

Federal Judicial Center  
Executive Edge - Episode 2  
Demonstrating Courageous Leadership in Times of Crisis

Lori Murphy: Hello, I'm Lori Murphy, assistant division director for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Welcome to *Executive Edge*, a new podcast from the FJC, focused on executive leadership in the federal judiciary. Each episode is designed to bring practical leadership guidance, research, and insight to judiciary executives. Today's episode is about demonstrating courage in times of crisis. Every executive at one time or another will likely face a crisis in a work situation. It's how you respond in that moment of crisis that can define you as a leader. Our host for today's episode is my colleague, Michael Siegel, senior education specialist at the FJC. Michael, take it away.

Michael Siegel: Thanks, Lori. Today, we're going to talk with Harvard business professor, Nancy Koehn, author of the book *Forged in Crisis, The Power of Courageous Leadership in Times of Crisis* [sic]. I'm excited to introduce Nancy who holds the position of James E. Robison chair of Business Administration at Harvard. Nancy is a featured contributor to Boston's WGBH, an NPR radio station. She speaks frequently at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and the Aspen Institute's Ideas Festival. Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*,

*Washington Post*, and *Harvard Business Review*. Nancy, thanks so much for joining us.

Nancy Koehn: It's a real pleasure, Michael. Thanks for having me.

Michael Siegel: Sure. Can you tell us what inspired you to write the book *Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Times of Crisis*?

Nancy Koehn: Well, two major forces acted upon me in motivating me or inspiring me to write the book. The first was just a series of historical ruminations on the turbulence that seemed to be engulfing our global village, really from the turn of the 20th into the 21st century. There I was, a young historian at Harvard Business School watching all this disruption - technological, political, climactic in terms of our environmental - all over the place it was turbulent. I was curious about how institutions, and particularly leaders of institutions, respond to that turbulence. That was the first, if you will, analytical wind whipping around me.

The second more powerful gusts that were coming at me in writing this book were a series of personal crises. My husband walked out on me. My father died very suddenly. I developed cancer. I developed cancer again. In the midst of that, pretty early on in those dominoes falling - and they fell fast and furiously - I picked up a book of Lincoln's writings. I didn't

know much about Lincoln. I hadn't studied American history as a PhD student. I was so struck by what he was dealing with at the center of a perfect storm as president during the Civil War. I literally can remember saying to myself in 2003, "Nancy, you think you have problems? Mr. Lincoln had much bigger ones."

I began a quest to try and understand the emotional experience of leaders in great turbulence and how that affects their impact. I was also learning lessons for myself as well as for, if you will, my historical file folders or body of knowledge.

Michael Siegel: Wow, it sounds like your head and your heart were activated at the same time.

Nancy Koehn: You're the first person that said that to me. That was spot on, Michael. Spot on.

Michael Siegel: Thank you. Thank you. Nancy, you cover five very different leaders. Your comment about gusts brings to mind Ernest Shackleton, a 19th century British naval officer turned explorer. He tried to lead an expedition to the South Pole. Abraham Lincoln, who you mentioned, a 19th century U.S. president who fought to preserve the Union during the Civil War; Lincoln's contemporary, Frederick Douglass who honored the free African Americans held in slavery; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th century German theologian who struggled to resist Nazi Germany; and finally, Rachel Carson, a 20th century American scientist

and writer, who spoke out for the critical importance of environmental sustainability. What unites these five very different leaders? What do they have in common?

Nancy Koehn: Well, that's the animating question of the book. I don't want to give all the gold away here. But at least three major meta things unite these people. The first is and most obviously is that each of these people found themselves in an unexpected and enormous crisis, a crisis that tested their soul, that tested their strength in all dimensions, that tested their very ideas about what they were doing on this planet - so it was existential as well as spiritual and intellectual and emotional.

Then the second theme that was absolutely critical, the second common thread that was absolutely critical to understanding the book, which is called *Forged in Crisis*, and that was that each of these people made a choice. They didn't have a choice about the crisis coming. It took them completely unaware in each instance. But they made a choice, each of them, to make something of the crisis, to get somehow stronger or better, to navigate through it without knowing exactly how they were going to do it, but to play to their stronger side as they did. They were each resolved, to put it negatively, not to be a victim and to emerge somehow better than when they originally started in the storm. That turns out to be absolutely critical

to the kind of boulders, huge boulders of goodness that they each moved in their respective spheres.

