prioritization decisions before the transition can actually become even -- almost feel more like a formalization than it is like a real difference.

But other times these things are totally new for someone, and so they kind of have to go through it for the first time.

They have to actually be trained, you know, try it out, reflect on what it takes, come up with your own playbook for like, okay, what does it take now for me to grow and successfully hire my team. That I think has to be kind of done hand in hand with that person's own manager, as well as an understanding of what the team needs.

Lori Murphy: And what about for someone who's jumping from maybe a mid-level manager role to an executive role? How is that different or is it?

Julie Zhuo: The difference for me in terms of when you become a manager and what's kind of the next transition or change is when you go from directly managing individual contributors to now managing managers. I think that's actually quite a transition as well. You're in that step becoming a little bit more further removed from the work, and learning more and more how to delegate and how to trust people with big problems, and get stuff done without being enough in the details to kind of even be able to talk to the person who is even doing that work.

So that's oftentimes when people think about executives. Oftentimes, it's more of a focus towards things like aligning everybody around a shared purpose. It becomes more critical, your ability to hire and coach great leaders and grow them, now grow leaders of your own, and your ability to I think focus on

high level process and strategy and all of that versus more tactical running of day-to-day meetings or kind of making specific decisions.

Lori Murphy: So more strategic and less tactical. Julie, if the major tasks of a manager as you've said are to improve the purpose or the why, the people or the who, and the process or the how of a team, what are our best tools as managers for improving those three things - purpose, people, and process?

Julie Zhuo: So of purpose, people and process, I tend to think that people is the most critical of all. So you're thinking about, okay, how can I be more effective? How can I help my team get to bigger outcomes or more efficiently achieve them? Then I always go back to like let's look at people. Do you have the right people with the right skillsets and the right roles? That's one major lever, probably the biggest one, right? Because if you don't actually have the right talent, you can do a lot of coaching, you can add a lot of process, you can focus on purpose but you may not just be able to get additional output because you don't have the right people in the right role. So that's always, I think, the most important thing to think about.

Now, if you do think you have great people and they have the right talent, then the additional lever is going to be on coaching them and growing them. This is where giving feedback, learning to give and receive feedback, becomes hugely important.

I think it's just a great skill for life. I think it's a critical and absolutely necessary skill for successful managers. Because, frankly, no matter how good all of us are, it doesn't mean like we're there. We're not static. We can always be better.

I think that the purpose of understanding feedback as the best way to help each other grow and the best way to make us the tomorrow's version of us better than today's version means that we kind of have to lean into giving feedback. And feedback doesn't always have to also be negative. I think we sometimes have this idea of like, oh, I should only give feedback if something's wrong. No. If someone's doing something really well and they're doing it in a particular way that makes it great, they're bringing great energy to a meeting, they were very succinct in summarizing an important point, call that out. Because the more that we understand about what we do well and what we should improve in, then the better we're going to try next time. We're going to go and lean into our strengths, and we're going to try and work on improving our weaknesses. So as a manager, it really goes down to let's focus on giving feedback. Let's focus on giving specific feedback that both helps someone recognize what their strengths are and how to improve on their weaknesses. So that's a huge, huge lever.

I think when it comes to let's say process, I think one of the most important levers for process is spending time with the team reflecting on how the way that we work together can be improved. So process for me is just simply the norms of how things get done among a group of people. Oftentimes, the way that things get done is the way they've always been done or the way that we've always done them which isn't necessarily intentional. Right? It's just what we're used to.

So oftentimes getting together and reflecting and saying, hey, are we doing things in the way that is best, in the way that is maybe the most efficient, or produces the best decisions, or yields the best results, or even maybe makes all of us feel the most included and energized and enthused about what we're doing? Those are questions that it's very easy to just go months, days, years without thinking about them.

So we take the time to periodically, let's say once a month or once a quarter, actually gather all of the people who work together in a room and say, okay, let's think about how the last three months went. What was done easy, what took longer than it should have, what was frustrating for some of us, what was smooth that we want to replicate, and to use that as a time to really hone in on the process and to come up with suggestions or modifications for the future.

Then you go and try that again. You'll figure out some things that work well and some things that don't. You go and reflect once more. It's kind of an iterative process. I love reflecting on process because I really think that we always, every time I do it, we come up with so many energizing ideas for how we can improve the way that we, as a group of people, work together.

Then, finally, when it comes to purpose, I think purpose is really critical when the team becomes bigger and bigger. If it's just two or three people working together, oftentimes the idea of what success looks like or what are we all trying to do or how should we align ourselves, it's pretty easy. Right? You probably don't even have to maybe be that explicit about it because it's just two or three people. You talk all the time and it's clear what you're trying to do together.

