Federal Judicial Center
In Session: Leading the Judiciary
Episode 20: Transitioning Gracefully to Executive Leadership

Lori Murphy: Coming up on *In Session*.

Ron Carucci: Most leaders are very unprepared for the notion of power and are so afraid to use the power that comes with their role for fear of disappointing people, for fear of alienating people, for feeling being estranged by making a hard call or saying no that they put that power down. Leaders have to understand that, at your level, leadership is the ability to disappoint people at a rate they can absorb.

Lori Murphy: In today's episode of *In Session: Leading the Judiciary*, we discuss how to effectively and successfully transition to an executive leadership role. Our guest is Ron Carucci, an executive consultant and co-author of the bestselling book *Rising to Power: The Journey of Exceptional Executives*. Ron suggests that the story of your rise to power will be told in the faces of those you have led. His research exposes the major obstacles facing new executives and what they can do to overcome those obstacles to lead their organizations to success. We'll discuss the implication of his research for leaders in the judiciary in today's episode.

Ron is cofounder and managing partner of Navalent, a consulting firm that helps executives pursue transformational

change for their organizations. For over 30 years he has worked with executives to develop effective strategies to achieve personal and organizational success. Ron is consulted in more than 25 countries on four continents. He is a regular contributor to the *Harvard Business Review* and has delivered two well-received TEDx talks.

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

Michael Siegel: Ron, thanks so much for joining us.

Ron Carucci: Michael, a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Michael Siegel: Let's start with the rather dramatic contrast you identify between what most people envision in an executive leadership position and what they actually find when they get there. While you say this is a normal part of the transition, it's also the cause of many failures. How does a new executive work through that?

Ron Carucci: Well, with great organizations like the Federal Judiciary who prepare people well for it, tell them in advance about what's coming. Certainly the program that I got the privilege of joining you for is a great example of what you're doing. Now, if I'm going to nudge you, I would say do it sooner. If you know someone is in a pipeline for that career path, do something a year earlier. Start teaching them breadth,

context, choice, and connection even in basic forms even earlier.

You have enough content under your belt. Now you know enough of the patterns, enough of the questions, enough of the tripwires that folks are going to face at that altitude. Now apply that knowledge to get really proactive sooner. Know who is in the pipeline. Know who is interested in being in the pipeline. And cultivate that core so that your pipeline isn't just getting its formal attention when they arrive at a moment but in a constant stream of preparation.

Many organizations don't do anything. It's astounding to me how much of the billions of dollars of issued [sounds like] development are spent on, and not that they don't deserve it, on first line supervisors and middle management which is appropriate. But the people who have the most disproportionate level of influence over the direction and the futures of organizations are getting the least amount of attention because we have this naïve assumption that somehow, when they arrive up there, they've arrived. So they're fully baked. Versus the reality that they have to unwind so much more learning from their time in the middle because so much of what happened in the middle is so irrelevant to what happens at the top.

Most organizations tell people that is the bigger version of what you're already doing. And of course nothing could be

further from the truth. Many leaders, when you look up at the world from the middle of an organization to the top, it's easy to draw conclusions about the perks that come with those roles, or the broader sense of influence or the power you have, or the level of importance or status that come with those roles. And some of that certainly is true.

What you don't see is what life is like to have everything you do on the jumbotron. To have everything you do amplified, misheard, misperceived, misjudged. To be blamed for all the mistakes. To have everybody project on to you all their authority issues without ever telling you they're doing that. And to be passive-aggressive on how they share information. Suddenly the information sources you used to have, dry up.

So with all of that, the expression lonely at the top isn't a cliché at all. It is a very isolating, difficult, and complex experience to be at the top, in the top strata of an organization with none of the navigational equipment you prepared for the middle working are helpful. You have to really completely overhaul how you understand and how you participate in the organization. That can be tough if nobody tells you what's going to happen.

Michael Siegel: It can lead to what you call cognitive dissonance?

