

Federal Judicial Center
In Session:Leading the Judiciary
Episode 14:Ambidextrous Leadership and Organizational Culture

Lori Murphy: Coming up:

Michele Gelfand: People really yearn for rules and rituals and routines in these kinds of contexts. We don't want to tighten up too much and we need to allow some flexibility for creativity.

Lori Murphy: In today's episode, we discuss how social norms, the unwritten rules of behavior impact an organization's culture.

We discuss the role that chronic and acute threats have on shaping culture and how culture in turn shapes the interactions among leaders and staff.

Our guest today is Dr. Michele Gelfand, a distinguished university professor of psychology at the University of Maryland, College Park where she also directs the Culture Lab. Michele has spent her career researching and understanding as many aspects of culture as possible. Her pioneering work has been cited thousands of times in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *The Economist*, as well as on numerous network, cable television, and radio outlets.

Michele is the recipient of numerous awards and she is past president of the International Association for Conflict Management.

Today's conversation focuses on her book, *Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire Our World*. Our host for today's episode is Michael Siegel, senior education specialist for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Michael, take it away.

Michael Siegel: Thanks a lot. Well, hello, Michele. Thanks so much for joining us.

Michele Gelfand: It's great to be here.

Michael Siegel: Would you please define the term social norms and culture and how they apply to organizations?

Michele Gelfand: Sure. So as a cross-cultural psychologist, I've long been interested in the deeper cultural codes that guide our behavior. And there's lots of ways that cultures vary but I've been focused on the variation that we see across cultures and how strictly they follow social norms. Social norms are these unwritten rules of behavior that are found in all cultures. And they're really critical for us as humans to predict each other's behavior and to coordinate our social action. But what I found over the last couple of decades is that some cultures tend to veer tight. They have strict rules and punishments for deviance. And other cultures tend to be loose. They have weaker norms and they're much more permissive.

And I first started looking at this at the national level in a paper that we published in *Science* some years ago where we could differentiate nations on the strictness of their social norms. But this lens can also help us to understand culture variation across different levels of analysis including our organizations, our households. And it's what I call a fractal pattern drawing on this metaphor from physics that we can use tight-loose to understand variation across different levels and across different scales with really kind of the same lens.

Michael Siegel: So how do these norms, these cultural norms form what you call cultural codes? How do they form and how do they affect organizations?

Michele Gelfand: Yeah. This is such a good question. At the national level, we didn't find any similarity in tight cultures, and on the flipside, loose cultures in terms of GDP or their location or their tradition or their language. But we found one important difference between the two different types of cultures. And that is how much collective threat they tended to experience across their histories.

So, tight cultures tended to have a lot of threat either from Mother Nature - constant natural disasters or famines, or from human nature. Think invasions or pathogens or density. And loose cultures tend to have less of those collective threats across their history. And it makes sense that when you have a

lot of collective threat, you need stricter rules to coordinate to survive. And so there's kind of a logic behind the evolution of tight and loose at the national level. And we could see the same thing also applies to organizations.

Michael Siegel: So interesting. We could project perhaps that American culture might become tighter after 9/11 and this recent pandemic. Would you speculate that?

Michele Gelfand: I would. I think that the U.S. has had the luxury, with some exceptions, of not having chronic invasions and with some exceptions, not having chronic disasters. And we're separated from other continents by two oceans. So in a lot of ways, loose cultures have had the ability to be more permissive because they haven't had to coordinate as much as cultures that have had a lot of threat.

Still I would predict that we will be tightening. We have tightened. And also it might be the case, and some of our initial data suggests this, that loose cultures take a little longer to adapt to threat than tight cultures that have much more experience in dealing with them throughout their histories.

Michael Siegel: Great. And what are some benefits and drawbacks to each type of culture in general?

Michele Gelfand: So cultures each have their own benefits and liabilities depending on your vantage point. And I call

this the order versus openness tradeoff in terms of what tight and loose confers to human groups.

Tight groups tend to have much more order. They have less crime, more monitoring. They have more uniformity and synchrony. And they have much more impulse control. When you live in a context where there are a lot of rules, you need to manage your impulses in order to avoid punishments.

And loose cultures struggle with order. They're more chaotic. They're less synchronized. And they have a host of self-regulation problems. But loose cultures corner the market on openness. They tend to be much more tolerant of people from different groups, races, and religion, the stigmatized. And they tend to be more creative. And tight cultures struggle in general with openness. So you could see that they each have their own strengths and liabilities depending on your vantage point.

Michael Siegel: I think there's a part of your book where you talk about greater innovations coming from loose cultures because of the creativity.

Michele Gelfand: Well, you know, it's interesting. When you think about innovation, it actually involves both tight and loose codes because you need loose cultures to create incredibly interesting and different ideas. And that's what loose cultures are good at. But you need tight cultures in order to scale up,

to implement, to coordinate at a very large level. And loose cultures struggle with implementation. So actually, you need both tight and loose if you really think about what innovation involves in terms of both creativity and implementation.

