

Federal Judicial Center
In Session: Leading the Judiciary - Episode 22:
How Rethinking Revolutionizes Decision Making
Interview with Adam Grant
August 2021

Craig Bowden: Coming up on *In Session* --

Adam Grant: "The absence of conflict is not harmony, it's apathy." If you never disagree in your workplace, that means that people don't care enough to try to surface diverse opinions and really get toward a better answer.

Craig Bowden: Today on *In Session: Leading the Judiciary*, we're talking about rethinking leadership with the active open-mindedness of a scientist. Rethinking involves frequent unlearning and relearning what we think we know in order to avoid falling prey to confirmation bias, desirability bias, and what today's guest calls the "I'm-not-biased" bias.

Adam Grant, author of *Think Again*, posits that by detaching the present from the past and opinion from identity, we can fight those good fights that lead to informed deliberation, better decision-making, and exceptional workplaces. Grant argues that intelligence may be best measured not by the ability to think and learn but by the willingness to rethink and unlearn.

Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, where he's been the

top-rated professor for seven straight years. His books have sold millions of copies. His TED Talks have been viewed over 25 million times. And his podcast, *WorkLife with Adam Grant* has topped the charts. He is recognized as one of the most influential thinkers in management and is one of *Fortune's* 40 Under 40. Dr. Grant has received distinguished scientific awards from the American Psychological Association and the National Science Foundation. He received a BA from Harvard and his PhD from the University of Michigan. He is also a former junior Olympics springboard diver.

Today, we are talking about his most recent book, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. Our host for today's episode is Lori Murphy, assistant division director for executive education at the Federal Judicial Center. Lori, take it away.

Lori Murphy: Adam, thanks so much for joining us today.

Adam Grant: Don't thank me yet, Lori. But I'm glad to be here.

Lori Murphy: We're glad to have you. I have heard you say that you study ways to make work not suck. So, how did your research lead you to determine that rethinking is critical for individuals and organizations to thrive?

Adam Grant: Oh, there are so many moments it's hard to settle on only one. But one of the defining moments for me was

the winter of 2018 when I went to a bunch of leaders and said, hey, I think that hybrid is the future of work. I would love to do a remote Friday experiment, where you let people work from anywhere and we test the impact. Just one day a week. And every leader I pitched said, nope. They were afraid of opening Pandora's Box. They thought people would procrastinate. They worried their cultures would fall apart.

And it was such a missed opportunity for them to think again because they could have had all of 2018 and 2019 to figure out how to make remote work, before we were in the middle of the global pandemic, and before we were trying to get things done while we had our kids at home in online school.

And it's not that I had some magic crystal ball. In organizational psychology, we've been studying remote work for a couple of decades. And we already knew that as long as people were in the office about half of the week, you could get more productivity, higher satisfaction, greater retention without any real cost to relationships or collaboration.

And when I see those kinds of moments happen, I realize a couple of things. One is that we all need to be quicker to think again. And two, I have a lot to learn when it comes to motivating other people to think again. And because I failed to do it, I thought I would write a book about it.

Lori Murphy: Love it. Speaking of things I love, I love this quote from your book: "If knowledge is power, knowing what we don't know is wisdom." You can relate this idea of rethinking with overconfidence, which I think many of us fall prey to, especially as we gain more skill and expertise. So, how do we get ourselves out of the overconfidence cycle and into the rethinking cycle?

Adam Grant: Well, I think mindsets really matter here and I think a lot about the legal system in this sense because there's a whole body of research suggesting that we spend disproportionate amounts of time thinking like preachers, prosecutors, and politicians. And I just found this endlessly interesting as an organizational psychologist because I'm not very religious. I never went to law school. And I can't stand politics. And yet I catch these mental modes slipping into my head.

When I'm in preacher mode, I believe I've already found the truth. And I'm proselytizing it. When I'm in prosecutor mode, I'm trying to win an argument and prove my case. And when I'm in politician mode, I am telling some group of constituents what I think they want to hear and trying to lobby for their approval. And all three of those mindsets can stand in the way of thinking again because when I'm preaching or prosecuting, I believe that I'm right and you're wrong. And that means you

need to think again. But I'm good; I've seen the light. And when I'm politicking, I'm basically trying to create a good impression, which doesn't mean I'm necessarily changing what I believe deep down.

