

Federal Judicial Center  
In Session Episode 6  
Courageous Follower and Intelligent Disobedience  
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Lori Murphy: Hello. I'm Lori Murphy, assistant division director for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Welcome to a podcast from the Federal Judicial Center focused on executive leadership in the federal judiciary.

In today's episode, we'll talk with someone intimately familiar with two provocative and interrelated concepts, courageous followership and intelligent disobedience.

All of us had the opportunity to transform our organizations, not just from positions of leadership, but from the vantage point of what our guest calls courageous followership. Courageous followers help implement a leader's vision while simultaneously allowing those leaders to become more successful.

Yet, there are times when blind obedience can be dangerous to our organizations and institutions. During those times, what we most need are individuals to demonstrate something our guest calls intelligent disobedience by holding themselves and others accountable, and, in doing so, averting catastrophe.

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

Michael Siegel: Thanks, Lori. Today, we're going to talk with Ira Chaleff, author of *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and for Our Leaders* and *Intelligent Disobedience: Doing Right When What You're Told to Do Is Wrong*.

Ira is the founder and president of Executive Coaching & Consulting Associates in Washington, D.C. He's an adjunct faculty at the Federal Executive Institute and visiting leadership scholar at the Moller Institute Cambridge University in England.

Mr. Chaleff has served on the board of the International Leadership Association and is chairman emeritus of the Congressional Management Foundation, a non-profit, non-partisan organization that provides management research and training to members of Congress and their staffs. *Intelligent Disobedience* was named the best new leadership book of 2015 by the University of San Diego, School of Leadership and Education Science. Ira has been named one of the 100 best minds on leadership by *Leadership Excellence* magazine. Thanks for joining us, Ira.

Ira Chaleff: You're very welcome, Michael. The Federal Judicial Center was one of the first to identify the value of courageous following. And, I was so pleased we did work many

years and that you then integrated it into your own training curriculums. So, it's great to be back in touch with you.

Michael Siegel: Yes. That's a really nice memory, Ira. Thanks for bringing it up. We're going to turn now to the first portion of the episode focused on your book, *The Courageous Follower*. In that book, you say the time has come for leaders and followers to develop and honor new models for relating to each other. That's a powerful statement. What do you mean by it?

Ira Chaleff: Well, we know that the historic model of the great man theory, and it was a man, is discredited. That was a theory where the leader had the vision, gave the orders and everybody else followed. We know, in a highly complex technical society, that doesn't work. There is expertise at every level of our organization systems. That expertise has to flow both up and down, and leaders have to be as good listeners as they are communicators. And, if that relationship is in balance, that's how leadership succeeds.

Michael Siegel: So, there's a fluidity and a dynamism to the relationship?

Ira Chaleff: Yes, absolutely.

Michael Siegel: Most of us who prefer to see ourselves as leaders instead of followers, yet you suggest that there can be

great dignity and meaning in the follower role. In fact, most leaders are also followers. Can you elaborate?

Ira Chaleff: Yes. I really like that word, "dignity," Michael. Thank you for calling it out. We know that in our culture and in other cultures, if someone says you're a follower, you can take umbrage at that. We're all supposed to be leaders. Well, I take issue with that, and I'll explain that. I believe that we have wrongly defined the follower as a personality type. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but that's not what we're talking about.

We're talking about follower as a role. And, sometimes, we play a leader role. Sometimes, we play a follower role. It's very obvious. In the court, the chief clerk will have people that they are leading and they will be following. The question is, how do you do both with integrity and with strength? And, that is what creates healthy leadership and healthy followership.

Michael Siegel: Great. Yes, I like the idea that followers are not a personality type, but rather they play a very important role in the organization. You go on, Ira, to describe forms of courage that are required by followers such as the courage to assume responsibility. How might this play out in the workplace?

Ira Chaleff: Well, it's interesting that you particularly called out the courage to assume responsibility. In my model, there are five forms of courage. There's a courage to support the leader, the courage to question or challenge if their ideas are not optimally serving the institution. There's the courage to take responsibility, which I'll come back to in a moment, and there's the courage to participate in transformation. It's always easier to see what the other person needs to change. We need to change ourselves for an optimum relationship. And then there's the courage to an ethical stance when needed.

I'm delighted that there have been many dissertations completed testing my model. And, they've asked a variety of questions around the model. One of the more recent dissertations asked the question, do leaders value courageous follower behaviors? She wasn't sure that they would. Well, it turned out that they do value each of the behaviors. But, the behavior they valued as much as all the other combined was this courage to assume responsibility.

