

Federal Judicial Center
In Session: Leading the
Judiciary Episode 10
How to Think Differently

Lori Murphy: Hello. I'm Lori Murphy, assistant division director for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Welcome to a podcast focused on executive leadership in the federal judiciary.

Today we're talking with Rohit Bhargava, a leading authority on marketing, trends, and innovation. He is the founder of the Non-Obvious Company and previously spent 15 years as a marketing strategist for Ogilvy and Leo Burnett. Rohit is *The Wall Street Journal* best-selling author of six business books and teaches a popular course on marketing and storytelling at Georgetown University. He's widely considered one of the most entertaining and original speakers on marketing disruption and innovation in the world. Today we'll focus our conversation on his book *Non-Obvious: How to Think Differently, Curate Ideas, and Predict the Future*. Rohit Bhargava, thanks for joining us.

Rohit Bhargava: Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Lori Murphy: We're glad to have you. What does non-obvious thinking look like and why does it matter to today's leaders?

Rohit Bhargava: Non-obvious is a really intentional way I think of describing a point of view that I have of the world, which is that we need to start seeing the things that aren't delivered to us. To me non-obvious it sort of encompasses being innovative and it encompasses being creative, but at the end of the day it excludes something that I think we hear a lot which is the obvious. Everybody kind of says the same thing. We hear a lot of agreement about these things that are almost clichés. What I really try and encourage people to do is get outside of that. Like see the world a little bit differently, and I try and give them tools and an approach to be able to do that.

Lori Murphy: In your book you talk about curation as an important aspect of non-obvious thinking. You call it the ultimate method of transforming noise into meaning. Can you tell us a little bit more about curation and why it's so critical to this concept of non-obvious thinking?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah. One of the things I try and do a lot in the book is I tell stories. I'm a storyteller. The idea of curation came from me being in Norway, at this really fascinating place called the Mini Bottle Gallery which is a museum of these tiny liquor bottles that you would probably have seen in lots of places. It turns out that there is a Norwegian billionaire who has collected like 70,000 of them. I

mean an insanely huge collection. At one point his late wife said, look, these need to get out of my house, which I think we can all identify with.

Lori Murphy: Right.

Rohit Bhargava: So, the guy created the only solution that would be logical for a Norwegian billionaire, which is he built a museum for his bottles. When he did that, he had 70,000 bottles. Someone had to go in and say, you know, we could take all 70,000 of these and basically stick them up as wallpaper but it wouldn't be very meaningful. Instead what they did is they chose 10,000. They found themes around them. They created little rooms for them. They basically did what every museum every where in the world does, which is they choose what to show you and what to put in the collection.

By choosing what to show you, they actually create meaning because now there are themes. There are stories. There is something to experience. I think that that lesson is something we can really apply to our own lives to be able to curate ideas, to figure out what to pay attention to. Because there's a lot of noise in our lives too, right? There are a lot of things that attract our attention. Being smarter and more intentional about figuring out what to pay attention to and then finding the themes is a lesson that I think we can all use.

Lori Murphy: So, it's figuring out what to eliminate, as well as what to keep in?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah, it's what to eliminate. It's also what are the connections between the things that I am seeing.

Lori Murphy: Got it.

Rohit Bhargava: One of the analogies I use often is we're all used to, when we travel, we get our frequent flyer miles. No one would take a trip from D.C. to L.A. and then turn around and say, okay, where do I use all my miles? Because you don't have enough yet, right? You haven't collected enough. So, what you do is you collect the miles until you have enough to then do something with it. If we could do that with our ideas, if we could collect ideas the way frequent flyers collect miles, I think that eventually we'd cash them in for bigger things.

Lori Murphy: So, you have to hold on to the ideas for a little while?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah. You have to have a good way of holding on to them. Not writing it down on a piece of paper that you lose. That's not a good way to do it.

Lori Murphy: We'll talk about that later. You talked in the book about what you call a curation mindset through building certain habits - five habits to be specific. What are those five habits?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah. A curation mindset is really the idea that I am going to save ideas even when I'm not sure of what the meaning behind them is going to be. And so, when you think about doing that, I mean, you have to engage certain human elements. So, you have to be observant. You have to be able to have the ability to see the details, the things that most people don't see, to pay attention to those details.

