

Federal Judicial Center
In Session: Leading the Judiciary
Episode 19: Decision Making, Collaborating, and Coaching

Lori Murphy: Coming up on *In Session*:

Michael Lewis: I would say the qualities of a good coach, the absolute first thing, is to earn the trust of the person who's being coached because at some point you're asking that person to take some risks and to change something about themselves. People don't like to do that. People are rightly kind of wary of that.

Lori Murphy: In today's episode we discuss decision-making, collaboration, and the power of coaching with our guest journalist and author Michael Lewis. In his book, *The Undoing Project: A Friendship That Changed Our Minds*, Lewis chronicled the lives of award-winning researchers Amos Tversky and Danny Kahneman. Their work challenged the idea that people are rational decision-makers and their partnership illustrated the possibilities of professional collaboration. In his book *Coach: Lessons on the Game of Life*, as well as on his podcast *Against the Rules with Michael Lewis*, he explores the positive impact coaches can have on performance.

Lewis has published numerous *New York Times* best-selling books including three books that have been made into movies: *The Blindside*, *Moneyball*, and *The Big Short*. His most recent book,

The Fifth Risk, is about the often underappreciated and positive role the federal government and public servants have on our lives.

Our host for today's episode is Michael Siegel, senior education specialist at the Federal Judicial Center. Michael, take it away.

Michael Siegel: Thanks, Lori. Thanks for joining us, Michael.

Michael Lewis: A pleasure.

Michael Siegel: The pleasure is all ours. *The Undoing Project* is largely about the collaboration between the two brilliant and in many ways opposite men, Amos Tversky and Danny Kahneman. Give us a sense of each of them as individuals and how they work together. What can we learn from them?

Michael Lewis: Yeah. When I conceived the book in the first place, although it was a story of this intellectual project that they've been engaged on which is investigating basically how the human mind makes decisions under conditions of uncertainty and how there are kind of systematic mistakes that people make. That could sound like a dry intellectual project. But it was a passionate love affair between these two guys. It was platonic but each of them said that they had a deeper relationship with the other than they had with anyone on this planet including their spouses.

They were opposites in many ways. There was a great deal of contrast. Even though they were both Israeli Jews, they were roughly the same age, the people around them said how could these two be together? Amos Tversky was the clearest intellect that anyone who met him ever met. His mind was uncluttered. He had a mathematical or logician's mind. He's very funny. He was kind of ruthless with the world around him in some ways without letting them know. There was a sociologist who created an intelligence test after meeting Amos Tversky. It is the longer it takes you to figure out that Amos is smarter than you after you met him, the stupider you are.

Danny, on the other hand, is this tortured and complicated soul. He has very good reasons in his biography for being tortured and complicated. I mean his very early childhood was spent hiding from Nazis in France and watching his father die. If Amos' superpower is clarity of thought, Danny's superpower was doubt. He would doubt that the sun would rise tomorrow. From that doubt, he'll have all kinds of insights that no one ever had before. He'll torture a problem to death. These two meet and they engage in this intellectual journey that I think is one of the great scientific collaborations in history.

Michael Siegel: Yeah. Your book certainly made that point. Even though they were so different, as you said, they were united in what they were doing.

Michael Lewis: Both of them acknowledged that neither was as good alone as they were together, that there was something about collaboration, it was just different. It brought out a thing in the other that you barely glimpse in what they do on their own. You glimpse it in Danny's work.

Amos dies in 1996. Danny visits Amos on his deathbed. They're reconciled. They'd had a falling out. Danny says something to the effect of, you know, what am I going to do without you? And Amos says there's a solution to this. You have a model of me in your head; you have a model of my mind better than anybody. Just imagine me. Call me up kind of thing. Ever since then Danny's work alone looks in places like stuff they might've done together. I wonder if to this day Danny hasn't internalized Amos to some extent.

Michael Siegel: So these two great minds revolutionized the way we think about human cognition. They revealed flaws in the ways we gather information and reach decisions. How do those flaws impact our ability to make good decisions?

Michael Lewis: So the big question is, all right, human beings are moving through the world. Even if they're not thinking about the decisions they make as probabilistic judgments, what their work showed is that when people are making probabilistic judgments even when the probabilities can be calculated, they misjudge the probabilities in ways that sound

quite familiar to anyone who watches human beings and systematically. It's not like they misjudge them all over the map. They misjudge them in certain ways.

The first source of the problem, they call it availability. What's available to the mind? I think of it as memory. So if you're driving on the highway in California and it's a sunny day and the freeway's kind of open, nobody's going the speed limit. Everybody's going 80 miles an hour, 85 miles an hour. People are racing each other. You think that looks like the safe time. Then you come upon an accident where there is a body on the road and lights flashing. For the next five miles after that nobody's driving 85 miles an hour. It's in their mind, the risk of being in this car, and they adjust their behavior but probably at a time when they are actually safest because everybody else is being safe. So the power of what comes to mind.