But when your organization becomes 20 people or 50 or 100 or 1000 people, then suddenly, you know, all of us, maybe even if we're only like 5 percent different in what we understand the process to be, by the time you take that through enough people, suddenly you have people who have maybe completely different ideas of what it is we're trying to do.

So as a leader and as a manager, oftentimes taking the time to go and simplify and communicate and to tell stories and to work on whether it's for presentations or Q&A's or whatever it

is helps bring that alignment into focus. Constantly saying, guys, this is what success looks like, these are our goals, this is what we know, this is what will tell us that we're doing a good job or poor job, and just really making sure that that gets permeated throughout a larger organization is really, really critical.

Lori Murphy: So what I'm hearing you say, Julie, is that communication is really a thread that comes through all of these. For each of these - purpose, process and people, it's not just about the manager. It's the manager in partnership with those who report to the manager.

Julie Zhuo: Absolutely. The way that you get a group of people to work better together is oftentimes by inviting them into the conversation because they have a much better idea of what's difficult and what's not, what's working well about how things are done and what's not, what's helping them be effective in their job or what's holding them back. So as a manager, the more you can invite them at a personal level but at a team level and even at a broader org level the better.

Lori Murphy: I want to go back to something you said earlier about ongoing feedback to help people keep aligned with the purpose, and to make sure that process is going okay, and that they are getting the most out of themselves and you're getting the most out of them.

So one of the things I loved in your book you said feedback is a gift. And that's actually a phrase I've used for a long time. I loved it. It's not just enough to give feedback, it's also important to get feedback. So I'm wondering if you could talk about that both from what you'd recommend for others but also how you have gotten and given feedback.

Julie Zhuo: It's really, really important for managers and people in positions of leadership to ask for feedback because oftentimes it won't come naturally. It's just a huge risk, right? Why do I want to make this person maybe like me less? So as a manager, the best thing you can do to create a culture of feedback is to really proactively ask for it, and to make it feel like it will be okay if somebody tells you something, even about something that you didn't do well, and that you truly care about it because you believe that feedback - to your point - is a gift. That it's the thing that's going to help make us stronger.

So this is a huge example to me of where leaders have to walk the walk. If you're giving a ton of feedback to other people and telling them they should or shouldn't do this or they need to do this better, you better also be just as often asking for that and saying, hey, because I care so much about feedback and it's important, I'm going to ask you guys for feedback all the time. That means sometimes in a one-on-one, maybe not every

single week but maybe every two weeks or once a month, you're having a one-on-one with one of your reports.

Just taking the time to step back and say, hey, I want to get some feedback on how have our meetings been going for you. What do you think I could be doing better to support you? Is there even anything about the way that we run our check-in or this particular meeting that could make it more effective for you? Every time you're kind of wondering could I do this better in the future - go and ask for a round of feedback. It's about communicating that this is a culture of feedback. It's important. It's also about going and actually demonstrating it in your day to day.

Lori Murphy: The invitation and creating the environment in which it's safe to get that information, I'm curious how feedback has helped you to grow, and change, and learn.

Julie Zhuo: There's a ton of things that I feel like I've gotten much better at as a result of feedback. At Facebook we had a process where every six months everybody would just give peer feedback to all of the folks that they work closely with. So you'd give it and then you'd also receive it. I love the idea of 360 feedback. I think you can also do this even if it isn't something that is a formal process at your organization.

But what it really means is you just go out and you talk to all of the folks that you've been working closely with and you

ask them, hey, if you think about our interactions together over the last three months or six months, what's the best thing that you feel like I've brought to the problems that we worked on together? And what's one or two things that you believe will help make me more effective in the future? You can ask this of let's say six or seven people.

What's really valuable is the patterns that kind of come out of it. People might help me realize, for example, that one of the things I should work on is how I communicate, how do I simplify, and how do I get things to the essence of what they need to be rather than producing these drafts and documents about our plans that are five or six pages which nobody really wants to fully read.

Lori Murphy: Right.

Julie Zhuo: Other things that I have learned about myself are even feedback through the recruiting process. I oftentimes will reach out and say, is there anything that would have been better about this interview process for you that could have made this a better experience? Because we'll be hiring more candidates in the future and if anything was a turnoff about the way that the process went, we want to know about it so that we don't repeat that mistake in the future.

Lori Murphy: What you're essentially saying is you're going to try and iterate and ask for feedback, and grow, and change. You're assuming you don't have all the answers.

Julie Zhuo: That's right. When I became a manager, I really felt that I needed to show up as extremely confident all the time. That if somebody asked me a question and I wasn't really sure of the answer, that I should just say something and deliver it like I was 100 percent sure. Because I guess that was the impression that I had of managers and bosses through popular culture. Maybe through some of my own past experiences it always felt that the person at the top was this guy who had a lot of confidence and a suit. It wasn't somebody who didn't know what was going on.

