

Federal Judicial Center  
In Session 28: Leading the Judiciary  
Interview with David Robson - August 2022

Craig Bowden: Coming up.

David Robson: Just framing an event as like a positive challenge rather than say talking about it as if it's kind of big threat to someone, that can be really useful.

Craig Bowden: Today on *In Session: Leading the Judiciary*, we explore how what we think, believe, and expect can quite literally alter the reality we experience. David Robson, author most recently of *The Expectation Effect: How Your Mindset Can Change Your World*, shares research that our underlying beliefs about ourselves and our situations often create potent positive or negative self-fulfilling prophecies. By recognizing and reframing expectations and helping others to do the same, leaders can improve themselves, their workplaces, and organizational outcomes.

David Robson is an award-winning science writer based in the United Kingdom. A graduate of Cambridge University, he previously worked as an editor at *New Scientist* and as a senior journalist at the BBC. His writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *Men's Health*, *The Washington Post* and many other publications. His first book, *The Intelligence Trap*, was published in 2019.

Our host is Lori Murphy, Assistant Division Director for Executive Education at the FJC. Lori, take it away.

Lori Murphy: Welcome, David. We're really happy to have you.

David Robson: It's completely my pleasure. Thanks so much for inviting me.

Lori Murphy: In your book, David, you say that our brains are constantly simulating the world around us. And really looking at what might happen next, that they're in fact prediction machines. How do these predictions shape what we experience, what we see, hear or feel, and how do they influence our physiology?

David Robson: Our prediction is really they are what we experience. In fact, I think that's what's so profound about this idea of the brain as a prediction machine - is that actually, based on all of our previous experience right from the moment we were born, we're kind of building these simulations of the world around us. Actually, they shape the way we process the incoming sensory data. So sometimes they might make up for kind of ambiguities. At other times they might actually tone down information that the brain doesn't think is useful based on these simulations.

So most of the time this works wonderfully. Sometimes, it can create these kinds of visual illusions, especially when

there's some kind of ambiguity in the input itself, you can sometimes see things that aren't there or hear things that aren't there. But, in general, it works very well.

But importantly these simulations, by preempting what's going to happen, they also then feed into the body to prepare your physiological state for what's going to happen next. So that can change everything from the balance of your hormones, your stress hormones for example; the actions of your cardiovascular system, whether your heart's beating fast or if you have high or low blood pressure, the actions of your gut, you know, whether you're getting ready to digest food, levels of inflammation within the body which can help you to fight pathogens. All of these things are happening based on these simulations. So that can have a profound impact on our health and well-being.

Lori Murphy: So our minds are literally influencing what our bodies are experiencing?

David Robson: Yeah. Absolutely. And you know we all experience this. If you think of something, like a really sour lemon, your mouth starts watering. That's just one example of this mind-body connection. Eventually it's going on all the time in ways that we don't even notice but which are affecting our health.

Lori Murphy: So what is the expectation effect and why is it important for us to understand?

David Robson: So the expectation effect is really how this manifests. The true definition of the expectation effect is the way our beliefs create self-fulfilling prophecies. And these free mechanisms that I talk about, they can be behavioral. It can just be that actually, if you expect something to happen, that changes the way you respond to the situation consciously or unconsciously. It can change your perception in the ways I described by changing the processing of the sensory data. That can also be an important form of the expectation effect.

But what really interests me is also these physiological mechanisms too. It's really these free pathways together that are constantly having a big influence on our life and they can interact. It could be the perceptual expectation effect then changes your physiology. It could be that your behavior changes your physiology or your physiology changes your behavior. So all of these together are really having an important impact in our life.

Lori Murphy: Most people have heard of placebos and know that a placebo response is positive beliefs about a treatment. Even if the treatment is only a sugar pill, it has been shown to relieve patient symptoms and even accelerate recovery and even

when they know that it's a placebo, which blows my mind. How does that work and can you share an example?

David Robson: The placebo effect has been known for centuries. But actually, in the past, the assumption was that it was just very subjective. You're kind of changing someone's emotions, but you're not really changing their body. Eventually we know, the expectations of a treatment success, that can actually change things. Like the expression of neurotransmitters in your brain or inflammation that will then shape your symptoms.

One of the best examples I think is that when people believe they're receiving a painkiller, but it's actually a dummy pill, that they also show this kind of heightened expression of opioids within the brain. Natural painkillers, the body is producing its own painkillers. It seems to be that, if you've taken opioid painkillers in the past, the body's been conditioned to then have this response. Then, when you believe you're taking the drug, the body and the brain are already creating a good environment for that drug to take effect by producing its own endogenous painkillers.