The third thing that's really important, and I think the reason this book seems to speak to all kinds of people is that each of these people cultivated their own emotional awareness as a very conscious kind of enterprise and believed that by doing that -- Lincoln and Shackleton and Douglass were all working way before that term even exists in common parlance. They did it because they knew somehow instinctively that that was part of their, if you will, tool belt for getting through, getting better, and accomplishing something.

Those three things, *Forged in Crisis*, the power of a crisis to actually, from the inside out, make each of us better and stronger and more luminous and more resilient and ultimately -- here's the real kicker -- be able to exercise very worthy, bigger impact on a world that could not be more thirsty for good leaders.

Michael Siegel: Wow, absolutely. That's a great message. On the other hand, the five leaders were not devoid of personal ambition, whether it was to sell books, attain high office, or reach the South Pole. But as they matured and as the environment around them changed, they pivoted, it seems to me, from personal ambition to something much grander, as you talked about earlier, to the achievement of a goal for society or

humanity. What was the catalyst for the transformation among some of them?

Nancy Koehn: That's a great question. You are saying this and no one's asked it of me before. I say in the conclusion that they each independently make the transition from, if you will, the narcissistic fuel of I, me, me, I, me, to thou, you, the larger whole and the good of a larger whole. I think that the reason they each make this transformation or make the pivot – I like the word pivot, Michael – make the pivot is because they're each in a sense called to dig so deep into themselves to just navigate the high winds and huge waves that they come out thinking that moment by moment, there has got to be something bigger than just myself, something more meaningful, something heftier, something more attuned with the larger goodness than just my wish to sell books or my wish to be famous or in Lincoln's case, my wish to hold political office.

I think it's the very aspect of the crisis and being taken so unawares and also, in a sense, in falling to their knees and getting up and saying, this has got to be bigger than just my résumé. In that realization comes two really important things. This is, I hope, very relevant to your colleagues and to the folks who are doing such important service in the judiciary. Two important things: One, when one discovers the relationship between one's gift, one's energy, and a larger purpose, first,

there's a great sense of not only satisfaction but inner power in that like the investment and the commitment of one's self to a big worthy purpose. They discover actually more power and more resilience in that, if you will, transformation or pivot.

The second thing they discover is they discover the ability to nurture other people, to bring other people along in that quest to care for others and then to bring those people along. That, of course, then becomes another gas tank for them. I say early in the book – I use this quotation. I think it's just spot on from an American writer called David Foster Wallace – that courageous leaders, real leaders, he writes, are individuals who help us overcome the limitations of our own weaknesses and laziness and selfishness and fears and get us to do harder, better things than we can get ourselves to do on our own. Each of these people in embracing that purpose becomes that kind of leader. Others rise within themselves because of that leadership. The pivot turns out to be a pivot of great and worthy power.

Michael Siegel: What a great concept and what a great quote. It reminds me of the Colin Powell statement that motivation is a force multiplier.

Nancy Koehn: Absolutely. When you're in that place, when you're in the flow with others trying to do something really hard, but they know it's about goodness, you see that

multiplier. You feel it's part of the energy. It's part of the connection with other people. It's part of what drives you.

Michael Siegel: Exactly. Several other leaders – perhaps most notably Shackleton, Lincoln, and Douglass – reflected a change in their thinking. They modified their purpose or vision to the changing circumstances. What can we learn from this about staying loyal to a purpose but also be willing to be flexible?

Nancy Koehn: That's a great pullout, Michael, for surely Frederick Douglass. That's a careful read that you've done and I appreciate. I think the large lesson here about this combination of, in one sense, stubbornness. I mean these people, all of them to a one, exemplify something. Estée Lauder, the cosmetics entrepreneur once said that no is just another word for how and when, when you're on a worthy endeavor. No is just another word for how and when. They don't really take no for an answer. They keep on, keeping on.

So there's a stubbornness to the hewing they do to the purpose, the adherence to the purpose. In Douglass's case, it's free slavery. But how he's going to do that changes pretty significantly between, say, the late 1840s and the mid 1850s. And then again, when he sees war is imminent. For Lincoln, it's a much more significant shift from, "I'm going to lead the nation to war and save the union" to "I'm going to save the

union. I'm going to transform it." And in Shackleton, of course, for his shift massively when he had to save his men. The real combination, I think, is the stubbornness to a worthy mission. They're all are huge in this, Carson with *Silent Spring*, her world-rocking book. And then Dietrich Bonhoeffer was resisting Nazi evil.

