

Federal Judicial Center  
In Session: Leading the Judiciary  
Episode 35: Focus on What Matters by Subtracting What Doesn't  
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Leidy Klotz: When you've got super, high-achieving, well-meaning people who really care about doing their job well, it's hard to take things away.

Craig Bowden: Today on *In Session, Leading the Judiciary*, Leidy Klotz, author of *Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less*, shares how subtracting before adding can create better outcomes, especially when we are clear about what we want to accomplish. Though counterintuitive, Klotz's innovative research proves that subtracting doesn't necessarily mean doing less. Rather, it's an important first step for individuals and organizations that want to improve processes and solve problems.

Leidy has also written several research articles and his work has appeared in the journals *Nature* and *Science*. He shared his research on subtraction on NPR's podcast *Hidden Brain*.

He is an interdisciplinary professor of engineering, architecture, and business at the University of Virginia and has secured more than \$10 million in competitive funding to support his and other's work in the science of design.

Before joining academia, Leidy played professional soccer.

Special thanks to today's host, Lori Murphy, assistant division director for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Lori, take it away.

Lori Murphy: Well, Leidy, we're so happy to have you today. Thanks for being with us.

Leidy Klotz: Of course. It's a pleasure to be here, Lori. Thank you.

Lori Murphy: So, Leidy, what do you mean by subtraction and why is it important for leaders in organizations?

Leidy Klotz: It's a great question to start with because it can seem so simple. But if you don't define it, we're not going to get anywhere. So subtraction is changing something from how it is to how you want it to be by taking something away. So much of what we do in the professions is to change something from how it is to how we want it to be. Whether that's a doctor trying to fix a patient, an engineer trying to work on a bridge. Subtracting is one of the options that we have but we don't seem to use it very much.

Lori Murphy: So you say that subtraction doesn't always mean doing less. I'm already a little confused. Help me understand the difference.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. I think that's another kind of crux of the issue here, is that so often we combine those two ideas. You see a really streamlined document or you see even like a

modernist piece of architecture and you think, okay, that is the result of doing less. But in so many cases subtraction actually means doing more. One of the reasons we don't do it a lot is because our first thought is what can we add, and then we add and move on without considering subtraction. We have to do a little more mental work to think of subtraction.

If you look at it in an organizational level, for example if you want to remove a reporting line in an organization, you have to have put the reporting line there in the first place. There are more steps because you added, added, added, added. Then, after doing the adding, you have to do a subtraction.

So I think it's really great to bring up right from the top that, no, this isn't doing less. Most of these subtractions that bring you to something that is preferable to where you were are actually taking more cognitive effort and more physical steps, but it's worth it in a lot of cases.

Lori Murphy: I want to build on that for a moment. You said that we often don't even consider subtracting. How did you notice that?

Leidy Klotz: The way that I figured it out or the beginning of the way that we figured it out I guess is I was playing LEGOs with my four-year-old and we were building a LEGO bridge. The problem we had was the bridge wasn't level. I went to solve this problem. I turned around behind me to grab a

block to add to the shorter column. By the time I had turned back around, my son had removed a block from the longer column and he had a level bridge and was moving on to the next thing.

We since did a lot of studies with three other really smart researchers to show what happens to people is what happened to me in that moment, which is there's this thing that I wanted to make better. I wanted to have a level bridge. And my first thought was to think, hey, what can I add to this? If my son wasn't there, I would have added and moved on and never even considered this whole other class of options. We studied in a lot of different contexts to become pretty convinced that that was the way that our minds are approaching this.

Lori Murphy: I wonder, Leidy, is this a function of being an adult?

Leidy Klotz: That's an interesting question. Between 18-year-olds and 60 year olds, for example, we didn't see any correlation based on age with how people were doing with this. Our studies weren't designed to look at that, so I wouldn't say that there is definitely no correlation.

Lori Murphy: As adults, you get to a certain age and you've acquired a lot of knowledge. You say in the book we spend more time acquiring knowledge than distilling it. So is subtraction a necessary part of distilling what we know? How do you recommend we do that?