Michael Siegel: The judiciary in general is a tight culture. Legal culture tends to be tight. How can judicial leaders balance the deep respect they have for the structure and traditions of the institution with an openness to change?

Michele Gelfand: This is such a great question. And it sort of reflects a broader principle that tight and loose organizations have very different people and practices and leadership.

So tight organizations in general, including the judiciary, have people who are attracted to those organizations, who have a lot of conscientiousness and they're careful. They're what psychologists call prevention-focused individuals who are trying to avoid mistakes. And they have practices that foster a lot of standardization and efficiency. So they tend to be more formal. And they have leaders who are more autonomous and independent.

And loose cultures have very different people, practices, and leaders. They have people who have higher openness and are more inclined to take risks. Their practices foster a lot of flexibility and experimentation. And they tend to be much more

informal. Their preferred leadership is more team-oriented and charismatic.

And to the point about why do these differences evolve, even in organizations, we know that tight organizations are typically in a context where there's a lot of potential threat and needs for coordination. Think airlines or manufacturing or the military. And they also evolve in context where there's a lot of accountability and oversight like in the judiciary or other context like law or accounting.

Whereas, loose organizations with their different people, practices, and leadership styles evolve in very different ecologies in the context where there is much more focus on high tech. In the context where there's a lot of mobility and diversity. So you can imagine that the judiciary actually needs to veer tight given its context.

The critical issue for me is how to think about how to negotiate tight and loose in your organization particularly when it's possible that organizations start getting too tight or too loose. And I could tell you a little bit more about kind of the Goldilocks principle of tight-loose before getting into how can you diagnose that - extreme tightness or looseness - if that would be of interest.

Michael Siegel: Sure, so too hot, too cold, just right. Right?

Michele Gelfand: That's right. So the Goldilocks principle, as you know, it's a very simple story about having balance - not too hot, not too cold, not too soft, not too hard. And it also tends to apply to social norms. And the gist is that all groups need to veer tight or loose for good reasons. But those groups that get too extreme, either get extremely loose or extremely tight, tend to start getting very dysfunctional. We've seen that, for example, at the national level. Countries that are extremely tight or extremely loose have higher suicide, depression, and they're more unhappy.

But this principle also tends to apply to organizations. Think about places like airlines that need to veer tight. We don't want them to make all sorts of weird decisions. But sometimes, they can get too tight, as we saw years ago with the United Airlines fiasco, where people were tending to just follow norms blindly. And United needed to insert some discretion into that tight system. It's something I call flexible tightness. But think like the flipside, places like Uber or Tesla that should veer loose.

But you can argue that we're getting too loose, chaotic, and having a hard time scaling up. And here is where we have to think about where we can insert some structure into these systems. Here's what I call structure looseness. So what's really exciting is that we can actually negotiate tight and

loose in organizations. We invented norms and we're able to actually calibrate them. And once we understand how to assess tight-loose in our organizations, we can start thinking about wait, are we getting too tight? And how can we actually become more flexibly tight? Or on the flipside, if we're getting too loose, how can we insert some structure.

So it's exciting to actually have leaders think about this and be mindful. And use the terminology and use the logic of it to actually engineer cultures that have the right balance. Even in the context where you need to veer tight, you can find domains that are not safety related in order to insert some flexibility. And that helps that system be quite productive and happy.

Michael Siegel: Love that concept of ambidexterity. And I can even say it. It's a wonderful idea and it draws leaders to a challenge of how do you become ambidextrous. Is this something that people have to learn?

Michele Gelfand: I think it's something that is eminently learnable. Once you start thinking about it, you start seeing it everywhere. You start detecting when things are getting too tight or too loose.

So for example, the way that you start thinking about extreme tightness is you look around and see, well, what's the supervision like in my organization? Is it kind of helicopter-

like and hierarchical? Is it ultra-standardized, promoting uniformity? Are there rules for almost everything? And are people starting to feel uncomfortable, dissenting, and disagreeing? Do they have a voice? Or are they walking on eggshells? That's a way that you could start thinking about yeah, maybe we're getting too tight. And we could start thinking about how to insert some flexibility into that system if we think it's getting too tight. We can start asking employees to explore different ideas. Give them unstructured time for brainstorming and be open about feedback about doing different things. Encourage pushback and in fact decentralize a bit. That allows us to kind of loosen up in a context that might need to be tight.

But we also could see that we can diagnose when there's context that are getting extraordinarily loose, when they're getting so chaotic and uncoordinated. Here we can look for signs like is there a lack of monitoring in many domains? Is there a lack of oversight? Are things completely unstructured? And are there any clear guidelines and goals? And do things seem pretty chaotic and unpredictable? And do people miss deadlines and targets with some frequency? This is really a sort of sign that things are getting too loose. And that we need to start inserting some structure into this system.