And my favorite alternative to those mindsets is to think a little bit more like a scientist. Lori, when I say, think like a scientist, I don't mean that you needed to go out and buy a microscope or a telescope. I just mean that as a scientist, you're trained not to let your ideas become your identity, to value humility over pride and curiosity over conviction. I think the hallmark of thinking like a scientist is looking for reasons why you might be wrong, not just the reasons why you must be right, to say when I have an opinion or even a conviction, that's a hypothesis waiting to be tested.

Lori Murphy: So, building on that concept of a hypothesis as well as humility, you talk about confident humility. So, what is that and why is it important?

Adam Grant: Well, I think about confident humility as being secure enough in your strengths to acknowledge your weaknesses to say, you know what, I believe that I'm capable of doing great things. But I also know that there may be gaps in my knowledge and skills. And I think that humility gets a bad rap. People hear the term humility and they think, oh, well, I don't want to be weak or meek.

If you trace back the roots of the word humility, one of the Latin roots translates to "from the earth". It's about being grounded, recognizing that you're human, you're fallible. And I think it actually takes a lot of confidence in yourself to say, I don't know, or I was wrong. And that's part of how you invite other people to rethink things and to tell you what you might need to rethink.

Lori Murphy: Why, if it is so important to success, to better performance, to more personal happiness, if all of those things are true, why is it so hard for so many of us to do?

Adam Grant: I think we live in a world that mistakes confidence for competence. The irony is the faster you are to acknowledge when you're wrong, the faster you can move toward being right, which is where we all want to be last time I checked. And I think one of the ways we can move there a little bit faster is to rethink our networks. Most of us are good at building support networks, surrounding ourselves with people who encourage us and reassure us and cheerlead for us.

Rethinking depends on a different kind of network, a challenge network, which is a group of thoughtful critics that you trust to hold up a mirror so that you can see your own blind spots more clearly. And one of the things I've done over the past year is I've reached out to a bunch of my best critics. And I've said, hey, you may not know this, but I consider you a

founding member of my challenge network. Then I had to explain what a challenge network was.

And I said, I know I haven't always taken your criticism well. Sometimes, I've been defensive. Sometimes, I've just been on a path and it seemed like a distraction, and I dismissed it. But I know I need you to push me to rethink things. And I really value that. So, if you ever hesitate because you're afraid that you're going to hurt the relationship or you're going to hurt my feelings, don't. The only way you can hurt me is by not telling me the truth.

And I have gotten much better feedback since I've had those conversations. And I think we forget that we needed to invite people to challenge us. We also need to show that we can take it. Otherwise, they're going to stop.

Lori Murphy: You know, it strikes me that this is in line with another concept you talk about in your book, which is task conflict. And it seems like those go hand in hand. So, what is task conflict? And why should leaders engage in it?

Adam Grant: When most people think about conflict, they're thinking about relationship conflict, which is the personal, emotional, I think you have bad values, or I can't stand your personality. Not surprisingly, that turns out to be destructive in marriages, in work teams, in friendships. But there's another kind of conflict that can be healthy and even necessary,

which is task conflict. That's when we disagree about a decision or a vision or a strategy.

There's a team of researchers that I think put it brilliantly. They said, "The absence of conflict is not harmony, it's apathy." If you never disagree in your workplace, that means that people don't care enough to try to surface diverse opinions and really get toward a better answer. Another way to think about task conflict is it's productive debate. It's where people come in, instead of arguing to win, disagreeing to learn, whether they reach consensus or not.

Task conflict is about surfacing a variety of views so that everybody involved is open to rethinking the decision, the criteria, the considerations. And we need that, right? Gosh, I've been in too many workplaces where people walk around believing you shouldn't cut the boss' throat, or this is not a place where it's psychologically safe to criticize your coworkers. They're forgetting that if people always have to get along, then you're going to be stuck doing things the way you've always done them.

Lori Murphy: Sure. So, a certain amount of friction around the work is actually productive.

Adam Grant: Yeah. Let's bring in creative tension. I mean the American legal system was designed for this, right? There's a reason that we have juries deliberate. I would be

horrified if we ever saw a jury get into a room and say, let's have the most powerful person in the room give their opinion. And then let's have everyone nod and smile.