You have to have curiosity. You have to be able to kind of think about what is the piece of this that causes me to ask the next question. You have to be able to take those pieces and think about how am I going to eventually bring them around to something that's meaningful in my life. So that's kind of what I talk about, which is like really what it elevates to is having a mindset to explore the world, explore the things that are out there.

Lori Murphy: You mentioned being observant, being curious, bringing meaning. What are other habits that we can bring to bear?

Rohit Bhargava: Another one is be elegant. That's kind of an interesting one because being elegant is not something we generally think about. But, to me, what it means is you choose your words intentionally. You don't just share the first thing that comes to your mind. You actually think about like how am

I going to say these things and how am I going to say them in a valuable way.

The other piece is be thoughtful. Being thoughtful does come I think from taking a little bit of time. I mean when you take the time to connect the dots to put the pieces together, you can actually start to see what does this mean. What are the pieces of the puzzle and then how do they all come together.

Lori Murphy: Where they all come together is what you talk about as trends --

Rohit Bhargava: Yes.

Lori Murphy: -- which is a lot of what your book is about. If I'm reading your book correctly, you talk about trends as where ideas impact an acceleration overlap. I'm sort of fascinated by this concept. Could you tell us more about it and then what qualifies as a trend?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah. There's a lot of confusion about trends, right? I mean people look at lots of different things and they say, oh, that's a trend. To me a trend is, my definition for it, is that it's a curated observation of the accelerating present. Curated we've talked about. You know the importance of curating. Observation is sort of you're paying attention to the details. But the really important piece of that is the accelerating present.

To me a trend is not something that could happen at some point in the future. It's not like a prediction of the future that doesn't have any basis in now. A lot of times people are like, oh, the trend might be flying cars. We don't really have flying cars now.

Lori Murphy: Right.

Rohit Bhargava: So to me a trend is something where there are signs of it right now. What the prediction is, is that it's going to accelerate, that more people are going to change what they believe. They are going to change how they buy, how they sell, how they act, how they communicate based on what the trend says.

Lori Murphy: Give us an example of a current trend based on that definition.

Rohit Bhargava: One of the trends that I wrote about that a lot of people were talking about once I wrote about it was something I called the strategic spectacle. The strategic spectacle was this idea that in a world where everything feels crowded and noisy, the only way to stand out is by creating a bigger spectacle. Sometimes a spectacle is spectacular, like in a good sense. Sometimes a spectacle is just like you're trying to attract the eyeballs by doing the thing that we all see online. That headline of the article that says, this star that you recognize from your past, you won't believe what she

looks like now. And they are enticing you to click because, well, what does she look like now? Now I want to know.

That's like a little bit evil, right? Because now they're not actually going to show you. They're going to make you click through 12 things before they show you. And that's the problem. That is a spectacle. They're doing it intentionally. Obviously they're doing it because the more page views they get, the more advertising they sell. So, we kind of know how it works, but we're still taken in by it.

When I started writing about that trend with this double-edged sword behind it, it really does lead you to start thinking about, well, am I being engaged in a spectacle? Is someone trying to capture my attention to do something self-serving with it? Or is it a necessity that I now need to encounter that or at least communicate in that way to be able to use spectacle in a positive way? What would be a positive way? So, a lot of these trends, they kind of raise these questions and say that what does it take - in that one in particular - what does it take to stand out, what does it take to get attention from someone.

Lori Murphy: Can you give us a sense of a trend that might be more applicable within the federal court system?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah. So, there is a trend that I wrote about called truthing where I kind of turned truth into a verb.

I think that's very applicable for the judiciary because one of the things that has become a problem in our culture is people are rapidly becoming super skeptical of everything because they don't know what to believe. They don't know what to trust. They see ridiculous media. They see marketing messages that are clearly promoting things that can't possibly exist. I mean there are cereal brands that are promoted as all natural even though clearly they're not grown all natural. Like, it doesn't make sense. How could this be all natural, right?

So, every time we have one of those situations, our faith in what we hear goes down just a little bit. There are all of these surveys that say that trust in institutions in general is going down. When that happens, I think that psychologically what people do is they start to retreat back into themselves. They go backwards into their own lives. They think about who they know and who they trust. They put even more trust in them.