Ron Carucci: I think that if you can at least be aware of what your ingoing assumptions are, what your expectations are, what your aspirations are. There are so many things you want from when you take on an assignment of broader responsibility. And it's okay to want those things. Whether they're personal or career or economic motivation, those are okay to want. But if you only want those and you don't have a sense of broader agency, if you aren't really motivated by making a difference and impact, the sacrifices of the role are going to catch you off guard.

If you're really motivated exclusively by your own career advancement, you should rethink whether or not doing that through an executive role is the best way to do I because you're likely to regret some of what you discover when you get there. So make sure that you're prepared for redefining relationships. People who were your direct reports, who are your bosses, are now your peers. People who are your peers now report to you. So there is a whole realigning of relationships.

There is a whole new information vacuum that's going to happen as information gets filtered to you, gets sifted to you. People who used to tell you everything now are clearly couching what they say and hedging whether or not you're safe to tell the truth to. You're going to hear all kinds of concoctions about yourself. People making up things you said. People attributing

motives to you you never had. People attributing decisions to you you didn't make.

It's just part of the process if you don't know and write down how to stay true to yourself, how to stay true to the values you want to lead by, how to stay true to the principles that guide your choices and mostly how to lead out loud, how to make sure you are transparent enough that people aren't having to decode you in a way that they miscode you. Right? Make sure that people can predict. Within your first six to eight months, make sure that they know how you make decisions. They know how you're going to communicate. They can predict how you're going to react to a frustrating situation. You condition them to know that you're a safe place to know the truth.

Michael Siegel: Does this present a real challenge to introverts?

Ron Carucci: It can. It can. I think, where introverts have to sort of regulate their what I'd call extrovert points. Because so many of us who are introverts are living in an extroverted world, and so we have to measure our capacity. Because, otherwise, you just run out of gas right in the middle of a meeting.

But leading out loud isn't so much about socializing with other people, which is where a lot of introverts lose their energy. It's just making sure -- the advantage to introverts is

that they are very reflective. Introverts tend to think a lot in their head. All I'm simply suggesting is put that on the table. Say out loud what you're thinking so people don't have to wonder.

Michael Siegel: Yeah.

Ron Carucci: Don't assume people are reading your mind or come equipped with clairvoyance. Make sure that as you're making choices, as you're weighing options or contemplating certain directions, people understand how and why you're doing that. So many leaders don't do that and especially when -- whether you're introverted or extroverted, you think out loud.

I watched an executive do this where we were in the middle of a business review and a team was presenting an update on a very expensive and very major initiative. The CEO, who is my client, looked very confused. Finally, he turned to me and whispered to me. He said, do you know what this initiative is? I said: No. But if you don't, don't let them keep going. Stop and ask for an update.

So he paused and apologized and said: I'm so sorry. We're seeing hundreds and hundreds of presentations. Forgive me. I want to make sure I'm fully engaged. Can you just remind me of the background of this project?

Well, they looked confused. They said, well, six months ago you asked for this. He said, I what? They reminded him

about two reviews ago what he said. He was just thinking out loud. He was just wondering about it. I wonder what would happen if. They took that to mean they should march together a team, resources, and money and go do it. It is a great but painful cautionary tale to realize, when you think out loud, it's not the same as leading out loud.

Michael Siegel: Yeah.

Ron Carucci: If you have no intention that anybody act upon your thoughts, say I don't want anybody to go do anything. I'm just thinking out loud and I'd like you to think with me. Otherwise, people will assume you're telling them to go do something.

Michael Siegel: Great point. Thank you. You've got a fascinating way of describing the executive transition. You compare it to wing walking and being afflicted with altitude sickness. What can we give new executives to encourage them to let go of one handhold and reach for the next?

Ron Carucci: So for those perhaps unfamiliar with the wing walkers of the '20s, you know, aerialists both as entertainment but also practically to learn how to refuel aircraft mid-flight. How to walk across the wing. But the key rule was never let go of the strut you're holding on to until you have a firm grip on the strut you're going to. Well, for many wing walkers, you have two perils. One they froze mid-air and clung to both

struts or they let go of one too soon before clinging to the next. And of course we know where that goes.