Lori Murphy: Well, let's take this to the personal for a moment, Adam. You admit in your book that you've been called a logic bully and that being a logic bully prevented you from being an effective negotiator. What is a logic bully? And how did you ever overcome the logic bully instinct to more effectively negotiate and engage in real time?

Adam Grant: What makes you think I have? It's a work in progress. I don't always practice what I teach. A former student called me for career advice. It's very clear to me that she was leaning strongly in one direction. And I had some questions about whether that might be the wrong direction given her values and goals. And so I did what I always do when I disagree strongly with someone or when they seem close minded. I brought my best prosecuting attorney to the conversation.

And I just tried to tear apart her reasoning and her logic with data, which is what I do as a social scientist. And as we were wrapping up the conversation, she said, "You're a logic bully. You kind of bombarded me with data and with reasons and facts. And I don't agree. But I don't feel like I can push back." And it suddenly dawned on me that I have made that mistake systematically as long as I can remember.

I thought that the way that you win a debate or a negotiation is you basically treat it as a war. The problem with that is it leaves the other side feeling beat up and discouraged. You can't really bully somebody into changing their mind. Best case scenario, they might go into politician mode and say, okay. I'm going to tell you I agree with you to get you to shut the hell up. In many cases, they don't even go there. Instead, they lock into preacher mode or they come back with their best defense attorney. And then you end up in one of these defend-attack spirals. And I think the goal is to go into these kinds of negotiations, debates, disagreements and recognize that you can't expect someone to open their mind if you are not willing to open yours.

So one of the things that I started doing - and I don't always remember to do this, I don't always model it effectively. But on a good day, what I will do is I'll come into a conversation where it's clear we're about to have a difference of opinion. I will say, you know, I have a bad habit of going into logic bully mode. And I don't want to be that person anymore. So, if you catch me just giving you a barrage of evidence and just hammering you with logic, let me know. Call me out on that.

There are times when the conversation stalls. And someone will say, you know what, there's not common ground here. This

negotiation is not going to reach agreement. Or we just have a difference of opinion on this issue. And so let's just agree to disagree.

And I'll intervene at that point and say, actually, I don't believe in that because I am not on board with the principle of agreeing to disagree. It's giving up. You're concluding that we are incapable of having a thoughtful difference of opinion on this issue. I would like to believe that I can have a thoughtful disagreement with anyone about anything. And the fact that you've just opted out of that, it shows me that I failed. So, tell me where I went off the rails here. And I think this is such a powerful thing that whenever somebody says, let's agree to disagree, that should be a signal that it's time to stop arguing to win and start asking questions to learn.

Lori Murphy: One of the things I think is really relevant for our court leaders is a technique you call motivational interviewing. What is motivational interviewing? How does it work? And how can we do more of it?

Adam Grant: Motivational interviewing is actually a technique that comes out of counseling psychology. It's developed by Bill Miller and Steve Rollnick. They were treating often clients with addiction issues. And they found that it was very difficult to force people to change their minds and their

actions. It was much more effective to help them find their own motivation to change.

So, the stance of a motivational interviewer was to come in with the humility and curiosity to say, you know what, I don't know what's going to motivate you to change. And it's not my place to tell you what to do. Let me ask you some questions. Let me interview you and try to find out. Is there anything in your own experience that will lead you to say, you know what, whether it's drugs or alcohol or gambling, that this is actually not serving me or the people that I care about well. And I want to make a change.

Lori, I think it's probably best to illustrate it with an example. Can we take an example where you want to motivate people to think again?

Lori Murphy: I think this is an issue that you mentioned at the very outset of our conversation about the work-at-home piece. So, one of the things that courts are really contemplating coming out of the pandemic is the amount of telework that is appropriate in a post-pandemic world. And there are differences of opinion about how much telework is valuable, needed, et cetera. And there's often just a gulf between what staff would like and what leaders would like. And it strikes me that there's an opportunity to rethink, given the experience we've had over the last 14 months or so.

Adam Grant: Okay, Lori. So, I know we have some decisions to make around flexibility and working from home. Obviously, this is an experiment worldwide that nobody opted into. And maybe not the ideal conditions to test remote work because people are worried about a pandemic. They're dealing with a lot of distractions and interruptions and stressors at home they wouldn't normally have. But what's your read of the pros and cons from the way that this experiment has unfolded?