Leidy Klotz: I think it's probably the most powerful place we can use it. In our mindsets, right? If we can think of things that are things that we've always held to be true and then realize that, oh no, we should subtract those from our mental models. Education scholars study this and they actually describe it as constructivism. It's like you've got this mental model, you take in some new information and you put it on top of the mental model you have, it's really hard, even when new information conflicts with what you already think, to get rid of something that is already there.

We're talking a lot about my son. This is another son and LEGO example. He's a Santa Claus believer. When he got LEGOs from Santa Claus for Christmas two years ago, he said, "What the heck is this?" I said, "What do you mean? You asked for LEGOs." And he said, "Yeah, but Santa Claus can't make LEGOs. He only has the wood and the things in his workshop." And I said, "Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. But I mean, for LEGOs, Santa, he just works directly with Amazon." And my son was like, "Oh, great. Let's move on."

I mean we all don't kind of do it to that extent, but that is our tendency. It's to, instead of subtracting something from our mental model, we kind of massage it to make it work with the new information. So, yeah, I think subtracting and questioning the mindsets that we already have, if I look back at the things

that have been most transformative for me over the last five to ten years, it's been things like --

I mean I never thought there was a perfectly level playing field in the United States, but I certainly have been shown especially having kids and the George Floyd murder. Right? You see my kid walking into school and you see some other kid walking into school and realize that, no, they don't actually have even close to an equal playing field. That's sad, but it's also powerful to recognize it because it gives you things that you can work on.

So I think questioning the things that you believe deeply, but then also just kind of controlling the input of information. It's so easy to produce information now. This is one amazing example of taking advantage of all the ways that we can get information across. So now it's like we're doing this interview and talking about a very specific thing for a very specific audience. This is directly related to their work and that's probably time well spent. You can even multitask while listening to this.

But so much of the information that's out there is just designed to steal your attention. And not only for the time that it's stealing your attention, but the three hours later when you're thinking about the cat video or whatever that you

clicked on. Maybe that's what you want to do but, if it's not, then that's kind of distracting.

So really paying attention to what information we allow in. Then I think that goes with leaving time to distill because I know for myself, when I started looking at this research on how we process stuff and how much information we accumulate, I was like, well, maybe I don't need to run on the treadmill while watching the news and while listening to a podcast.

It was well-meaning. It was like I need to know what's going on with the news. I want to listen to this podcast because it's cool information. But running was my time where I could process things. So just being aware of that and leaving space for the processing and for the distilling I think could go a long way.

Lori Murphy: What comes to my mind is getting rid of a bit of the noise so that we can focus on the signal.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah, I think that's a pretty common theme with subtraction. It's that people will say, "Well, Leidy, what should we subtract? Should I subtract this podcast or that podcast?" I don't know. I don't know which one, which is the one that's aligned with your goal and that gives you clarity on what you could take away and what you should keep.

Lori Murphy: I want to dig in a little bit to the judiciary and then the judiciary's culture.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. Awesome.

Lori Murphy: It seems that there are a few barriers within the judiciary. And perhaps other organizations, but certainly the judiciary, challenges maybe. One is that, when we add things, people tend to notice. When we subtract, not all the time is it noticed.

Another challenge that we suffer from in the judiciary is, well, this is the way we've always done it. The third challenge is that very often the thing that we might subtract is actually the thing that someone feels tremendous ownership over. Maybe they created it and they might have even created it decades ago.

When you consider those aspects of our culture, how can leaders encourage those that they lead to consider subtracting while not feeling a sense of loss, while feeling acknowledged, and even celebrated for doing good by subtracting?

Leidy Klotz: I think building it into the process is the straightest answer to that. What I mean by building it into the process is, I think you're exactly right, it's not noticed. When you've got super, high-achieving, well-meaning people who really care about doing their job well, it's hard to take things away.

So what if in your annual review process, for example, it was said, okay, what are the three things you are doing, what are the three things you're currently doing that you're going to



stop doing to clear space for this, then now you're supposed to do it. It helps with the noticing because there it is written right on the paper.