But Danny and Amos would say that's a bucket. Like what's available to your mind. The other bucket is similarity judgments. It's this thing is like that thing. Let me give you a sports example. When baseball scouts are looking at young baseball players to decide which one of these people are going to make good professional baseball players. The typical way they do it is like does that person remind them of someone who succeeded.

A really great example, and in fact is an attempt to disrupt this problem. The general manager of the Houston Rockets was Daryl Morey a few years ago. Daryl Morey watched as his scouts would talk about amateur basketball players. It's like, God, he reminds me of Michael Jordan. He looks like Michael Jordan. Or, God, he reminds me of Magic; or he reminds me of Larry Bird. It would be a way of selling the player, but it also would be a way of understanding the player.

Whenever these similarity judgments, those matching things happen, they almost were always wrong because actually they were just seeing physical resemblance. So he instituted a rule that was very called the Tversky rule. He said you are allowed to make those comparisons between players. You can say that player reminds me of that player as long as the players are of different race. He said it was interesting, the comparisons vanished. People make mistakes when they make those matching judgments. But when they're doing this work, they don't think they're finished. There are all kinds of little dead-ends and kind of partially productive alleys they go down. The question was, once you know it in a formal way and once you publish this stuff, how much effect does it have? Like how did their work change the world?

The simple answer to that or the copout is, well, it had big effect on academic life. They show that people were

systematically irrational. It made a mockery of neoclassical economics. It opened up a whole field called behavioral economics, which is their work brought to economics.

Danny says even though I know all of this stuff, even though I invented the knowledge, I still am susceptible to all of this stuff. With these things, it's like you got a magic act going on in your mind deceiving you in the same way that you know that it's a trick when the magician saws the woman in half. You still think he sawed her in half. So it's very hard to banish, just banish the problem from your mind. The best you can do is sort of set up systems around you as guardrails to kind of jam a wrench you once the magician starts working to sort of stop the magic act.

Michael Siegel: Tell us about how their research and findings affected hiring practices.

Michael Lewis: Their work certainly leads to this movement of sort of blind auditions. The people wanting to judge people with like something other than sight or interviews. Again, sports is the best analogy here. If you go back 40 years, not even 40 years, 20 years, the idea that anybody would select a professional baseball player in a draft based on anything but some expert scouts going and staring at him for a few games would have been preposterous. That has been flipped on its head. It's now thought that's insane to let somebody just go

look at somebody for a few games and make a judgment about him. What you want is data on that person. You don't even need to see the person. All you need to see is the stats.

So the idea that you can get around the biases, the cognitive biases that Kahneman and Tversky present by removing the temptation, by removing the thing that's causing your mind to be distorted at the sight of the person, they're completely responsible for that I think.

Michael Siegel: I'd like to turn us to a slightly different topic if we can. You've written so many books, Michael, on such fascinating topics. Another topic you've concentrated on is coaching. What I'd like to ask you is what does it take to be a good coach and how do you know if you are one.

Michael Lewis: That's a hard question. I tackle this mostly in a podcast, my *Against the Rules* podcast, but also in a little book about a high school baseball coach I had. He was a genius. What got me interested in the subject was actually an editor asking me pointblank like who is the most influential person in your life. I had to go back and think about it. I was kind of shocked to realize it was this coach who was also a teacher.

So what makes a coach really good? Apart from the qualities of the coach, you must give a nod to the circumstances

in which he's coaching or she's coaching. I would say the qualities of a good coach; the absolute first thing is trust, able to earn the trust of the person who's being coached. Because at some point you're asking that person to take some risks, to change something about themselves so that they get better and people don't like to do that. People are rightly kind of wary doing that. So that's really important. Different kinds of coaches can earn that trust in different kinds of ways. So that's one, the belief in the person who's being coached in the coach.

I'd say the second thing is - this could be achieved in different ways - you have to be extremely observant. I will tell you a bad coach. You can tell a bad coach when they walk in and just kind of start shouting stuff or they walk in and they just start giving orders even if it's in calm words. Or they aren't taking stuff in before they're spitting stuff out. The coach paying a lot of attention to a person who's being coached before they start saying stuff about what you should do.

I'd say the third thing - it sounds silly - I think really good coaches make it fun in the sense that, even if it's hard, people got to want to be coached. If they don't want it, it's kind of pointless. The way you get them to want it in addition to trust is to make it something they're looking forward to. Something you want to get. I think that some of the most

interesting coaching I've been exposed to, some of them don't call themselves coaching.

One example, I spent a very odd three days at Second City, the improvisational comedy place, when my now 18-year-old daughter was seven or eight. I brought her there because she was so negative. Everything was no, no, no and I thought, ah, I'm going to take her to an improv class. She's going to go in this class three days and they're going to teach her the value of yes. The rules of improv are, yes and, you got to take everything.