Like you said, what's really remarkable here is that actually this can happen even when people have been told they've been given these clearly labeled jars of placebo painkillers to take twice a day. In these experiments, these scientists had

told the participants about how the placebo effect works. That explained the mind-body connection. Then that in itself seems to have created the expectation effect.

So the scientific knowledge there of how the expectation effect works was itself helping the expectation effect to happen. When I've spoken about the expectation effect, people have asked me do we have to deceive people. Actually these open-labeled placebos as they're called, these honest placebos, really show you don't have to deceive people. You just have to help them to understand how this works and how the expectation effect works. Then that in itself is enough to change beliefs and to kind of prompt these changes.

Lori Murphy: Let's consider the placebo effect not as a medical intervention but in the workplace. Could you give us an example of what knowing about the placebo effect might do for us in the workplace?

David Robson: I think that's really important. A lot of research has shown that our beliefs about our capabilities can actually shape our intellectual potential. In lots of studies looking not just at measures like IQ but also measures of creativity, scientists have really shown us that we can create these positive expectation effects ourselves not by fooling ourselves into thinking that we're better than we are. It's not like we're just telling ourselves we're kind of geniuses and

then we become a genius, but actually by reshaping some of our attitudes to the challenges that we're facing.

I think the best example of that, for me really, is when we feel a sense of frustration when we're facing a really difficult task. Now you can interpret that one of two ways. You could think of the frustration as being a sign of your own inability. You're frustrated because you're just not good and you become quite defeatist. You become more anxious. You have that feeling that you're never going to succeed.

Actually, frustration is a really useful emotion. It's the feeling that comes from when you're wrestling with a difficult challenge. The more frustrated you feel, the more you're learning. Just changing that mindset by recognizing that the frustration is actually showing a positive growth in your abilities, that in itself can then help you to perform better and ensure that you follow that positive trajectory rather than just plateauing in your performance.

Lori Murphy: I love that. We focus a lot on wellness in the judiciary. I'm interested in how the power of expectation can help us be happier, healthier, just overall as leaders in the courts.

David Robson: Yeah. I think one of the best things here is really the effect of our expectations on the way we experience stress. Again stress is a bit like frustration, but

we feel stress kind of physiologically. So there's the racing heart, the kind of shallow breathing, fast breathing, that feeling of tension in your muscles.

Thanks to our culture, at the moment I think a lot of us see all of those signs of physiological arousal as being purely negative. We're assuming that there are a sign of impending failure. That actually we believe this stress is going to be damaging to us in the short and long term.

But we evolved the stress response for a good reason. It actually evolved to help us to deal with challenges. So all of those things we're feeling can be positive. The racing heart is pumping lots of oxygen to your limbs but also to your brain helping it to think more clearly. Those stress hormones that are causing you to feel a bit agitated, well, actually they're keeping you on your feet. If you're doing something difficult, like giving an important talk, you want to be alert. You don't want to be kind of sleepy and drowsy and not really paying attention.

What the researchers have shown is that by explaining these adaptive benefits of stress, that they can actually change the experience of stress for these people. So it actually ensures that they perform better, that they use the stress to their advantage, that they really find it energizing rather than



distracting. Even more importantly, it helps them to recover from the stress more quickly afterwards.

Their body returns to what's called the rest and digest state more quickly. So that means they're less likely to suffer those long-term effects because they've performed as well as they could and then they're going back to maintaining their bodies and maintaining their health.

I think it's important to emphasize that I'm not saying we should actively look for more stress all the time.

Lori Murphy: I don't think we need to.

David Robson: Exactly. But a lot of the stresses, we're facing them for a purpose, for our own personal growth. It's seeing those kinds of situations differently and recognizing how those temporary feelings of stress can actually be used to your advantage. That's really important. And I think if we really focus on those particular situations to change our stress mindset, we can already do a lot to improve the way we cope with life in general.

Lori Murphy: You talk about self-affirmation, and self-compassion, and how they influence us. So I'm curious if you can say more about how those impact us.

David Robson: I think self-affirmation is a really powerful way of helping us to deal with anxieties at work. This is especially important, I think, when we're dealing with the

anxieties that can come from other people's perceptions of ourselves, particularly if you're facing negative stereotypes. You might assume, or you might have heard people assume that people who are similar to you are not good academically or they're not cut out for this kind of job. That creates a lot of pressure for you. You feel that you have to perform well not just for yourself but also to represent the whole group. And that anxiety can then impair performance.