So I think building it into the process is the fundamental principle there. Right? And then you can think about that at the level of annual reviews. You can think about the level of to-dos and stop-doings. So if every time you think about your to-do list, you also think about stop-doings, that's going to go a long way to making sure that you don't forget subtractions that could be helpful and maybe even kind of balancing out that information in with distilling time.

It's like for every hour of podcast that I listen to I'm going to set aside five minutes afterwards to just process it and see how it aligns with what I already think and if there's anything I need to subtract from my thinking based on the new information. But the key is making it a process and not relying on yourself in the moment to think of subtraction because you might not think of it. Also building into the process makes it acceptable and visible and a way to show that you're doing your job.

Lori Murphy: So when you talk about process, are you also talking about looking at maybe something that has been going on for a while and stepping back and saying, gee, if we were to

start this today, how would we go about it, would we have all these steps, would it look the same as it does now?

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. This wasn't in my book, but it's an example that I've encountered in my travels since the company is on a -- I mean like any company or a big organization, they have a lot of meetings. Their approach to it was to have a meeting doomsday. And this is written up really nicely on the internet by the person who ran the study at their company. It does exactly what you're talking about. It changed the calculus from like going through every meeting to say, good, do we need this, do we need that. Now you're making all these decisions to like, okay, let's just clear the slate and now the calculus is do we need this.

They immediately started to think about which ones they could add back in, but it totally flipped things around from do we want to subtract to do we want to add which is a different question. And they saved -- I'm going to not remember the exact number, but it was double-digit hours per month per employee that they saved. Again, I think what's cool about that, everybody is trying to do something about meetings I imagine, but this kind of really just flipped the framing around to say, hey, do we need this in the first place.

Lori Murphy: Budget constraints are a big issue in the judiciary, as elsewhere, and I hear a lot - I heard it last week

as a matter of fact - we need to do more with less. I don't think -- I think you're talking about almost the exact opposite.

Leidy Klotz: That's like such an engineer thing. That's what we think of, is doing less is just inefficiency. And it's the opposite because maybe doing less is the goal.

Lori Murphy: You said in your book clarity about what could be a good subtraction is having a really clear idea of what you want the end state to be. So what does that look like in an organizational setting?

Leidy Klotz: This is from one of my favorite books by Chip and Dan Heath about *Switch: How to Change*. They talk about having clarity on the vision. I think it's Southwest Airlines, some employees, they had this great chicken sandwich and wouldn't our flights be so much better if we had these chicken sandwiches on our flights. Southwest Airlines had this very clear vision of we are going to be the low-cost airline. Maybe if an airline has the goal to provide the best experience while they're on the airplane, then the chicken salad sandwich would make sense. But it didn't make sense in terms of that vision, and so it became something that you would take away.

It ends up being a really cool example because it's easy to think of things that are bad in all situations. Those of course are things you want to take away. But the chicken salad sandwich is like, no, that's good, but it's not good for our

situation. It's not good for our vision. So having that clear vision is really important.

Another example. Marie Kondo is very reliant on the vision. She gets people to get rid of all of this clutter that they've always had. One of the things that she does is really force people to have a vision of their clean space in mind. Then, if you fail to subtract something, you're going to lose that clean space. You're focused on that instead of focused on the T-shirt that you haven't worn in five years.

So it's the same basic principles. You've got this really clear idea of what the end state is going to be. It becomes easier to see that these specific subtractions are in service of that.

Lori Murphy: It sounds like that might actually take some of the pain of subtraction away even for the owner of the thing that might be subtracted.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. That's a beautiful -- I mean perfect to bring it up now because what's her other big thing? Does this shirt spark joy? If the answer is no, get rid of it. If the thing that you're losing is the clean room, then you're not as focused on losing the shirt that is a way to get there.

Lori Murphy: I want to share a judiciary example with you and get your reaction to it.

Leidy Klotz: Okay.