Similarly, as you rise up in altitude -- if you've ever done any mountain climbing, you know to acclimatize you have to climb up. Get used to that. Climb back down. Spend time there. Climb up again. Get a little higher. So that your lungs can adjust to the thin levels of oxygen. Climbing up into an organization feels much like both of those things. You have to have a firm grip on the strut you're going to before you can let go of what you know and you have to acclimatize to the thinner air.

The thinner air shows up in many ways, as I mentioned before. In differently aligned relationships. In new political currents. In how others perceive you. And in the information you have access to. If you're not prepared, if your lungs are not prepared, if your brain and your emotions are not prepared for how life is different, you'll keep trying to cram that new life into your old life and try to impose what you know and struggle. Of course that struggle becomes very visible and that is often what can derail a leader's career if they just are clearly not fitting in to the higher ranks of an organization because they're trying to make it too much like the middle.

Michael Siegel: So what is the medicine we could prescribe to avoid that kind of altitude sickness? What can be done?

Ron Carucci: Well, again preparation is really key. As you're establishing new relationships, go and have, with every new stakeholder have a conversation. Especially if the relationship has changed. If it used to be a peer and now it's your report, talk about the new boundary conditions. Talk about how you want to interact with each other. If it was an old boss and now it's a peer, talk about how it is. How you're going to interact with each other, how you're going to support each other, how you're going to be colleagues and no longer expecting a difference.

If it's an older report that you no longer have any interaction with who has now I'm going to assume have access to you and want to curry favor with you and, okay, you give me a promotion now, have a conversation about expectations. About where you can and can't socialize, and how you can and can't interact with them now. If you want to preserve certain relationships that became friendships, talk about how that is going to happen.

When you come to realize that all eyes are on you, you're on the jumbotron and people are making things about you, prepare yourself. You cannot control every narrative out there about you, but you can control some of them. And you can certainly be preemptive about letting people know why you're doing what you're doing, how you make decisions, what your values are, what

they can expect. Especially for the many people you may be leading now that aren't in your physical presence. They are in different geographies, in different parts of the world. Who are really going to be able to make things up about you because they don't know who you are. How will you get to know them? How will you let them be able to know you? It's all about the preparation, Michael, so that when you get there you're not publicly shell-shocked by what you're finding.

Michael Siegel: Yeah. Very important especially to have those conversations with colleagues and let them know it's kind of a new terrain that you're in. Right? Yeah.

Ron Carucci: Yup.

Michael Siegel: So once an executive ascends to power and in your terminology, they are in the adjust or assert phase. I love the way you make these different phases because they're very helpful analytically. What dangers still loom in these latter phases and what strategies can help overcome them?

Ron Carucci: Well, most leaders are very unprepared for the notion of power. They assume there is an inordinate amount of power that now comes with their authority levels in a new role. I can't tell you how many CEOs and seniors had said to me: I thought I have less power than I ever did. Because maneuvering an organization, pulling all the levers of an organization to get it to coordinate and synchronize to get

things to happen, isn't as easy as declaring a decree. Very often decrees are useless. They fly into the wind. People hear you and -- unless they feel threatened by you, which of course you don't want because if people are only acting out of fear of you, then you really have a problem especially when a crisis hits.

The biggest finding in the research for the book wasn't that power was abused for self-interest, but that power was abandoned out of fear. Most leaders are so afraid to use the power that comes with their role for fear of disappointing people, for fear of alienating people, for feeling being estranged by making a hard call or saying no. They put that power down in exchange for currying favor, building popularity, being Santa Claus and giving everybody what they want as if that's going to build their equity and build their credibility. Of course it gets you very liked, but it doesn't get you very respected.

Leaders have to understand that, at your level, leadership is the ability to disappoint people at a rate they can absorb. If you're unable to say no, if you're unable to put the greater good of the organization before anybody's individual agenda and narrow the focus of the organization so that everybody can succeed, if that's uncomfortable for you and you say yes to every single idea that comes your way, you're going to dilute

the organization's ability and you're going to cause everybody to fail or at least accept mediocrity.