Lori Murphy: It's been pretty remarkable under the circumstances. And everyone's really stepped up. We couldn't be more grateful to the staff for doing so under challenging circumstances. My concern, frankly, is how do we preserve the culture of our court when we don't have everyone together.

Adam Grant: I think like any major disruptive change, there are probably some real challenges and there are some silver linings. I wonder, do you think that everyone should be physically at work all the time? Is it necessary for every person for every task?

Lori Murphy: If I had my choice, I'd rather people be in the office. I think there's camaraderie, there's the serendipitous interactions. I do think there's a benefit to being in person.

Adam Grant: It sounds like then your big fears are about people losing the camaraderie, not participating in the culture.

And you think it might be doable to address those fears with some amount of remote work as long as there's not too much of it.

Lori Murphy: Yeah. I think that's fair.

Adam Grant: Okay. And what about your personal stance, are you going to be in the office 24/7?

Lori Murphy: Well, to some extent, I can't ask my staff to do something I'm not willing to do. So, wherever we land on the telework front, I think, I probably would try to align my work with that. So, if we said one day a week at home, I probably would do that just so people felt comfortable doing one day a week at home.

Adam Grant: I like the fact that you're willing to ask what's going to work best for everyone. It sounds to me like you also want to be in the office most of the time. But you'd like a little bit of flexibility. I guess where it takes me is there are some experiments that we ought to be running to try to figure out, okay, how many days a week do we give people for flexibility? Does that vary a little bit by job? Is that something that's going to work better for people who are experienced versus people who are new?

I just feel like we have a lot of questions that we haven't answered yet I guess. What information would be helpful for you? What kind of data would you want to see? What kinds of

experiments would you want to run to get a better handle on whether it's possible to get the best of both worlds?

Lori Murphy: You know, I think, one, I'd want to know what the court, what the judges thought of how things had worked over the last year. Plus, I'd like to look at the data of how we handled the work during that time. I'd want to probably know what staffing - my management team as well - I'd want to get a sense of them and also just personal challenges because I think that impacts telework as well.

Adam Grant: Well, I think it would be great to design some of those experiments and learn from them. So, Lori, stepping out of the role play a little bit.

Lori Murphy: Sure.

Adam Grant: One of the interesting features of motivational interviewing is that you can elicit two kinds of answers. There's what's called sustain talk, which is people generating reasons to stay the course of their current attitude or behavior. And then there's change talk, which is coming up with a desire or a reason or a plan to make a shift. And the thought here is, when people are considering a change, for the most part they're ambivalent. They have reasons to stick with the status quo. They also have reasons to consider shifting.

And if you can surface that, they will hear some of their own ambivalence out loud, which makes them a little bit less

black and white on the issue. And then of course, if you can follow up on some of the change talk, they might end up persuading themselves. The challenge is, I was so tempted to go into logic bully mode there, especially because I have a lot of data on this topic.

I wanted to say, Lori, pre-pandemic, there was, I mean, a gold standard randomized controlled experiment done in China actually, CTrip, by Nick Bloom and colleagues, where half of employees were randomly assigned to work from home for months. And on average, they were 13.5 percent more productive, in part because they didn't have to commute and in part because they took fewer breaks and shorter breaks. And they responded to the flexibility with motivation and loyalty. And they were also half as likely to quit over the next six to nine months because of that commitment that they made.

And that showed that even before we've experimented with all these technologies that make remote work easier, it's very possible for people to be productive from home. But there were definitely culture challenges. Despite being more productive, they were less likely to get promoted because they didn't have face time with senior leaders. And so there are a lot of dilemmas that get created by that. But there's no reason -- I mean who made up the idea that we have to be at work eight hours a day five days a week?

What if we experimented with a ten-hour four-day workweek? What if we said, okay, there are a couple of mornings where you can work from anywhere? Could we still build our culture? And interestingly, even though those data are more compelling, you're more likely to resist if I try to persuade with you with the data as opposed to really surfacing your own thoughts.

One of the mistakes a lot of people make when they're trying to open other people's minds is they haven't really set the terms of the conversation. So, I found it so helpful just to ask a question like, what evidence would change your mind? What that allows me to do is find out what standards of proof the other person finds compelling. It allows us even if we're going to disagree about the substance of the discussion, at least we can get on the same page about what counts as logic or what qualifies as rigorous data. And I think that ability to have a meta conversation is the starting point. Because then, it doesn't feel like anyone's being bullied.