But what is so important of this is that they marry that to this suppleness that you're talking about in the question about how I'm going to do that and what I'm willing to do in terms of adaptation to accomplish the mission. And if the mission can get worthier - in the case of Lincoln or Shackleton - if the mission can get bigger and worthier, well then, I will walk into that space. I will actually adjust myself, work on myself so that I'm capable within myself in terms of transformation and change to accomplishing something bigger and more decent.

The combination of find the purpose and move into it and then at the same time like you're driving a stick shift car and you keep a light hand on the gear shift and a light hand or a deft hand or foot on the clutch. It was that combination, I think, that's so important.

Michael Siegel: The leaders in your book reflected an inside-out approach to leadership. Meaning, they drew their inspiration and their power, as you were just talking about, from deep inside themselves. Then they worked to persuade

others to join them. What is the significance of an inside-out approach to leadership success?

Nancy Koehn: A couple of things, first, it suggests that really courageous leaders get right with themselves and keep getting right with themselves as a way to hold the responsibility of accomplishing the mission through thick and thin. I think the first piece of significance, if you will, the first caveat of a significant aspect is by leading from the inside out. You are doing two really important things: you are honing your muscles of resilience; you are honing your muscles of moral courage. Each of these people actually grows into moral seriousness the further they march along on their mission because they're leading from the inside out, because they're working from this transformation in themselves and this clear-eyed honesty about who they are and what their purpose is.

First, more resilience, an increase in moral seriousness, which I think is incredibly important. Second equally important, because these people are leading from the inside out, they're cultivating empathy, right? They're cultivating an ability to understand by virtue of their own emotional awareness what makes other people tick. They develop higher and higher levels, if you will, of interpersonal and group, if you will, communication and ability to motivate, inspire, and just keep their troops moving and marching when things are very difficult.

Shackleton's men to a one after they got home said - this is in BBC Radio interviews way into the late '20s and '30s - said, "What kept us alive was the boss' belief that we could do this."

There you see a perfect example of Shackleton's emotional intelligence affecting other people's willingness to follow them and do harder, better things than they could do on their own. I think the third thing - this is maybe even more pertinent today than it is in these five stories, one of which ends when Carson dies in 1964 - is when turbulence is accelerating as it is so clearly around the world and we only have social media spreading the emotional aspects of that turbulence often on the more negative side so quickly and so broadly, leaders simply have to cultivate and invite others to cultivate a kind of emotional stability and forbearance and, if you will, steady on that is so critical.

To do that, you can't do that by downloading an app if you're a leader or by telling people to download an app. You got to have it within you and then use it to help other people stay calm, have others act as ballast and so you can get things done and keep institutions functioning at their best level as the volatility and uncertainty accelerate.

Michael Siegel: Powerful ideas. We're going to take a quick break. When we come back, we're going to talk with

Professor Nancy Koehn about leadership in times of crisis. I'm Michael Siegel. You're listening to *Executive Edge*.

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Michael Siegel: Welcome back. I'm Michael Siegel. You're listening to *Executive Edge*. I'm talking with Professor Nancy Koehn, author of *Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Times of Crisis*. Nancy, let's talk about how all the leaders in your book dealt with crisis, and yet none of them succumbed to crisis as you indicated. They were not defeated by it. You indicate that all five leaders made an emotional pact with themselves, that they refused to spend lots of time playing with worst-case scenarios. Were they simply blind optimists? What propelled each of them to stay the course?

Nancy Koehn: A combination of factors all against, I mean, from emotional agency, emotional awareness, and their choices over their emotions, and therefore, a great amount of emotional discipline, which all of us have. Whether we cultivate it in us is a different question. The decision not to spend an enormous amount of time replaying worst-case scenarios was a decision that each of them came to. They were not blind optimists, none of them Pollyannas. They said this could happen.

Bonhoeffer said, "I could be executed by the Nazis." He goes down that path for a while when he's first imprisoned in 1943. He quickly realized, "I'm going to lose myself. I'll be

so anxious. I'll be so despairing. There is nothing for me at the end of this dead end and very, very dark street." He pulls back and says, "I know that possibility exists.

I'm going to close the door. I'm spending a lot of time in that room of my mind and my feelings."

That piece, they each do. They each choose to turn their attention away, acknowledging the worst-case scenario exists trying to avoid it but not endlessly replaying the loop of that possibility. I think that's a very important skill that, again, in our moment of a salacious and dark media and all kinds of base stuff running around the Internet we could all do well to experiment with and hone.