So you've got to be willing to use the power that comes with your role. You have access to information that can change people's minds. You have access to relationships that can cause people to broaden their network of views. And you have access to authority that can actually write injustices. So every organization has things that are unjust about it. Unfair processes. Unfair, opaque, confusing decision or resource allocation mechanisms. You can right those injustices. And that's what your power is for. It's to serve the people that you lead and some people that you work within for so they can become the greatest version of themselves, so you can unleash their talents, and that you can synchronize the organization in a way that gets the best performance out of everybody.

Michael Siegel: Your opening comments on that segment reminded me of one of our chief judges who once said: When they handed me the reins of power, nobody told me there is nothing attached. He struggled with figuring out, like you say, how to use power in a positive and productive manner. I think the avoidance of power, as you say, can be a problem. The ultimate expression of the transition is I guess in the affect stage. When you're actually affecting the organization. How do you know you've gotten there?

Ron Carucci: Well, we found that there were four capabilities that set in our research. We actually went to sort of separate the A team from the B team. We were able to isolate. If 50 percent of the folks by most stats were failing within the first 18 months of rising up, we want to understand what are the other 50 percent doing? How will they sticking the landing and be successful?

We found that there were four things that they did effectively that enabled them to do that. One was what we call breadths. So they could stitch the seams of an organization. When you're at the top, you no longer have the luxury of seeing the world through functional eyes, or departments, or silos. You have to build bridges across organizations. These leaders were able to traverse those boundaries and not see the world through the clerk, the judge, the this or that, but to see it as the judiciary. To see it as the legal system of moving decisions through it, and so how the pieces fit together to build that capability.

The second was context. These leaders could read the tea leaves. They could ask hard questions. They were curious. They understood why things worked the way they did both outside the organization and within it. They could ask contextual questions and understand versus just acting impulsively on their instincts without wondering how things got to be a certain way.

The third was choice. These leaders could construct hard choices. They knew what data, what voices, what intuition and experience, what was in from others to combine into a hard or difficult decision. They didn't have a one size fits all approach to choice making and they were absolutely not afraid to say no. They were comfortable sort of deferring or turning down some great ideas in the service of the good ideas they'd already committed to.

Lastly was their connection. The ability to form trust-based and meaningful relationships with people above them, alongside them, and below them. The key differentiator of those in the study was they prioritized their stakeholders not by those they needed something from. But they prioritized their stakeholders according to who they could most help, according to who they could help be successful, and they spent time actively looking for ways to enable others to advance their agendas rather than looking for ways to advance their own agenda.

So breadth, context, choice, connection. The great news is they're all learnable. The harder part of the data said that it was all four or nothing. So if you only have three of those, you're in the failure group. So the great news is they're all learnable. You can build those capabilities. But being good at two of the four is not going to get you to rise to the top and stick.

Michael Siegel: I want to pick up on the ability to say no and go back to something you said before that I wanted to emphasize. You said about disappointing people at a tolerable rate.

Ron Carucci: Yeah.

Michael Siegal: Or something like that. Could you speak to that? That's such an interesting concept.

Ron Carucci: The fact of the matter is when you are adjudicating many complex decisions and trying to synchronize many agendas, the people below you, they come to your table often as -- it's like the judiciary at UN. Right? They come as ambassadors of whatever their team or function is. Your goal is to help them see a greater whole. But if you fail to do that, the narrowness of their view is going to be lobbying you for resources, for decisions, for favor, for favoritism, for support and will be at the expense of others.

But if you are not willing to prioritize your resources, your choices, your initiatives, your strategy in a narrow bandwidth for the good of what the entire organization has to accomplish, which will inevitably disappoint some people. That's okay, right? People can tolerate not getting their way. But if you train them to think you're going to say yes to everything they ask for because you want to be liked, they'll make you think you're liked.

I had one executive who was favorably, or not so favorably, referred to as the waffle. People on his team had very carefully constructed ways to make sure that -- they called it the last one in phenomenon because the last one in got their way. So they knew that you wanted to be on his calendar in the final slot before the staff meeting. They would fight for that slot. They would even bring flowers and come to the admin who control the calendar because they know whoever get that slot get their way.