One of the most dangerous things about that is that I think - and there are several people who have written about this - that it's possible to both be more informed and more narrowminded at the same time because you just read the same thing over and over. You just believe it even more deeply. The algorithm online doesn't actually give us anything that we

don't agree with. It's really good at giving us the same thing we agree with over and over.

So, what ends up happening with that is we can't imagine why anyone would think differently than we do. We assume that everyone who isn't thinking like us must be an idiot. And that's kind of what happened. So the trend there was, when I don't know what to trust, I put more faith in myself and what I already know which sometimes means I get more narrowminded as a result even if I think of myself as open minded.

Lori Murphy: Help me understand, if I'm an executive in the judiciary, how I can take that trend of truthing and use it to build trust in the institution which I'm serving?

Rohit Bhargava: That's an interesting challenge because when people are retreating back into what they already know, now you have this challenge of will they have a world view. That's very difficult to change. Not impossible, but difficult. When you know that, I think that it starts to shift how you communicate because sometimes you can't communicate something from a world view point of view if you don't have the same understanding when you're starting.

I think that for a lot of us who try and be students of what's happening in the world, to try and pay attention to it, one of the challenges for us is how do we prevent that from happening for our self. Right? I mean we were talking about

it earlier. I coach my kids in soccer. One of the things I tell them as a coach, and a lot of coaches tell them, is don't worry about what your teammates did or what the opponents did. You focus on your play. How can you make yourself better? Because that's really the thing you have the most control over. I think at the end of the day that applies to using a trend like this too. How do we make ourselves more open minded?

One of my favorite ways to do that, which I use all the time, is when I'm traveling I'll go to a bookstore and I'll buy a magazine that's not targeted at myself. So, I'll buy *Teen Vogue* magazine which is for 16-year-old girls. I'll buy *Modern Farmer* magazine even though I can't grow anything in the garden to save my life. By doing that, I have this really curious experience where now I'll read stories that are tailored to someone else. I'll read about celebrities I've never heard of. I'll see ads for products that I didn't even realize people would want.

Just by doing that, I start to see this world outside of what I know. A magazine is a great way to do that because a lot of people don't realize that when you go online and you google something and I go online and google something we don't see the same results because our results are tailored to who we are based on all the things that Google knows about us. So,

it's impossible for us to have the same media experience online.

But if you walk into the bookstore and buy that magazine and I buy it, we see the exact same magazine. That's pretty powerful because now it's not customized. It's just this is the magazine. That's what it is. It allows you to see this media and these stories that maybe you otherwise would never be able to see.

Lori Murphy: Interesting. And it also changes your perspective.

Rohit Bhargava: Yes. Yeah, it really can.

Lori Murphy: Let's go back, if I could, to this concept of curation, specifically trend curation. You used a term called the haystack method. Can you tell us what that is and how we might be able to use it?

Rohit Bhargava: The haystack method is based on this cliché that a lot of times we've heard, which is you're searching for a needle in a haystack. Right? The haystack method says that's the wrong way to do it. Actually, the right way to see patterns in the world is to spend all of your time gathering the hay so that eventually you can take your own needle and stick it on top of it. And that's the trend, but it's based on collecting all of these stories and then spotting the patterns around them.

So, the haystack method really goes through a process that I use every year when I put together my trend report. What it says is that the first step is gathering. So, you're always collecting information. You're tearing articles out of magazines. You're taking down notes. You're always saving ideas like a frequent flyer.

The next phase of that is aggregating. Aggregating means, okay, what are the ideas that fit together? It's not, okay, all of these ideas are based on retail. All of these ideas are based on finance. It's not grouped by industry. It's grouped by theme. So now you start to say, okay, what are the themes?

The next stage is what I call elevating. Elevating is what's the bigger idea behind this. For example, at one point I was reading a lot about 3D printing. Everybody was like, oh my god, 3D printing is the big trend. Everybody is going to have a 3D printer in their home. And a lot of times that's how we mistake something that exists for a trend. Like 3D printing is not a trend. That's just a technology that exists. Whereas, a couple of years ago, what a lot of people were talking about was something called the makers movement which was this idea that we want to make our own stuff. That's a trend and 3D printing enables that. Right?