Lori Murphy: So the Probation and Pretrial Services System had been making approximately the same number of visits and the same type of interventions regardless of the different clients' risk factors. Officers are now administering validated risk assessment tools so that clients who are lower risk receive much less active supervision while those who are higher risk receive much more active supervision and more resources. To me this feels like subtraction on a system-wide level. What say you?

Leidy Klotz: Yeah, there are a lot of things I like about that example socially but also in illustrating subtraction. I also think it's a nice illustration of add and subtract. People will always be like Leidy is trying to get us to subtract things. I say like, yeah, I want to remind you to subtract things, but it's not that I think adding is bad. It's a great way to solve some problems. Right? It's just not the one we tend to think of that without help.

So you're doing both here, that nicely illustrates how these are complementary ways to solve problems instead of thinking of these as in opposition. You can only add or only subtract and, if you do one, you can't do the other. It's no. If adding is an option here, then, hey, maybe subtraction is an option too.

Lori Murphy: So we've just talked about a system-wide example not just of subtraction but also of addition. We've

talked about balancing the two. I want to go on a smaller scale now. Can subtraction be really very small? For example, would you consider it to be subtraction by your definition if we focus on our emails, we eliminate some extra words and extraneous information. Maybe format them a little bit better. Is that subtraction at a really small scale?

Leidy Klotz: Yeah. Definitely that counts. Those are gateway subtractions too, right, if you set them up correctly and if you're noticing that, hey, this is making my life better and maybe I'll try doing even more of it. I think also making them visible.

So I've got one of my favorite examples. One of my colleagues, whenever she says no to a meeting, she also puts that time on her calendar. It's like this is free time brought to you by saying no to this last meeting. So she subtracts, but then she also creates evidence of it. Then she sits down to do work in that time and she's thankful for her past subtraction which makes her more likely to do it going forward. So I think certainly those things count and I think they can turn into bigger ones when you see how beneficial they are.

Lori Murphy: In that example, your colleague is noticing the value of subtraction.

Leidy Klotz: Right.

Lori Murphy: How do we help notice the value like in a group, or a team, or an office?

Leidy Klotz: I think leading by example. Certainly, if you're a leader, it's just to subtract even more. It sounds like sometimes people don't notice that you're doing this intentionally, but I think there's a point with the short email. Steve Jobs is a cliché example, but nobody looks at the iPhone and says, oh, he couldn't think of buttons to put on that?

In one of the departments that I'm aligned with here, the chair will send out reminders of the weekly meetings when he cancels them which I think is a really cool example. It's kind of being celebrated and it's like, oh great, we don't have a meeting, this is awesome.

But it's also making it really clear that, hey, what matters is how we spend our time. Sometimes, if that's in a meeting, how we need to spend it. But other times I want you all to be working on the things that you need to be working on.

Lori Murphy: Right. It's making the invisible visible, as you said earlier.

Leidy Klotz: Exactly. One of the reasons that subtract wasn't taken as a book title is because it's not something that people think about in a positive light sometimes and to the extent that people might be turned off by that term. Just describing it as something else. It's like, hey, we're carving,

we're cleaning, we're streamlining. Focusing people's attention on the good thing that's happening.

Lori Murphy: In your book, Leidy, you suggest a four-part model for encouraging more subtraction. You've got four words. Invert, expand, distil, and persist. So I'd love you to share with us what each of those concepts mean and maybe illustrate them with an example.

Leidy Klotz: Two examples we've already talked about. One is just kind of inverting the situation. Like with the meetings, the question is no longer should we subtract meetings. It's should we add them back. That's an example of inverting. Also inverting how we talk about things. One thing that's really hard to get my graduate students to do is a shorter presentation. Because they've done all this work and they're presenting to their committee and they're like why would I do this on my dissertation, to not say every single thing that I've done. So if I frame it as subtracting, it's hard. But if I say making space for the audience, then that gets through a little bit more.

Lori Murphy: What about expand?

Leidy Klotz: I think with that one, one of the times that you can really find subtraction is by zooming out in your perspective because you realize that something is being done



somewhere else, by someone else, or somewhere else in the system.