So if you're known as somebody who flip-flops a lot, who is indecisive, who is anxious about making a hard decision and so you are conflict avoidant, people will take advantage of that. People will exploit that for their own good and they won't respect you. So disappointment is not a bad thing. Saying no is not a bad thing especially if you can explain why. If you're fickle, people will know it. Then they'll exploit that as well.

Michael Siegel: I want to go back on the concept of power. You talked about positional, relational, and informational power. Can you distinguish those for us a little bit?

Ron Carucci: Sure. Many leaders assume that positional power, the formal authority that comes along with their role, as their only source of power. Usually what they're surprised to find is that it is the least reliable source of influencing

their organization especially in a very complex, or matrixed, or network organization.

Certainly there are times you have to adjudicate. You have to declare. You have to make a decision that is unilateral. But mostly understand that should be the exception, not the norm. But your relational power, you have access to networks of people. You have access to other people of influence that can help those you lead learn, grow, stretch. You can form relationships, very intimate trust-based relationships, with those you lead in order for them to transform.

Your relationship with those you lead is the vehicle of impact. That will be the determinant of the degree of trust that will allow them to let you influence them, to let you stretch them, to let you challenge them. Or not. So the intimate relationships with those you lead are the determinants of how accountable people will be to your leadership, not your formal authority.

Then, lastly, your information power. You have access to points of view, access to data, access to perspectives. A wider range of ideas that your people don't. Sometimes you need to help people change their mind. You need to help people learn. You need to help challenge assumptions in the organization. And that information source, it used to be that information was power. But now information is ubiquitous. Today it's whose

interpretation of the information prevails that gets you powerful in your insights, in your perspective on something.

This is why so many people ask or want to know from a leader what do you think about this or what do you see about this. So sharing your point of view not as dogma, not as fact, but as a point of view. But sharing your perspective can help people ground how they make their own choices even if they disagree with you.

Michael Siegel: You made reference to the judiciary showing that you have an awareness of the public sector context. How else would you apply your research, which is based largely I think on the private sector, to the public sector environment?

Ron Carucci: I mean one of the challenges in many public sectors, and I have several federal government clients, is you guys do tend to be a bit bureaucratic and cumbersome to work with. There are lots of regulations and rules that sometimes can conflict making navigational experiences harder for leaders. So the two things that are often required are a lot of heroics and a lot of sort of backflips to get things done. Leaders need to prepare for that. To serve the public in those kinds of roles, you have to have a level of resilience that allows you to prevail. Every organization has constraints. You know that happens to be yours.

It's not like the private sector is some freewheeling, you know, get anything done at all cost. It's not that either, right? So just pick your poison and you have to be willing to also challenge status quo. You have to be willing to see where there are places where there are rules and processes that just don't make any sense. They are antiquated. They are leftover from another era. They don't match current context. You have to go in to say this isn't the only way to do this. Just because we always have doesn't mean we can't change it.

So your championing of change, your voting to lead away from the gravitational pull of the familiar, those two things - that and resilience - are probably the two most important things leaders need to bring to lead effectively in public sector.

Michael Siegel: Your notion of an exceptional executive -- and I assume that's the 50 percent that are more successful.

Ron Carucci: Yup.

Michael Siegel: How do they balance instinct with data when making tough decisions?

Ron Carucci: Well, the first thing they do is they understand that both are required. So you have many leaders who are predisposed to wanting lots of data and they get what is commonly referred to as analysis paralysis. They get buried in data. Then you have the cowboys and cowgirls who are just, you know, I just trust my gut. You always hear that statement which

of course is a little bit arrogant, to assume that your gut is that reliable of a barometer for anything. Certainly wisdom and intuition play an important role. That you are in the role you're in because of the benefit of your experience. So that certainly is a source.

But great choices are a combination of data, intuition or wisdom, other voices, who to include and the combination of them. So ask yourself what data do you typically go to as a source. What data do you exclude, that's a really important question to ask, and why. Who do you typically go to to get input from, or to get advice from, or to get a perspective from. And more so who are you avoiding, who do you never ask and why. Because if you're only asking people who you know are going to tell you what you want to hear, you're setting yourself up to fail.