But there is a process called self-affirmation that can be really helpful in combating this. I never really liked the term self-affirmation because it sounds a bit new age-y, unscientific. But actually, you know, it's not about just repeating a mantra to yourself. What it's really about is just trying to create a list of say ten qualities that you appreciate about yourself that aren't necessarily related at all to the task at hand.

So if you're talking to students who are worried about their academic performance, they might list completely seemingly irrelevant qualities, like their musicality, their sense of humor, how good a friend they are - all of these things that make them a whole person.

What this does is this process actually just helps you to recognize that you're full of resources and that you're a resilient person. It's almost a distraction from all of those

upper anxieties that I was talking about, and this really does then improve performance. So there have been some really impressive studies looking at minority groups at school, for example, and then into college showing that practicing self-affirmation regularly can really help them to deal with that additional anxiety they're facing because of their minority status. And I think it's really something that many people can use. The evidence to me is overwhelming now that this is really a powerful way of dealing with the stresses that we face.

Lori Murphy: How do leaders expectations impact those that they lead?

David Robson: If we go back to this idea of the stress mindset, I think what really interests me here is that actually that can be kind of contagious. So if you're a leader and you believe that stress is debilitating, you might then communicate that to the people around you. That's actually then causing them to have this kind of negative belief about the stress they're facing to catastrophize that stress, to feel that it's much more damaging than it really is, creating this kind of vicious cycle. So I think just communicating the fact once you've understood the positive potential benefits of stress. Actually just communicating that and making sure that you reflect that in the way you talk to your employees can be really useful. So just framing an event as a positive challenge rather

than say talking about it as a big threat to someone, that can be really useful.

Lori Murphy: So it's not being Pollyanna?

David Robson: No.

Lori Murphy: But it's also not being doomsday.

David Robson: That's exactly what I want to communicate in the expectation effect that there's a middle ground between the two. I think some of us, I certainly was in the past, are defensive pessimists. I kind of thought you should always look for the worst case scenario. If you expect the worst, you won't be disappointed. Actually, that's not more rational than being this kind of super optimist who's always thinking the best is going to happen when there's no chance of it occurring.

I think what we need to do is just to try to look more objectively at the situations around us. If we consider something like stress in the way that I mentioned, well, actually it's uncomfortable. I'm not denying that feeling stressed can feel horrible, but it can also be useful and it can be a source of energy. Just recognizing those two facts and holding them both in your mind at the same time is what I'm really suggesting that we do. Acknowledging that we might feel it's a really tiring day while also recognizing that those feelings themselves can help us to achieve our growth, I think that's what we should be looking for.

Lori Murphy: If we're doing that individually and then collectively as a group, presumably there's organizational benefits as well.

David Robson: Yeah. Absolutely. So this has been studied less than say the benefits for the individual. But certainly the researchers have gone into companies even during really difficult circumstances. Like the financial crash of the late 2000. They found that actually teaching people about the stress mindset could actually help people then to deal with all of those, the uncertainty that they were facing, so improve the well-being of the whole workforce within these financial institutions.

Lori Murphy: I'd like to go back to leaders as individuals and the impact they can have on others. I'm really interested in the fact that, even if we don't think we're communicating certain things, we actually are. So can you help us understand this concept of leakage and how it impacts what we've been talking about?

David Robson: So when the Pygmalion effect was first discovered where people first realized that actually a teacher or manager's expectations could shape the performance of the individuals, it wasn't really clear what was causing that. Why was it that what one person believes, why was that contagious and then influencing the other person?

One obvious possibility would be that those teachers and managers were just pretty nasty. They were putting those people down deliberately trying to impair their performance.

Factually, that wasn't what was happening at all. In fact, these people often might have tried to be kind to the people that they had the poor beliefs about. But their expectations were still leaking out of their nonverbal behavior. So that could be body language, you know.

Whether they were overtly paying attention or not, that's really important. Whether they were making eye contact, whether they were smiling as they spoke or smiling as the other person spoke, whether they were nodding their head in agreement - all of these things could subtly show to someone kind of what you think of them and how you appraised their potential.

Other forms of leakage that I think are really important come from our conversational style. So if you ask someone who you really respect a question and they struggle to find an answer, you're more likely to just give them the time to clarify their thoughts and to say what they want to say. If you have negative beliefs about that person and really don't think that they're going to say anything useful, you might just cut them off before they've had a chance to really think it through.