But what I've learned through my own experience is that in fact I felt that whenever I pretended like I knew the answer, I was robbing myself of an opportunity to actually get support and get a better discussion going and get better ideas from my team. But, furthermore, when I tried to pretend like I knew what the answer was even when I didn't, it would cost me in credibility as well. Right? Because I actually think that generally people have a pretty good detector of when you're saying something and it's not actually true or you don't really know what you're talking about.

I found that in those situations, when I came clean and I said, look, this is a really complex topic and I don't exactly know what to do, I'm going to ask for help from you guys but I'm also going to go and talk to X, Y, Z to get more insight and advice, and then we're going to come back together and we'll discuss this one more time. I felt that I got even more respect because people, you know, they trusted me more. They realized that I was the kind of person that would always speak the truth; that I was somebody who would rely on them; that I wasn't perfect. But really nobody is, right? Even all of those great leaders that we admire, all of them go through their own versions of not always knowing the answer or having a crisis of confidence. When you're able to admit that, I actually think it helps you create a better bond with the other person.

When I'm able to admit my weaknesses, my mistakes and just kind of show up as more vulnerable, I found that it actually makes it easier for other people to do that with me. And that's helpful as well as a manager. Because would you rather have a report that every time you met with them, even if things weren't going right, they were trying to pretend like it was and they weren't really telling you the full story? Or would you rather have somebody who tells you, hey, I'm working on this and I wanted to let you know right away that I'm worried about X. Can we come together and talk about it and see if we can put it on a

better path? You're always going to have more opportunities to improve things and fix things if you admit sometimes that they could be better or that maybe you made a mistake. There's so much power in being vulnerable as a leader.

Lori Murphy: I'm wondering if you could help us to give better actionable feedback and why that matters so much.

Julie Zhuo: There's a couple of reasons why I think feedback oftentimes doesn't tend to land. The first reason why is that the other person doesn't trust you. So if you're going in and you're trying to tell someone that they didn't do maybe a great job on this and you're trying to help them improve, if they don't trust you and they don't believe that you have their best interest at heart, it is very likely that whatever you say is not going to go through.

So before we get into even how do you say it and what do you say, I think you have to go back to what's the relationship that you have with this person and is that strong? Have we gotten to the point where this person actually knows that I'm giving feedback because it's out of a place of wanting us to be better and because I truly care and not because I'm trying to sound smart; I'm trying to sound right; I'm trying to show off; and it's about me?

That's really the first and most important thing. Let's focus on the relationship. Let's focus on what's the intention

behind the feedback and make sure that it really is truly about helping the other person improve. Because if it isn't, then it's better to just hold back and not give the feedback at that point in time. So that's the first step, I think, to making anything actionable and impactful.

I think the second thing is to focus on is my feedback being heard by and understood by the other person? Sometimes feedback is hard to give especially if it's critical feedback and you don't want to necessarily hurt the other person's feelings. So I think sometimes it can be very, very stressful. But the best way to I think help someone understand is to give them an example and to kind of talk about like what was your impression. So I always like to start it off with when you did X action, I felt Y, because Z. Right?

When you presented that first slide about whatever, I felt confused because it seemed like it was different from what the meeting agenda said we would be talking about. Something or some formula like that to help someone really understand like what was the emotion, what was the outcome, and why exactly did you feel that way. If somebody doesn't understand that, you kind of want to go into even more detail. Maybe give specific examples. It's tempting to jump straight into solutions, right? To just be like, oh, in the future, why don't you start your first slide with three bullet points instead of seven?

But if someone doesn't understand what the problem is, then they might not do the solution. They haven't actually become sort of more aware of what it is that they're doing that might be a pattern for other contexts. So help them understand the problem and then you might suggest as an example, in the future you can try A, B and C to help them make it a little bit more actionable and to give them something to go off of. Right?

Obviously, you don't want to dictate it because maybe they have a better idea for what they can do to address that situation. Ultimately, the ball is going to be in their court. You're just helping them be aware of it so that they can be better. But sometimes if you give them a suggestion, like in the future try using the rule of threes around bullet points, that can also help make it a little bit more actionable.

Lori Murphy: Let me shift gears here. Judiciary executives oftentimes are hiring new managers. So they're managing the new manager, will be hiring the new manager. In your book you have this powerful passage. I'd like to quote it. You say: "Hiring is not a problem to be solved but an opportunity to build the future of the organization." So I'm wondering how can judiciary executives or any executives best capitalize on that opportunity?