You have to actually actively seek out dissent. Actively seek out duly and fact basis. Go to people who you know contradict your views and see what they think because that will just help you increase the quality of your decision. It may not change it, but you'll know what you're up against in implementing that decision.

Michael Siegel: I totally endorse the idea of consulting with dissenting opinions. Even if you have to work hard to do it, it's well worth the effort absolutely.

Ron Carucci: It also builds good relationships, right? People who don't see the world as you do are the people who can become your greatest allies even if you don't agree.

Michael Siegel: You quoted from Alvin Toffler's book *Powershift* written in 1991 where he describes the revolution. We're back to the question of power. You reflected on revolution and the nature of power. Is that still happening? Is it over or is there a new one? How has social media affected anything?

Ron Carucci: Well, I think it's a very important point. I think social media is now fueling the powershift from formal authority, people with resources, white normative males. There are so many needed powershifts to get a more well distributed set of power resources into the hands of those who have been disempowered, who have been disaffected by unlevel playing fields.

I do think social media has become both a powerful but also dangerous accelerant of power because it in and of itself has become a source of power that's been so irresponsibly used. I think we as a society were unprepared for what that power, that source of power, that tool could do and how it can shape people's views and how it can destabilize governments and entire nations. I do hope that we are soon heading into an era without

rebalances because I think we're really so far over our skis when it comes to that and we don't even know it.

I do think that - and you and I are qualified for this, Michael - the white male oligarchies have enjoyed a level of control for so long. We need to recognize that letting go and distributing that power doesn't make us less powerful. It actually makes us more powerful. But to have concentrated power so much at the top of wealth structures, hierarchies, and certain identities is hurting everybody, including us. And so it is an important moment in our time where we have to not make people fight for power that is rightfully theirs. Because the more we make them fight for it, the more irresponsible they'll be when they get it.

We have to be willing to learn to share and distribute power in a more responsible and proactive way so that the people who have not had it -- much like a rising executive who doesn't know how to use it. When they rise up, they won't know how to use it when they get it. So we have to do this in a mindful, thoughtful, generous, proactive way so that the playing field is more level for everybody and everybody on that playing field knows how to play on it.

Michael Siegel: I rarely think of myself as an oligarch, but when you put it that way --

Ron Carucci: Well, you probably have no thoughts about it in such a way. But the problem is, to those who are of different identities, we'll experience it that way even if we don't intend it to be.

Michael Siegel: Yes, absolutely. What's the most important message you have for leaders in the federal judiciary?

Ron Carucci: I have clients in several very important government agencies who are very mission-driven. Some folks in the intelligence community. Some folks in the other lawmaking bodies. The thing I love about folks in these groups is how incredibly mission-driven they are. If there was ever a time where justice was being called into question in our nation, where can somebody get a fair shot. You are not just adjudicating individual case decisions or case law every day, you are shaping a culture of justice.

Never lose sight of the broader impact you have collectively. Yes, you work in many different districts in isolated ways. But as the entire judiciary goes, so goes our country's belief in getting a fair shot that the system is not rigged. That there are people on the bench who really do care about fairness, equity, and justice in all forms. So never forget in the middle of the bureaucracy, your day-to-day decisions or day-to-day stuff you do, please never lose sight of

the potent impact you're making on the entire country's perception of justice.

Michael Siegel: Thank you. That's beautifully stated. We really appreciate that. Finally, where do people go to learn more about you and your work?

Ron Carucci: You can come to our website at navalent.com. I have a brand new book coming out in about a month. It's the follow-up research study to *Rising to Power*. The book is called *To be Honest: Lead with the Power of Truth, Justice, and Purpose.*

Michael Siegel: Thank you. Thank you very much. And thanks so much for joining us today.

Ron Carucci: Michael, it was a real pleasure. Thanks so much for having me.

Lori Murphy: Thanks, Michael. And thank you for listening. 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. [End of file][End of transcript]