All of these are examples of leakage. What the research shows is that then they change people's own sense of self-

efficacy. So if you see your boss treating you in that way, you come to start to believe that really you're not good at what you're doing. And then that in turn shapes your performance.

Lori Murphy: We were talking about earlier placebos. What is a nocebo?

David Robson: Nocebo is really the evil twin of the placebo effect. That's derived from Latin. Placebo means I shall please. It's where your positive expectations improve the outcome of the treatment you're getting. And nocebo is the complete opposite. It comes from the Latin verb I shall harm. It means when you have negative expectations of a situation, that that's going to lead to worse outcomes.

In medicine, this is really common when doctors tell you about the potential side effects of the medications that you're taking. For lots of people, these side effects will be the result of the direct chemical action of the medication. But for lots of people, it's also hearing the words that the doctor is saying. Knowing that the side effect is possible can itself produce the side effects.

It's quite amazing, but it's really using all of the same mechanisms as the placebo effect. It's happening through changes to our hormonal balance, the nervous system, the expression of neurotransmitters. If you're told that you're going to suffer from pain, the brain expresses a chemical called

CCK that acts as a kind of amplifier for pain signals. It's really helping you to be on the alert for any potentially painful damaging stimuli. That can then exacerbate the pain that you're feeling.

So in all of these cases, the expectations are creating the side effects without any chemical action of the drugs as well. We know this happens because all clinical trials today have to have a placebo arm where people are taking a dummy treatment compared to the people taking the active drug. What you see is that when people in the placebo arm are given those side effects about the potential effects of the drugs, they also experience those negative side effects. Things like headaches, fatigue, nausea, muscle pain. All of these things can come from those expectations that have been implanted in their head.

Lori Murphy: Even when they're not taking any active medication.

David Robson: Exactly.

Lori Murphy: Tell us about the nocebo effect at work because that's the context we're talking about.

David Robson: I think the nocebo effect in the workplace, that's going to come about when you -- for whatever reason, it could be the people around you. It could be your own assumptions that you're carrying around. That you expect a negative outcome when there's really no objective reason for



that to occur. And then that will in itself reduce your performance.

If your boss tells you, oh, this is a really difficult task, you're going to find it really challenging. That's actually very similar to when a doctor is telling a patient that you're going to experience these side effects. It's actually setting you up to feel more fatigued by the task, to feel more frustrated, and to feel more anxious and then to have a lower performance overall.

Lori Murphy: So if I have had a challenging experience with a person in the past and I go into another conversation with them thinking it's going to be challenging, is that what you're talking about as well?

David Robson: Yeah. Exactly. In that kind of situation, you're going to be focusing on any kind of cue that might be negative, that could be perceived as being negative. You might actually miss all of the other cues of someone who's actually willing to cooperate and to collaborate. So yeah, I think it can shape our perceptions of other people. It can shape our experiences of the tasks themselves and how fatiguing that we find them.

Lori Murphy: I'm curious what your recommendations would be for leaders before they communicate with their staff or

others to maximize the benefits of the expectation effect and minimize the challenges.

David Robson: My general rule should actually be that in any situation that you're going to be presenting to other people or that you're even handling yourself, to just try to take a step back and to look at the positive and the negative equally and to make sure that you can actually balance those without say catastrophizing the negative elements of a situation.

If there's stress and uncertainty in what you're handling, to also try to look for potential for growth, potential learning points that could come out of this difficult situation and to then balance the two. One strategy that comes from psychology that can really help us to do this is called self-distancing. It's quite simple. It's just trying to take a step back psychologically from what you're experiencing.

You can do that. Say if it's a personal kind of issue or a personal decision, you can imagine you're advising another friend or colleague. What would you tell them to do in that dilemma? Or you might imagine even that you're someone from another organization completely who's coming in and trying to tell you what to do.

What the research shows is that it doesn't completely eliminate the feelings of stress or anxiety that you might be facing. And you wouldn't want it to because they're important

signals. But it can just lessen them and help you to look at things a bit more objectively. Because chances are if you're not fully immersed in a difficult situation, if you are a little bit distanced from it, you're more likely to be able to see the whole picture, the good and the bad. Then that can help you to change your mindset so that you're creating this positive expectation effect.

Lori Murphy: You've talked about self-affirmations. You've talked about self-distancing. You also mentioned self-compassion in the book. I'm curious how that plays in to this as well.