And what that means in essence is that once you understand the mission, once you understand your role in the mission, you don't wait around for orders. You take initiative. You act and you accept responsibility for the decisions you make, for the initiative you'd take. Obviously, you do it within the overall framework of the organization. You don't start to step outside

of the bounds of your own part of the mission, but you take full accountability and full initiative within that system.

Michael Siegel: On the other hand, there may come a time when a follower has to have the courage to challenge a leader. I'm sure leaders like this less than the other courage. How does the follower summon the courage to do that, and can you provide an example?

Ira Chaleff: Okay. So first of all, let's make sure we have a common understanding of what we mean by challenge a leader. What I don't mean is challenge the leader's authority or their right to lead or their position as leader. What I do mean is, when necessary, to question or challenge the assumptions that they're working on, the information if it's not correct, complete, or current, or the analysis that they make if you can see a significant flaw in it.

So, in essence, what we're trying to do, if the leader would step back and have some objectivity, we're trying to make sure that not only is the right thing done, but we're trying to make sure the leader looks good. No leader wants to be seen making a serious mistake especially if the people around him or her were aware of it and could've warned them that they were about to make an egregious error and help them to correct that.

So, that's what we mean by the courage to challenge. What's an example? Well, first of all, we have to understand

whether we're in the leader role or the follower role. We are humans and, by definition, we are imperfect. So, you may have a wonderful leader who has many virtues, but they also have a blind spot.

So, for example, and this is something that most people who've been in the workforce for any amount of time have experienced, you may have a leader who runs very poor meetings. The meetings tend to go on much longer than scheduled. They don't follow an agenda for which people came prepared. They tend to go down rabbit holes. The leader gets sidetracked by something that's a particular interest to him or her but may not be the optimum use of the group's time together.

So, this would an example where a courageous follower took the leader aside and said, look, I know that you want to run the most effective and efficient operation possible. You've demonstrated that. I have some feedback on one area where there could be improvement. May I or can we have that conversation now? Is this a good time? And, of course, the leader will usually say yes or no, I'm busy. Come back at three o'clock. And then, you lay it out.

And you don't lay it out -- you lay it out in careful language, so that you're not blaming the leader but you're helping him or her to understand the impact of how the current way of running the meeting is adversely affecting the group.

And you offer solutions on how to potentially do it better. There's an art to this. When we do workshops, as you know, Michael, we practice this kind of conversation because it has to be done skillfully. But, it won't be done unless the individual also finds the courage to initiate the conversation.

Michael Siegel: What a great distinction you made between challenge the authority and challenging a practice or a program. And really, it's an act of support. It's not an act of subversion as you're presenting it. You're also, Ira, painting a picture of leaders who are receptive to the feedback. How do we find leaders or how do we develop leaders who are receptive to the feedback of their followers?

Ira Chaleff: Unfortunately, everybody thinks they're really good at this. Everybody thinks, oh, no. I have an open door. People can come in and tell me anything. But then, you find that there are certain responses that they have during those conversations which actually discourage candor. So, we have to spend a little time with people in their leader role helping them to understand better ways of receiving this feedback that actually demonstrate that they really do want it even if it's uncomfortable. And, frankly, even if they may or may not ultimately accept the solutions that the person giving the feedback is offering, it's not necessary that they accept those solutions. It's necessary that they understand what the



person in the follow role is trying to bring to their attention, and that they engage around that and find better ways to perform that part of their leadership role.

Michael Siegel: Excellent. And that they trust the motivation of the people offering it.

Ira Chaleff: That's a great point. Yes, assume benign intent.

Michael Siegel: So, in the latest addition of your book, *The Courageous Follower*, you've added a chapter on The Courage to Speak to the Hierarchy, which is intriguing. The judiciary is a hierarchical organization. What insights can you provide on the courage to speak to this or any other hierarchy?

Ira Chaleff: When I first developed the courageous follower model, in my mind, I was thinking -- you might think more of -- my background was largely with congressional offices, as I think you know. So, I was thinking about a chief of staff or a legislative director who had a very direct relationship with a member of Congress. And, therefore, based on that relationship, they could develop the trust. And their judgment came to be respected, so they could give candid feedback that would be at least considered.

Michael Siegel: Yes, that would be equivalent to the clerk and the chief judge.

Ira Chaleff: Exactly, exactly. So, that - and that works fairly well. Later on, when I do executive coaching, especially in very large agencies, I realize that many times, orders were coming from four or five levels above the individual. And in large bureaucracies, they could not necessarily realistically have a relationship with the top leader who's giving those orders or setting those priorities. And did this mean that they were helpless to have a voice in the matter or to get the system to consider changing based on the impacts the program or order was having? And I had to conclude that the answer was, no, that's not acceptable.