Julie Zhuo: The big thing for me was thinking about -- was going through that mindset shift for what it means to hire. You

go into it from maybe a position of, oh, I really, really need someone here today because all the stuff isn't getting done. There's pressure to kind of do it quickly and to solve the problem so that you can kind of go back to having a smooth operating team. I always try and remind myself don't fall into that gap, of the pressure. Don't think about hiring as a problem. Instead think about it as an opportunity to bring someone in who might be with your team and your organization for years and will have a huge impact on how things go.

If you bring in somebody who is amazing at what they do and also a joy to be around, that's going to make your day better. You're going to wake up in the morning and be able to work with this person and we're all going to be happier for it. Similarly, if you bring in someone and you were hasty and they came in and they weren't really a great fit and nobody really likes working with them, that's going to make things much, much worse. The hiring especially of managers or other leaders is just so important. Really we should give it the time and the intention that it deserves.

The other thing that I would say about that is I think it's really important to spend time with candidates upfront both to get to know them and what is the best environment that helps them thrive, as well as be honest about your own environment, the norms, the values, et cetera that you have. If you're not

actually totally honest and let's say somebody joins and they have an impression of your team that's slightly different from what it actually is, when they start they'll see what's great and then also see the parts that aren't so great. If it's very, very different from their expectations, then that's not good for anyone.

I think if you can be really open and transparent with a candidate and you can say, look, this is what is exciting about the role; this is their challenges; this is what we're going to need someone to do. And, by the way, these are our norms; this is our values; this is how we work together as a team; this is what is great about the way we work; and here's some stuff that maybe isn't so great. And you can be completely open and transparent. The right candidates will self-select in. They're kind of going into it with eyes wide open. I think about that a lot too. It's just how much can I really try and convey about what this team is and who we are and what's like our personality and our way of being so that the right people can understand if it's the best match for them.

Lori Murphy: In addition to sharing and sort of being a little more transparent, are there any questions that executives can ask potential candidates to suss out if they will be a good fit and specifically a good manager?

Julie Zhuo: To be a good manager, I think the set of questions I rely on are around how this person treats other people and how they deal with other people. I'll ask questions like what's a time when you gave feedback to someone and it made a huge difference for them. I really want to understand how do they think about growth, how do they think about what success looks like in their job. I might ask them questions like describe what a perfect hire for you looks like in your last management role.

I'll also ask questions about how they deal with conflict or tense situations. You want to know that they have a lot of emotional maturity because human issues can be messy. Everyone comes to the table with a slightly different personality, a slightly different perspective on the world. So does this person have the emotional maturity to be able to be effective with lots of different personalities and also be able to be a calm and productive force? Somebody who deescalates rather than escalates when human emotions and situations could get tense? So tell me about a time when you really struggled, or you had reports of who didn't get along with one another or you personally did not get along with a colleague. What did you do?

But around whether or not somebody will be a great fit -- and I like to use the word fit or matchmaking because that's what it is ultimately. If our company or organization isn't a

great fit for this candidate, it doesn't mean we're bad. It doesn't mean the candidate is bad. It just might mean that life's too short to kind of try and force these things together when we might be able to find better matches elsewhere. So I always kind of keep that in mind, that we want this to be a long-term relationship. So let's start it on a great footing of getting to know one another and being really, really open and honest with one another.

Lori Murphy: Julia, as we wrap up, what's the most important thing you'd like us all to take away from this conversation?

Julie Zhuo: Learning to be a great manager and a great leader is not something that you're born with. It's something that we can grow into. It's something that, despite all of the many, many mistakes that I've made, I've felt that it was such a rewarding journey because it helped me really understand more about myself.

The satisfaction that we get from just knowing that a group of people can be working more effectively together because of our actions is wonderful. So the first thing is management is not a thing you're born with. It's really something you can learn and improve on. Secondly, going back to what we talked about before, feedback, giving feedback and receiving feedback

is the best way for you to learn and grow and the best way to help the others around you learn and grow.

Lori Murphy: Well, Julie, I know that I'm going to be doing more feedback giving and inviting as a result of this conversation. It's really lovely to talk with you. We really appreciate you sharing your insights with us today.

Julie Zhuo: Thank you so much, Lori. This is a huge pleasure.

Jim Chance: Thanks, Lori, and thanks to our listening audience as well. A reminder that Julie's book is *The Making of a Manager: What to Do When Everyone Looks to You*.

If you'd like to hear more episodes, please visit the executive education page on fjc.dcn and then click or tap on *Podcast*.

Produced by Shelly Easter and directed and edited by Craig Bowden. Our program coordinator is Anna Glouchkova. Special thanks to Michael Siegel and Chris Murray. I'm Jim Chance.

Thanks for listening. Until next time.

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