With this one, for me, I think my parenting a lot comes up. So say I've got an opportunity to spend time with my son and he's out playing soccer with his friends. I could go out there and help him play soccer. But if I zoom out and be like, okay, what's going on here and what's my goal with it? My goal is for my son to have good growing experience. I know that I was hanging out with him two hours ago and we're going to be having dinner together. He's happy and doing something with his friends now. I just end up subtracting myself from that situation.

That's an example of zooming out and seeing all the different things that are going on and realizing that what you're doing in that moment might not be necessary.

Lori Murphy: Okay. So we've got invert and expand. Distil is next.

Leidy Klotz: Distil, I mean I feel like writing is probable the best example of that for me because this is where you're constantly engaged in taking things away but it's incredibly valuable. This I'm sure is the work of judges and the people who work with judges. It's like you've got all the information there but, the more that you can whittle it down, the more effective it will be. It's hard work, but I also find

it really fun. Once you've got the words on the page and you're playing with them, it becomes more of a puzzle rather than this kind of overwhelming exercise.

Lori Murphy: Could you say something about persist?

Leidy Klotz: I think we talked a little bit about making it noticeable if you do it a lot. I think in trying to keep going and keep going with the subtractions, actually you might get to a spot where they're noticeable.

Lori Murphy: And keep bringing it up, keep it in the forefront, and keep celebrating when we have a subtraction that makes things better or easier.

Leidy Klotz: Yeah.

Lori Murphy: One of the things I wanted to ask you about is perspective. How does perspective play into this idea of subtraction and just looking at what's possible?

Leidy Klotz: One of the examples that gets used a lot for my book is the balance bikes. So these are the bikes that don't have pedals which make it so toddlers can stride on top of them. The cool thing about that I think is if you look at how the guy came up with it, who invented the strider bikes. He was watching his kid ride a bike. His epiphany came when he realized that the kid could provide the balance. So he realized that a toddler can actually balance and so you don't need to have training wheels. You don't need to have some kind of third

wheel or something like that. So he realized that there was some function that the bike had been providing that could actually be provided by the rider.

So again it's a cool example of perspective that allowed him to then subtract the pedals from the bike, which is the genius in that invention.

Lori Murphy: Leidy, what is one thing you wish you would have understood earlier about adding and subtracting? Or just subtracting.

Leidy Klotz: I guess that it's an act. I think I spent a lot of time really enamored with things that were the results of subtraction in trying to figure out what was special about them. What I was really interested in, I think what's probably useful for most people, is how to get there. And that's this act of taking away.

So that was kind of the mindset shift that the LEGO bridge helped me with and some other things. But that is something that took me a while to realize and I think is worth reemphasizing for other people.

Then I have one other small --

Lori Murphy: Sure.

Leidy Klotz: Not small but it's just -- it's amazing how many people this has the potential to help. I knew that, okay, we're missing out on this whole class of options. I mean that

sounds as an academic, wow, that's a big deal. But then when you get to talk to people and see doctors and lawyers and judges and people in organizations, they're really struggling with this. It's nice to offer some options that might be able to help with it. But it's also really helpful just to talk to them and understand how they're struggling with it because I think that feeds back into my own research and my own thinking about it. It helps me do that at a deeper and definitely more useful level.

Lori Murphy: Yeah. I'd like the idea of really the intentionality about the act of subtracting. So thank you. Leidy, where can we learn more about you and your work?

Leidy Klotz: My parents gave me a good Google name, so, I mean the book has all the best consolidated information, but I have a website, leidyklotz.com. If you Google me, you can see the latest stuff that's going on.

Lori Murphy: Leidy, this was just a really interesting conversation. I'm not sure what I would have subtracted. But I am grateful that we got the chance to talk.

Leidy Klotz: Well, that's why we have editors. Right? So good job, Lori. It's just a pleasure to do. I really appreciate the work you do and the work that your listeners do. So thanks for having me.

Lori Murphy: Thanks so much.

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

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