The second piece is perhaps even more important in terms of keeping them on course. Each of them - in Lincoln's case many times, in Carson's case many times, in Shackleton's case many times, in Douglass's case many times - each of them get right up to the edge of what I call the cliff of despair and giving up. They have a choice. Do I just do a dive over the edge because I can't do this, because this is too hard? Because this latest obstacle is hardly to be -- it's in my path, it's hardly to be believed. They each come to that point. All of us know that point in our lives, whatever the context.

Each of them gets right up to the edge. Their toes hooked over the rocks, peering down. In Lincoln's case, it is the most

clear in that chapter about his experience. Each of them realizes that if they give up, the whole enchilada is finished. The whole game is over. They know what they own in the moment when it really counts. They own the responsibility of their own leadership. Then interestingly – again, it doesn't make for great Hollywood's scoop writing because it's not dramatic – they take a tiny step away from the edge and then another tiny step away and then another tiny step away. By the time, 2:00 AM has become 6:00 AM because often, these kind of moments come in the wee hours. By the time at 6:00 AM, they're up off their knees. They're ready to take the first step into the day.

What is so I think very important for people to understand and appreciate here for all of us in this boundary situation is the most important thing we can do is that tiny step back from the edge of the cliff. Once you take that first tiny little step, the next step backward is easier. By the fifth step, you're back in the game again. That turns out to be really, really important, muscling, if you will, muscling their courage and their resilience or persistence in that moment.

I think the last thing – this is really perhaps relevant for the people that you serve that you folks work with and that you are – and that is that each of these people understood that they were on an important mission. The mission at a certain moment, the very act of what they were trying to accomplish in

its decency and its possibility to move, as I said the boulder of goodness forward each, that very mission served again as a source of reason to go on.

Lincoln in the depths of the end of 1862 when the war was going so badly for the North, Carson dealing with all the ramifications of a harsh treatment for an aggressive cancer and trying to finish this book that you know is world-changing - each of them finds some comfort and some resilience and persistence in the mission itself.

Michael Siegel: Wow, yeah. That's so motivating and so inspirational. The emotional discipline you talked about allowed them to, in effect, slow down or pause during the crisis so that they would not react emotionally. At a point where tensions were high, events were moving probably more quickly than they wanted them to, these leaders had the ability to stop, assess the situation, as you said, take a small step in order to marshal the proper resources to tame the crisis. This seems remarkable. How can leaders today learn to do this?

Nancy Koehn: A couple of things. I do a lot of leadership coaching mostly for executives but for some really magnificent leaders in government and in nonprofits. We talk a lot about this, that the importance of slowing down is actually becoming greater as the world accelerates and move fast and break things. That sounds nifty, but that's just wrong. It's just blatantly

wrong when the stakes are high. Nothing that's important and worthy and worth fighting for is ever made better - especially if a leader or the people around him or her are hot under the collar emotionally - is ever made better in the midst of great speed. We're also conditioned partly by our gadgets to move so quickly and removing the sight of the idea that waiting even just an hour, 12 hours can make a major, major difference, not only in the leader, him or herself and their thinking about it and their ability to consider a larger picture and make that sound efficient but also in the circumstances themselves.

One of the things we do when I'm coaching, Michael, is to say to people, can you leave the email? Can you not respond for 15 minutes? Can you find the forbearance to just leave it? Then after 15 minutes, can you leave it for 40? Can you leave the text for an hour? Once people cross the 40-minute mark, all kinds of things become possible. People can wait for 12 hours. Then, here's a really good thing, a really interesting ticker. If you wait 12 hours, in something like 30 or 40 percent of the cases, what looks like a budding crisis resolves itself or circumstances change. What is making the leader so addled, so upset in the moment has suddenly assumed gentler proportions and less sharp contours.

This is purely about each person saying, I can do this. This is easier than any diet or any exercise program one will

ever initiate. But you have to do it to see its power. Then by the time you do it three or four times, you're hooked. And you start using pace as a conscious tool.

Michael Siegel: Excellent. It changes your whole approach.

Nancy Koehn: It changes your whole -- I have learned so much in my own life from writing this book and these people.

Michael Siegel: I bet. Nancy, the five leaders you discussed were highly confident people, but they did not descend into arrogance. Which leaders best exhibited this approach and how did they do so? How can today's leaders do so? How do they find the balance?

Nancy Koehn: They found balance, first and foremost, by the embrace of the worthy mission. Part of that pivot you were talking about earlier, Michael, from I to we, from I to thou, from my agenda to a larger agenda for something better for others, and in some cases, for the world itself. I think that was the first thing. Here's what Lincoln said in 1862 at the end of a long letter. Someone was urging him to retaliate against some folks that were his enemies. He said, it would be varying [sounds like] in the letter, what I deal with is too vast for malice.