Here we need to do the opposite that I just described. We want to introduce more rules to create alignment and coordination. We want to set benchmarks and add structure to meetings and tasks and have more oversight. Maybe centralize a little bit more. And I talk about this in my book, *Rule Makers, Rule Breakers*, where I think it's really exciting that we could think about how to negotiate tight and loose in organizations. And of course, it's not one size fits all. But I think leaders empowered with some of this terminology can actually really make a difference in recalibrating as necessary.

Michael Siegel: So when confronted with a crisis like the one we're in now, the pandemic, leaders may be tempted to adopt a very tight orientation regardless of their usual cultural starting point. How can leaders navigate a crisis to benefit the organization and their staff?

Michele Gelfand: Yeah. This is such a great question. Actually, a lot of our data show that people really desire greater tightness under threat. You can imagine that threat brings so much uncertainty, so much fear. And people really yearn for rules and rituals and routines in these kinds of contexts. Psychologically speaking, threat really is extraordinarily anxiety-provoking. So people desire greater tightness in this context.

And I think it's really important for leaders to respond to that, those kind of desired rules and routines and rituals. But also to be mindful that we also don't want to tighten up too much like I just mentioned. We need to allow some flexibility for creativity. And I do believe that in times of COVID-19 that we need to balance both of those. We might need to veer tighter to help to coordinate and manage anxiety. But we have to remind ourselves that our creative entrepreneurial spirit, we also need to be allowed in these kinds of contexts.

Michael Siegel: So, so far we've been talking about organizational cultures. But your research also shows that each individual has a cultural orientation, tighter or looser. How does one's cultural orientation impact leadership behavior?

Michele Gelfand: We all have our own default tight or loose mindsets. Some of us veer tight. We know these rules and we like structure. And we manage our impulses with great frequency. And others of us lean loose. We don't notice rules as much. We might be more risk-taking and maybe a little more impulsive. And we're okay with the lack of structure and ambiguity.

And the key here is that we all have these default settings on tight and loose based on our own experience, our histories, our cultures. And we can actually quantify what that looks like. So on my website I have a quiz, the tight-loose mindset

quiz, where you could see where do you fall on tight and loose mindsets.

And it's also important to recognize though that we can quickly shift to have different mindsets depending on the situation. So for example, we all quickly tighten up in the library, most of us, and at funeral settings. But we also loosen up in parties or in city streets. So it's really critical to know that we, as humans, have such great flexibility with our tight and loose mindsets even if we all have our own default.

What's exciting to me about this is that it can help us, first of all, understand where do we fall in this mindset and think about our own preferred level of tight and loose in general. And then to think about the people around you - your spouse, your kids, your colleagues, your coworkers - and think about where they fall, and maybe why they fall the way they do on this default continuum. And maybe we'll find out and have more empathy for that perspective instead of kind of being upset with how people react to the same situation with respect to rules. We might realize that they have their default setting for a good reason. So that might help us to empathize with other people. And it also might help us to think about how to resolve conflicts that stem from differences and orientations

toward rules. This happens a lot with parenting, how strict or permissive should we be in what domains.

I know I could say my husband is a lawyer so he veers tighter. And I veer looser as an academic. So we have a lot of negotiations over tight-loose in our household including with our kids. It sounds a little cheesy but you can actually think about what domains do we need to be tight in and what domains can we be loose in in our households or in our organizations.

And from a negotiation point of view - I also study negotiation - we can think about what are our priorities? Which domains really can we agree on we need to be tight and loose and make tradeoffs on those? So what's exciting is that once we realize we have our own mindsets and for what reasons, we can start empathizing with others. We could start negotiating conflicts that relate from parenting or finances or even how you load the dishwasher. As in my case, I get a lot of negative feedback on my dishwasher loading behavior. I think it's a great unobtrusive indicator of tightness and looseness because, you know, his loading of the dishwasher looks a lot different than mine.

Michael Siegel: Mine probably looks more like yours. So in terms of empathizing and conflict management, negotiation, let's apply that to a work group. And say you're a leader who's

managing a work group that has very different tight and loose people on the staff. What do you do?

Michele Gelfand: I think in general, as we're trying to navigate cultural differences, we want to focus on two things. And this comes directly from the acculturation literature. We want people to feel psychologically safe, to feel like their culture is valued so they can have their identity and it's something that they can cherish. But leaders also want to at the same time help people to feel like they have a superordinate identity, meaning that they're identified also with the team. And I think that once we have both of those identities, these multiple identities that are cherished, groups really work very well together because they feel safe and authentic to be in their cultural selves. But they also feel they're part of the team where they're all are following the same goals and have a lot of trust. So I think you can negotiate both of those things.