But, now you have to find different strategies. So, it may be, for example, let's say you see something backlogging in your court system. And we all know, you know that the courts are generally understaffed and their case loads are enormous. And, so, this is something that I'm sure is wrestled with all the time. But let's say that you are three or four levels down and you see a situation where you have some ideas on how to potentially streamline the process, so that it reduces the backlogging that occurs, but you don't have a platform from which to study that and voice it. Well, you might, for example, suggest up your chain of command that a task force be formed and you would be happy to serve on it. And that would then give you a platform to really examine the issue and lay out options that

could really make a significant difference for the better, even though you were not formally in a position to have initiated that conversation and create the chain.

Michael Siegel: That's a great insight. And you'll be happy to know that this has actually happened in some of our courts. So, it's a magnificent example of leading from anywhere really. I have another question before we take a quick break. In the epilogue of your book, *The Courageous Follower*, you say, when leaders and followers fulfill their respective roles, they give each other the gift of being able to serve well. This sounds like it's really important to the public sector.

Ira Chaleff: Well, that's right. Most people in the public sector I find are drawn there at least in part because of a sense of desire to serve. The key is keeping the humanity in the system. As we know, bureaucracies must have a lot of rules to govern them. And, those rules are important because they do their best to make sure that personal individual bias is minimized and has much objective fairness. Everybody is sort of judged by the same rules, et cetera. And yet, if we become totally ruled down, we can lose our humanity. And that's how that sometimes a bureaucracy will make a decision collectively that no individual in that system would have made if they were completely authorized to use their judgment.

So, I think this is where, to the degree we nurture our relationships between the different levels of the hierarchy, we see the humanity. We come back to this viewpoint of benign intent on the part of everyone even if we disagree with them or sometimes they're disappointed by their decisions. I think we keep making it possible for us to feel that we are in an organization with true humanitarian values and that we are part of keeping that spirit alive, so that even though it is a legalistic culture, and it must be, it's also a human culture at the same time.

Michael Siegel: What a great note to move to the break on. Thank you for that inspirational comment. We're going to take a quick break. When we come back, we're going to continue talking with Ira Chaleff about *The Courageous Follower* and *Intelligent Disobedience*.

Paul Vamvas: Hi. This is Paul Vamvas, producer of the new FJC podcast, *Off Paper*. Mark Sherman, the head of the probation and pretrial services group at the FJC, hosts *Off Paper*, and in every episode brings news, insights and analysis about the best ways for probation and pretrial services officers to serve their clients and their communities and achieve the goals of the Charter for Excellence. Mark's guests are officers in the field sharing their experiences, academics in the criminal justice

community sharing their findings, and practitioners at the national and local levels sharing their guidance.

Episodes of *Off Paper* are available wherever you get your podcasts, as well as on [fjc.dcn](http://fjc.dcn), [fjc.gov](http://fjc.gov). and the U.S. Court's YouTube channel. You can also subscribe to Off Paper using your smartphone's podcast app. So, come on, you won't want to miss what's on *Off Paper*.

Michael Siegel: Welcome back. I'm talking with Ira Chaleff, author of *The Courageous Follower* and *Intelligent Disobedience*. Okay, Ira, in this portion of the episode, we're going to focus on your book, *Intelligent Disobedience*. Ira, what is intelligent disobedience? And why did you start to address it?

Ira Chaleff: Well, intelligent disobedience is taken from the world of guide dog training when dogs are trained to support a person who is blind. Of course, they have to learn to obey all of their commands. But, once in a while, the person who's blind may issue a command that would be unsafe to execute like crossing the street when there's a quiet hybrid car coming around the corner. The dog must know when not to obey. And that is if the dog cannot differentiate between when to obey and when not to obey, it can't be a guide dog because it can't

assure the safety of the human being who is the leader in this case.

So, I realized that that is a very powerful metaphor for what we sometimes need to do when we're in the follower role vis-à-vis our leaders who have a blind spot.

Michael Siegel: You described our primal instinct to obey authority, especially when that authority is cloaked in a doctor's gown, a pilot's uniform or a judge's robe. And yet, surgeons, airline captains, judges, and others can issue commands that if executed could cause considerable harm. Can you explain how intelligent disobedience can, in these cases, prevent catastrophe?