It starts with saying, okay. Walk me through your logic for what would be the information that would shift your view on this. And then I can work with that logic to say, here's the information I have. What do you make of that? Instead of just trying to be one-sided about that, it's a little bit more effective for me to say, okay, tell me now, what was your reaction to what I just shared? What did you find compelling?

What did you find less compelling? In that way, I get to keep learning from you.

Lori Murphy: It strikes me that, you know, I think one of the challenges we have is we often feel like when we make a decision that it's sort of carved in stone. What you're saying is rethinking and considering alternatives is an ongoing process. And we can experiment with something and then gather data. And if it doesn't work, we can change course again.

I loved in your epilogue of your book that you showed us your thinking and rethinking, your walking the talk, so to speak. And I just wonder if you have ideas for how court leaders might be transparent about how they are rethinking or considering rethinking.

Adam Grant: One of the best shifts that I've seen in leaders as they embrace this evidence and vocabulary is they stop seeing changing your mind as a sign of weakness and start to recognize it as a source of strength, right? To say, oh, maybe I should rethink that. It's a signal that you're about to learn something. There's an opportunity here to grow and evolve your thinking, which last time I checked, is the definition of learning.

You cannot learn anything if you just stand still. And of course, we should have high standards for our values and our principles. But we ought to be flexible on our policies and

practices because we might be wrong about the best ways to advance our values. We can be here all day trying to make a list of all the things that have been wrong in the history of the legal system. We even have constitutional amendments for rethinking very big policies.

But on a regular basis, we're questioning our procedures to try to figure out how to make them better. What I would like to see is for our leaders to say, if I am as quick to rethink my opinions and convictions as I was to form them in the first place, then I am more likely to make good decisions in a rapidly changing world.

Lori Murphy: So, as we start to wrap up, Adam, and as we come out of this pandemic into whatever post-pandemic looks like and court leaders are trying to navigate that transition, what ideas do you have for them in terms of rethinking? And what concrete things can and should they do?

Adam Grant: Well, I would definitely start with the challenge network. I think surrounding yourself with people who question your thought process, not the ones who agree with your conclusions, is a first step.

A second step is to question the idea of best practices. I get what leaders are trying to do when they create them. But best practice, it signals that there's an endpoint, which is, of course, an illusion. There's no such thing as a perfect

practice. The way we do things can always be improved. And I think we should be looking for better practices instead of sort of enshrining your practice as best. At which point, people feel like it's impossible to rethink it.

And then a third step might be to make regular time for rethinking. I think so many of us are just busy doing all the time fighting fires and solving problems. And we all know the value of thinking and learning time. We also need rethinking and unlearning time. My favorite way to think about this is to say just like you would go to the doctor for a checkup, even when it seems like nothing is wrong.

You should do the same thing once or twice a year on your decisions, your goals, your values, your beliefs, your assumptions, right? If you had an annual or even a twice a year rethinking checkup where you pause to ask, okay, am I living by my values and leading by them? Are my values in the right order? Is there something missing? Have I made some bad decisions this year? What did I learn from them that could improve my decision process next year? Or is there an opportunity to reverse some of those bad decisions before I'm stuck with the worst consequences of them?

I think we need those checkpoints so that we don't fall into this trap that's called escalation of commitment to a losing course of action, where you make a decision, you get some

initial negative feedback. And instead of rethinking it, you double down because you want to prove to yourself and everyone else that you were right all along, which is a great way to send yourself on a one-way mission to failure.

Lori Murphy: Well, on that note, Adam, where can our listeners learn more about you and your work?

Adam Grant: Thank you for asking. I host a TED podcast called *WorkLife*. And that's a decent place to start. Also, if you want to assess your rethinking style, I have a free assessment on adamgrant.net.

Lori Murphy: Excellent. Thank you so much, Adam. It's been a pleasure to talk to you.

Adam Grant: Thank you for having me.

Craig Bowden: Thanks, Lori, and thanks to our listening audience. To hear more episodes of this podcast, visit the executive education page on fjc.dcn or simply subscribe to this podcast on your mobile device.

In Session: Leading the Judiciary is produced by Shelly Easter. Our program is supported by Anna Glouchkova and the entire studio and live production team. This podcast was paid for at U.S. taxpayer expense. Thanks for listening, until next time.

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