David Robson: Yeah. I mean in self-compassion, there's so much fascinating research on this. In general, I think our society has pushed us to being really self-critical. Actually, some work environments I think really encourage this too. That's like you own your problems by kind of beating yourself up over a mistake. You're kind of proving to the people around you that you've learned your lessons.

I'm not saying that we should just ignore our mistakes. Actually, that's the last thing we need to do. But we can treat ourselves with kindness. We can accept that a mistake doesn't reflect something innately terrible about us or our abilities, and that actually it's part of the human experience. The more

decisions you make, the more chances there are that you're going to make the wrong one eventually.

Now, contrary to this kind of prevailing belief, that actually if you're easy on yourself, you're going to kind of continue making the same mistakes again and again. What the research shows is that people who practice that kind of self-compassion and can forgive themselves for the mistakes they've made, they're actually more likely to learn from what they've done and less likely to err in the future. It's actually helping them to experience that positive trajectory. Whereas the people who are self-critical, overly self-critical, actually they're just piling more and more stress on themselves. That makes it much harder to grow, if you're constantly feeling awful and anxious and too negative about yourself.

Lori Murphy: Does this work also in a group setting? So if I'm managing a project and we do an after-action discussion or report, how can it leverage what you're talking about to make sure we learn from it and grow and feel better as opposed to feeling worse and experiencing the negative impacts?

David Robson: Yeah. I mean I think really it's the bosses primary responsibility to make sure their team have the space to practice self-compassion. What you don't want to be is kind of feeding the self-criticism. You want to be reminding them that

actually like there's an opportunity to learn from what's happened.

One of the best things that one of my own bosses told me -- I was pretty upset about an article I'd written that I just didn't think was up to my usual standards. He just pointed out that actually it's statistically impossible for all of your articles to be better than average. The more you write, the more you're going to have like some down points as well as up points.

So he was just emphasizing to me don't focus on the individual success of each article but just look at your trajectory. Look from when you started your career, to now, to what you're hoping to achieve in the future. If you can feel that step by step over the months and years, you're making an improvement. That's what success looks like. It's not always having the success that you want.

Lori Murphy: Zooming out a little bit more as opposed to zooming in.

David Robson: That's it. Exactly.

Lori Murphy: David, what else would you like to share with us today?

David Robson: One thing that might be useful for you would be the research on the willpower mindset. So there's lots of research showing that our self-control and willpower is where we

can maintain our focus and concentration. But that's actually the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy, much like the stress mindsets.

What this research shows is that some people have this kind of limited view of willpower. They assume that, the more they practice their mental focus and self-control, the harder it gets. That they're going to get fatigued very quickly. People with a non-limited mindset, they view willpower as being self-perpetuating. It's almost like the feeling that I think we will know to a certain extent. Of once you get into the zone, staying in the zone is actually really easy and enjoyable. People with the non-limited view of willpower, they just recognize that actually they can maintain it for longer and longer.

You know, whether that's resisting the cookie jar or whether that's focusing on a really difficult task at work, they recognize that once they get into the groove, they can maintain that. And we know that that's actually the result of their mindset. So if you have someone who's got a limited mindset but then you tell them that willpower doesn't have to be depleting, that it can be self-perpetuating, these people understanding that science, they find it easier to get into that flow state, to get into the zone.

This has huge implications for all manner of things. Maintaining and reaching our professional goals, our personal goals, our health goals. All of these things can be influenced by that mindset. So I find that quite empowering actually. To realize that if I'm feeling a bit fatigued, feeling a bit frustrated, that I can just try to reset those expectations and realize that actually my brain has enormous resources to kind of continue what it's doing and to do it well. I think what I would like to emphasize is that it's a bit of a learning process, changing your mindset and crafting your expectations. That's certainly something I find when I'm applying this research myself.

Lori Murphy: David, where can we learn more about you and your work?

David Robson: Well, I have an active website, [www.davidrobson.me](http://www.davidrobson.me). I'm on Twitter, [d\\_a\\_robson](https://twitter.com/d_a_robson). And if you search me on LinkedIn, I'm there. You know, I love to hear from people. I'm happy to answer questions.

Lori Murphy: Well, it's been just a delight to talk to you today. I've learned even more than I learned by reading your book. I'm excited to put some of these ideas into effect.

David Robson: Oh, thank you so much. It's been a really good conversation for me.

Craig Bowden: Thanks, Lori, and thanks to our listening audience. To hear more episodes of this podcast, visit the Executive Education page at [fjc.dcn](http://fjc.dcn) and click or tap podcast. You can also search for and subscribe to this podcast on your mobile device.

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