You can also help people to understand why these differences evolve in the first place, to have empathy. We can help them to understand that their deficiencies actually are other culture's strengths and vice versa. And so in fact, we need each other in intercultural groups and in work teams to have multiple cultural codes to be more effective. So I think once we start to really talk about these differences and label

them and help people understand them, we're much better off in being able to manage these differences.

Michael Siegel: Thanks for reminding us about psychological safety. We just talked recently to Amy Edmondson about that. And it's a fantastic concept applied as you say to a work group. Let me ask you though, if you're not a leader, how can each of us interact successfully with people who have very different cultural orientations?

Michele Gelfand: Yeah. I think first, we have to start with the self. To think about how have I been socialized to have a particular set of cultural attitudes in this place, in this case, toward rules. We tend to ignore that we have our own cultural programming. And I'm often reminded of that funny story about two fish who were swimming along and they passed another fish who says, "Hey, boys, how's the water?" And they swim on and one says to the other, "What the heck is water?" And, you know, it's a funny story because sometimes, the most important realities around us are the most difficult to see. We take them for granted. And for a fish, that's water. But for humans, that's culture. And we really, first of all, ignore that. We have been socialized to have a certain set of codes.

But it's then important to help people develop what people call cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence can be developed. It's a muscle. It matters much more than things

like IQ or EQ and intercultural interactions. This is what some of our research has shown. So once we start to think about where do we come from in terms of our culture, where other people come from, we're able to understand and make sense of other people's behavior with much more empathy and understanding. And so I think that it should be a lifelong goal to think about culture which tends to be really invisible but really profound.

The other thing I would just mention with intercultural interactions is often while we do need to think about cultural differences, we also should focus on how we're similar as well. Harry Triandis, one of the founders of cross-cultural psychology and my mentor, always reminded me that we should be thinking about cultural differences but also embed it in an enormous number of similarities.

We did a study recently where we looked at this in the U.S. and Pakistan. And it was a really interesting study because when we interviewed Pakistanis, they didn't just think about the U.S. as being loose; they thought of the U.S. as being extraordinarily loose. Like they were half-naked all the time or drinking beer at breakfast. And likewise, Americans didn't just think about Pakistanis as being tight. They thought they were extraordinarily tight and only thought about them being in

a context like a mosque. They didn't associate Pakistanis reading poetry or dancing or listening to music.

And so what we did was a pretty simple technique. We had Pakistanis and Americans read each other's diaries over a week's time. And these diaries were unedited actually. So the U.S. diaries are certainly more loose. And the Pakistani diaries certainly reflected more strictness in that context. But what was remarkable was that over a week's time, people started to realize they had a lot more similarities than they realized. Yeah, they recognized they were different. But they also saw the common humanity that they shared. And it made them have much more positive attitudes toward each other. So I would recommend that we think about it and try to understand cultural differences, develop CQ, cultural intelligence. But that we also try to look for similarities that we have with other people at the same time.

Michael Siegel: What a fascinating study about the diaries.

Michele Gelfand: I just want to mention that the first time we did the study, we simply showed Pakistanis pictures of Americans in these different contexts. Looking more formal, being at dinner with their parents. We showed Americans pictures of Pakistanis playing sports and reading poetry. But just showing pictures didn't do the trick. In fact, they didn't

really buy that these were real in that study. And that's when we said, you know what, we're just going to go with the real thing. Let's really expose them to each other's lives. And we didn't edit those diaries. We wanted them to be real. And it was really very encouraging to see that we were able to reduce perception of cultural distance and understanding. And avoid that kind of extreme stereotyping that happens sometimes when we don't really interact. Or we interact in the media or we live in our own echo chamber. So I think the technique could be used for other contexts where we need to really understand each other and bridge divides.

Michael Siegel: Very powerful. Very powerful. Michele, you've given us a lot to think about. Is there anything else you'd like to tell our audience?

Michele Gelfand: First, I want to thank your audience for listening to our podcast. And I'd also really love to hear from you in terms of your tight-loose stories. Where have you noticed the construct of tight and loose being relevant in your households, in your organizations, on your city streets? Where have you noticed that it has relevance for how we're dealing with this pandemic? On my website, there's a place where you can send in your stories and I'd love to hear from you.

Michael Siegel: We will do that. And thank you so much for joining us.

Michele Gelfand: Thanks again.

Lori Murphy: Thanks, Michael. And thanks to our listening audience as well. If you're interested in hearing more episodes visit the Executive Education page on fjc.dcn and click or tap on podcast.

Produced by Shelly Easter and directed and edited by Craig Bowden. Our program coordinator is Anna Glouchkova. Special thanks to Chris Murray. I'm Lori Murphy. Thanks for listening. Until next time.

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