I went into the adult class. She went into the kids' class. After three hours we came out. She's jumping up and down saying that was so much fun and so easy. And I was in a cold sweat because it was so hard for me. But it was three really powerful days of coaching. They didn't call it coaching. But it was showing me the rigidities in my mind, how I just move through life with those rigidities and how hard it is to break them down and to get to some other place.

Michael Siegel: If I substitute the word leader and talk about trust, observation and fun, would that apply in your mind?

Michael Lewis: Absolutely. Absolutely. I would say if I was going to make a distinction. A coach is a leader, right? But when you say the word leader, the other thing that pops to mind that I find often absent in leadership in our culture right

now is leading by example. There's a lot of do as I say and not as I do going on. And you look at people in positions of power or influence, they are often behaving in self-serving ways that undermine any kind of message they're trying to deliver. I would instantly add to the list of those three a very careful examination of one's own behavior and a very close attentiveness to holding yourself to the highest standard so that you can ask people to hold themselves to a high standard.

Michael Siegel: We talk about modeling the way. I think you're saying the same thing there.

I want to turn to one final topic because it relates to another book you've written more recently. That book is called *The Fifth Risk* which has been described by some as a love letter to government employees which they certainly need. Can you give us an example of an unknown or uncelebrated achievement by a federal agency or public servant that publicly impacted society?

Michael Lewis: Sure. I'll pick one. I'll pick one and I'll tell you how I picked it. So here's what happened. Government shuts down in January of 2018. Like two-thirds of the people got sent home. They don't get paid because they were unessential. Telling them they are not important. I called up a friend who runs an organization called Partnership for Public Service which gives awards out to people in public service. They were just in the process of gathering up all the

nominations for these awards. They're called Sammies. I said could you just send me the raw list? He sent me the raw list. I said I want to do this. I want to write about one of them kind of randomly.

I just took the guy's name that was on the top of the list. And the list was alphabetized. His name was Arthur A. Allen. He worked at the Coast Guard it said. He was an oceanographer who went into the Coast Guard because the work looked kind of interesting. But he didn't know what it was when he was a young post-doc in the '70s. He quickly figures out that, to his surprise actually, Americans have an incredible ability to get lost at sea. On average, every day, ten Americans are lost at sea. Today about seven get rescued, so three Americans a day on average dying because they were not found at sea. It is pleasure craft. It's whatever it is. Fishing boats, whatever it is.

He figures out that one of the problems in the middle of the rescues, when they're doing this search and rescue operations, is that they're getting word that someone is lost. They know where they kind of went lost. But it's six hours later. The objects drift on the ocean. Where did this human being drift? That depends on what kind of object this person is on. Each object has its own drift characteristics.

Arthur Allen basically invents the science of how objects drift to figure out how you find people. It takes him years. He's floating stuff in the Long Island Sound on his own time, on his own dime and making measurements of how objects drift and building them into mathematical equations. They can then be put in a computer, then the Coast Guard search and rescue team can just plug it in.

Flash forward. I think it's 2001 when his system finally went live and all the Coast Guard had it. Miami Coast Guard Station gets word that a 300-pound man has run out of the window of his Carnival cruise ship cabin and gone into the ocean, but they only discovered his absence some hours after he had done it. Any other time in human history, that person is dead. I mean even if he can last for days, you can't find a human being in the middle of the ocean.

But Arthur Allen has created a mathematical equation. They plugged it in and they pluck him out. Hours later they plucked him out of the sea. All the newspaper stories are incredible find, amazing, a miracle. A miracle, this guy was saved at sea. Then everybody moves on the next day. Arthur Allen saved that man's life. There are hundreds of other people whose lives Arthur Allen saved. Not only has no one ever heard of Arthur Allen. We, as a society, sent him home without pay and told him he wasn't essential. It's extraordinary to me.

Michael Siegel: Yeah. Wow. That is so inspirational. We have people in the judiciary who are Arthur Allens as well, and as you say, unrecognized but so important. Thank you so very much for this interview --

Michael Lewis: Totally a pleasure.

Michael Siegel: -- and for all you've done. Keep up the great work. We're all waiting for your next one.

Lori Murphy: Thanks, Michael. And thanks to our listening audience.

A reminder that the books Michael Lewis discussed today are: *The Undoing Project: A Friendship that Changed Our Minds*; *Coach: Lessons on the Game of Life*; and, *The Fifth Risk*. To hear more episodes of *In Session*, visit the Executive Education page on fjc.dcn and click or tap podcast. You can also search for and subscribe to *In Session* on your mobile device.

In Session: Leading the Judiciary is produced by Shelly Easter and directed and edited by Craig Bowden. Our program coordinator is Anna Glouchkova. Special thanks to Chris Murray. I'm Lori Murphy. Thanks for listening. Until next time.

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