Lori Murphy: Right.

Rohit Bhargava: But there are other ways to enable that trend too, of making your own stuff. You don't have to 3D-print it, right? Now that's an example of elevating the idea. It's not about 3D printing; it's about what is the human element that allows 3D printing to be popular.

Lori Murphy: Often I think we are actually responding to ideas which we have previously, until now, thought of as trends. What you're suggesting is that we should really be curating trends. We should be trying to look for the trend and not just the idea. Why is this helpful or useful for our court leader audience, for example.

Rohit Bhargava: I am very conscious about taking it outside of trends as much as I can. I mean trends are obviously valuable for me because I publish this report and then I get to go out and talk about it. So, it's strategic for my business. Most people don't need to curate trends. What they need to use though is the skill of finding intersections between what they read and what they see because that allows them to have better ideas, to have less bias, and to just be more creative and more innovative as people which has a huge effect in everything that they do.

So really what I try and advocate with this whole idea of non-obvious thinking isn't so much be a trend curator. I mean, yes, you could use this stuff to be a trend curator. But to me

really it's be more open minded. Don't just read the same thing that everybody else reads and conclude the same thing. You're smarter than that. You have to choose to read other things and put the pieces together. And if I can give you a process through the haystack method to make that a little bit easier, then great. But the output doesn't have to be trends. The output can just be great thinking, or making yourself smarter, or making yourself better.

Lori Murphy: Got it. So, applying the trend is actually more important in some ways?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah. Well, applying the thinking that gets you to the trend I think.

Lori Murphy: Okay.

Rohit Bhargava: Now there is a whole section of the book where I really do focus on like here are the trends and here's what you can do with it. So, here's what you can do with it to either start a new business, make your business more profitable, make your career better.

Lori Murphy: Make your life better.

Rohit Bhargava: Make your life better, yeah, actionable ideas behind each one of the trends. So, there are really specific things around the trends, but I'm very conscious a lot of times of not putting too much on someone's plate. I mean, look, people have a lot of stuff to do. Most people are not

like me where there is an element of my business where I'm supposed to sit there and think about trends all day long. It's part of my work to do that. For most people, that's not something somebody is waking up and asking you for.

Lori Murphy: But the concept of gathering and aggregating information is still useful for anyone in a leadership position. You said earlier that just kind of keeping notes, scattered notes, isn't necessarily the best way to do that. If I'm a court leader and I want to be more curious and I want to look for ideas that are out there and I want to make sense of these, maybe I don't want to do what you do and put a trend report together but I really want to broaden my observations. How do you recommend I go about doing that?

Rohit Bhargava: What I found over and over again with really smart people is that they do some piece of this already. They're already looking for interesting ideas. They already read books. They already read interesting things. What they don't usually do is have some sort of a disciplined way to save that for later consumption.

So, what happens is they'll read something great and they'll think about it for a little while and then they'll forget and then move on to other stuff. The challenge with that is that sometimes you leave your best ideas on the table because you're not building. You're not accruing anything.

You're not amassing anything. So, it's just kind of like the difference between saving your money by sticking it in your pillow or putting it somewhere where you actually get interest on it.

To me, when you start using a disciplined process where you can now make the connections between ideas, you start to think bigger. Thinking bigger is hard in our daily lives. Some people are charged with being in a role of innovation where their job is to think bigger. Even they struggle with it because it's hard to just look at a blank piece of paper and be like, all right, come up with an idea nobody has come up with before. How would you do that, right?

Lori Murphy: Right.

Rohit Bhargava: But if you have the right ammunition, then you can start to see the connections and that happens a lot more easily.

Lori Murphy: So, give us a sense of what a system might look like. Maybe you can even give us a window into your world. You're doing this all the time. Give us some practical advice.

Rohit Bhargava: Yes. There are a couple of things I do. One is, whenever I read a book, I always use these little color tabs to save the most interesting parts of the book so that I

can flip through the book later and see what I thought was interesting.

Lori Murphy: So, you're reading physical books then?

Rohit Bhargava: Physical books, yeah. But you could do the same thing on e-books also. I mean you can save tabs. It's less visual which is why I prefer the physical book.