That I think is what we're talking about. People that understood that in the sweep of what they were trying to do,

they had certainly found and cultivated greater confidence in their ability to do a greater steadfastness. But the steadfastness and confidence in your ability to do something is actually very different than arrogance. Once they made that pivot, there wasn't really a great need to traffic in malice, or traffic in self-promotion. It was a need to get the work done.

This is true for all of them. I think that one of the ways that people transcend the arrogance is to discover what their purpose is. That purpose is never primarily about building your own brand in a self-proselytizing way. I think the second thing that each of these people discovered is that they're doing the work in concert with other people. You discover that your work is absolutely dependent on others. That tends to dial down the volume on arrogance and increase the volume on humility and service.

I think like embracing a bigger purpose is collective rather than primarily narcissistic that also fuels one's sense of being thoroughly grounded and capable of eliminating the need for a lot of arrogance, which is often about a compensation for some kind of insecurity or anxiety.

Michael Siegel: Indeed, those are wonderful ideas. I love the quote from Lincoln. Thank you for sharing that. All five leaders you profile are what we might call lifelong learners. It takes humility to continue to develop and all leaders in this

book had it. How can we cultivate humility and development in today's leaders?

Nancy Koehn: I think two things. First, by helping people understand how satisfying and engaging and compelling learning is, in learning about a specific path or a set of objectives or the tools we need to accomplish objectives. I think each of these leaders were learners. Then they were teachers. We don't talk about leaders always as being great teachers, but they are. They're like a great porter at a hotel. The door is always opening to something new. That is really important. People are looking for that all over the world. We're looking for people to help us learn more so we can do harder, better things than we can do on our own. I think that's the first piece - leaders as teachers, leaders as porters opening doors to others.

Then I think that leaders themselves help other people cultivate humility by the nature of how they show up. I write about different people in the book. Each of these people from Carson to Bonhoeffer to Douglass, they didn't show up in a swaggering or swashbuckling or self-aggrandizing way. Their very act of modesty or dignity helped other people find motivation to show up in a similar way. So humility, like collective anxiety, is contagious. The trick is, to turn that contagion towards something very beneficial for society rather than something that's destructive.

Michael Siegel: I have only one more prepared question. It comes from a quote from former first lady, Michelle Obama, who once remarked, "The presidency does not change who you are. It reveals who you are." To what extent does a crisis reflect the true essence of a leader? Does it take a crisis to bring out the best in our leaders?

Nancy Koehn: Let me answer the second question first. I don't think one has to endure or navigate through X number of crises to be a great leader. There's no question that most of history's most courageous and worthy leaders had endured or had learned what they had learned from crisis. We don't need to go to a crisis mode [sounds like] to be a great leader.

Rahm Emanuel said paraphrasing someone I'm not sure of, "Never let a good crisis go to waste," or "In the midst of crisis, lies great opportunity." But no one's talking about that in terms of human development. I think what's so interesting about the volatility that these people found themselves in is how they used it, again, mostly very intentionally to try and get stronger and better and to work from their higher self, if you will. That is where, I think, the stakes of power are so important. The stakes of power bring out either the best or the worst in someone as a leader. I think to Michelle Obama's point or contention is dead on. It works both ways, right?

Michael Siegel: Uh-huh.

Nancy Koehn: Power can make someone more a coward or more cavalier or more self-aggrandizing. Or it can sober them and help them develop greater moral seriousness, help them develop greater dignity and compassion. And so what is crisis? A crisis is the stakes of whatever authority a leader has in a certain sense turned up on steroids, more intense, more volatile. It's in those moments I think where we can see more easily than in a calmer time the potential growth for good or bad of a leader. I think that's really what we're talking about - crisis as a very, very interesting Petri dish or greenhouse for what the presidency or any kind of power makes a person for better or for worse.

Michael Siegel: Thank you, Nancy. You've given tremendous insights to leaders in the judiciary. We really appreciate your involvement. We thank you very much.

Nancy Koehn: It's my privilege. Thank you, Michael.

Lori Murphy: Thanks, Michael. Thank you to our listening audience as well. If you're interested in learning more about Professor Nancy Koehn or her book, *Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Times of Crisis*, be sure to visit the Executive Education page on [fjc.dcn](http://fjc.dcn) and click or tap on *Executive Edge* podcast. *Executive Edge* is produced by Jennifer

Richter and directed by Craig Bowden [phonetic]. I'm Lori  
Murphy. Thanks for listening. Until next time.

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