Ira Chaleff: You're right that I do mention the word "primal." More than primal, however, is the continuous reinforcement that we get from our earlier childhood forward on obeying authority. Every society needs to teach its young how to obey the norms, the rules, and the authority figures who are legitimate. What happens is we teach this very, very well and we neglect to do what they do in guide dog training to also teach our children and then our professionals what are the exceptions to the rule when they should not obey if the order unintentionally or not would result in harm if executed.

So, this is something that I believe should be built in to professional training wherever decisions are made that affect life, safety, and other core human values.

Michael Siegel: That's really valuable insight for our listening audience. I want to come back now though to the methodology. Let's say somebody even high up in the organization like a clerk of the court has a problem with an order issued by a judge to put it in our context. What would be the methodology to bring this to the attention of the leader?

Ira Chaleff: Well, there's two different responses based on how time-sensitive the matter is. For example, let's say that there is an active shooter event suddenly happens in a court room, and the judge fails to absorb what's happening. The clerk or one of the other officers of the court need to be willing to immediately take over and do what in guide dog training is called a counter pull. If the blind person is about to step off a dangerous edge, the dog is trained to pull them in the other direction. In an immediately dangerous situation, that's what intelligent disobedience looks like.

More often, this efficient time to absorb what the order you're getting is, compare it to the goals, the values, the cultural sensitivities, the evolving cultural sensitivities, and to then make a choice: should this order be complied with or should it be questioned? And if it should be questioned,

overcome your own, if you will, socialization to just obey authority and instead find the best way to question the order. Whatever decision you make ultimately, whether to obey or not, you must remember you are accountable. We can never say -- and this is established juris prudence, we can never say, I was just following orders. If you knew it was an order that would result in harm, you have a responsibility to not comply but instead try to get it changed.

Michael Siegel: Excellent. You say it's studies that have demonstrated over the years our inclination to obey. One of the most widely known of those is the Stanley Milgram experiments at Yale. Can you briefly tell us about this study?

Ira Chaleff: The Milgram experiments are the experiment where the subject thought that they were administering shocks to a learner and the authority figure was in a lab coat and issued orders to keep administering shocks. They weren't really shocks, but it was very convincing and the subjects thought that they were doing so. Two out of three people obeyed all the way to potentially lethal level of shocks.

Now, that part is pretty well-known. The part that's not well-known, which I emphasized in the book, is that Milgram then studied what was the difference between those who didn't obey. And, it turned out that almost everyone experience significant psychological stress about obeying when they knew it was wrong



to obey. How they resolved that stress was the difference. The people who kept administering shocks sort of caved and said, he's the authority figure. He's responsible. I'm just going to do what he said. That resolved the stress but not the ethics. The people who did not obey said, I'm going to resolve this stress by just saying, no, I don't care that you're the authority figure. I have a conscience and I'm going to follow that. That also resolved the stress but now did it in an ethical way.

Michael Siegel: That's very interesting. Towards the end of your book, you provide a compelling illustration of the power of intelligent disobedience from the annals of the tragedy of 9/11 and, in particular, the actions of Richard Rescorla. Would you share an example to highlight the power intelligent obedience can have?

Ira Chaleff: Yes. In this case, he saved 2,800 lives. He was the security officer in one of the towers. He had already observed the vulnerability based on the earlier bombing that had occurred. He was not able to convince management to relocate but instead he sort of wrested from them an agreement that there would be a safety drill done every month on how to evacuate the building. And when the first plane hit, orders were given for everyone to remain at their desks. He recognized that was a dangerous order. He ordered everyone, he disobeyed and ordered

everyone to evacuate and he got out everybody except two people and he went back in to try to get them and the building came down and he died in that event as a true hero having used the principle of intelligent obedience. So, he may not have used the terminology.

Michael Siegel: That is a very, very compelling anecdote. Ira, is there anything else you'd like to share with our audience?

Ira Chaleff: I'll emphasize that intelligent disobedience is based on intelligent obedience. Most of the time, courts are social structures. And most of the time, everybody is following the established rules. It's just staying alert to when a specific order actually would have an adverse consequence and shifting gears. And then for those who want to further inculcate the principles of courageous following or intelligent disobedience, I have found that there are reading groups in different agencies that just read a chapter and have a brown bag lunch a week and discuss it. And that makes a significant difference in employee engagement and morale. So, I'd like to just share that as well.

Michael Siegel: Thanks so much. Those are really helpful. And thank you, Ira, for sharing your really important insights and research with us. We really appreciate it and we wish you well as you go forward.

Lori Murphy: Thanks, Michael, and thanks to our listening audience as well. If you're interested in learning more about Ira Chaleff and his books, *The Courageous Follower* and *Intelligent Disobedience*, you can visit the executive education page on [fjc.dcn](http://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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