The other thing I do is I always have a notebook on me which is like a tiny passport-sized notebook so it fits in my pocket. If you carry a purse, it fits in your purse. Whatever. So, I always have something where I can write down interesting ideas. If you were to tell me, oh, I read this book, it's awesome and you got to read it, I'll always have a place to write that down. I'll never lose it. It's in a notebook. It's not in a scrap of paper.

The other thing I do is I have a folder on my desk that's just labeled - ideas. Whenever I find interesting magazine articles, I don't put a lot of pressure on myself to say what does this mean. I just read it. If I think, oh, that's interesting or that made me think, I'll just tear it out and stick it in the folder. Now imagine doing that everyday for nine months. How big would that folder be? Then going through that folder and saying, hmmm, let me see what I saved in February and how does that relate to something I saved in June. Seeing those connections, now it becomes a lot more easy to

understand how you might come up with bigger ideas because you're looking at them on a timespan that most people aren't.

Lori Murphy: Interesting. So, your timespan is about nine months to a year, right?

Rohit Bhargava: It has been every year that I've done -- so I've done the report now for nine years. It started in 2011 and every year there's been a new version of it. This year I did something a little bit different because I'm looking back over the last ten years of research. The new version of the book will be *Non-Obvious Megatrends*. That's actually going to take into account the past ten years. So recently I've been looking at like ten years' worth of stuff.

Lori Murphy: That's probably fascinating.

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah, it really is because some of the things have changed and some of them have just been like different manifestations of a similar idea. I've done a lot of study around the evolution of gender, for example. That's been really interesting, just to see like how it's moved from a trend four years ago which I call fierce femininity - which was all about women taking back power. There was like *Hunger Games*. The hero was not a princess in a tower. It was like a woman who was killing everybody. I mean that was like what we were seeing towards now where I think we're much more in a

world of ungendered where gender has sort of become this statement as opposed to a binary question.

You know Mattel just released a gender-neutral doll. Like all of this stuff is really shifting how we see really this thing that used to be the second question on a form. You put in your name and then you put male or female. That was it. Now it's like Facebook has 70-plus options for gender. If those aren't enough for you, they have a write-in option where you can just write in whatever you want. That's how it shifted.

Lori Murphy: Over that ten-year period?

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah.

Lori Murphy: Interesting. The key it sounds like for you is at some point to look back at all of the things you've gathered to try to make sense out of them.

Rohit Bhargava: Yeah. It's partially to look back and see the connections. It's really about, well, what does this mean for the future. Like if this is how we are seeing all of these different things from technology. I mean there's fascinating technology that's happened. Like the thirsty concrete, the idea that we can make this concrete that basically drinks rain and prevent flooding. These are the sorts of things that are out there. It's technology.

What does that elevate to? One of the things I've been writing and thinking about is technology that proactively protects us in every situation. It protects the environment around us. It protects us from ourselves in some case. I mean there was this vending machine that launched one year at the Consumer Electronics Show that, connected with healthcare data, and would scan your face. Based on your healthcare data, it would prevent you from getting the candy bar if you are unhealthy.

Lori Murphy: Wow.

Rohit Bhargava: Which maybe is kind of extreme, right?

Lori Murphy: Yeah.

Rohit Bhargava: But that's the sort of thing that we're starting to see. So, a lot of it is, well, what's the new idea? What are the pieces of that? What does that mean for the future in terms of what we're going to start seeing more and more of?

Lori Murphy: Rohit, this has been so interesting. Is there anything else you'd like to tell our audience?

Rohit Bhargava: No. The new book will be out January 7th. So that is on its way. That will be the last ten years, so that's been a herculean effort to get that across the lines.

Lori Murphy: I can imagine.

Rohit Bhargava: So, I'm really, really excited about it. I just can't wait to hear what people think of it.

Lori Murphy: Yeah. We're excited to have you. Thank you, again, so much for being here.

Rohit Bhargava: Thank you.

Lori Murphy: If you're interested in learning more about today's episode, visit the Executive Education page on fjc.dcn and click or tap on podcast.

Produced by Jennifer Richter, and directed by Craig Bowden. I'm Lori Murphy. Thanks for listening. Until next time.

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