

Federal Judicial Center  
In Session: Leading the Judiciary  
Episode 37: Why Microstress Matters  
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Karen Dillon: There's a lot of research that says that a negative interaction can have up to five times the impact of a positive interaction. If you can remove even just a handful of microstress interactions in your daily life, that's going to have a really material impact on the quality of your everyday life in a way that doesn't require you to just be stronger and stronger for dealing with more stress.

Craig Bowden: Today on In Session: Leading the Judiciary Karen Dillon, co-author with Rob Cross of the *Microstress Effect: How Little Things Pile Up and Create Big Problems and What To Do About It*, describes their discovery of the cumulative unrecognized small stresses causing significant impact on even the highest performing employees.

Called microstresses, they can add up to inexplicable exhaustion at the end of even the most uneventful workday. Removing even a few microstresses and building strong social networks outside of work can help leaders foster greater resilience, improve performance, and combat burnout in themselves and those they lead.

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Advisors, and co-author of three books with Clayton Christensen including the *New York Times* best-seller *How Will You Measure Your Life?*

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: Karen, we're so happy to have you. Thanks for being here.

Karen Dillon: I'm so glad to be here. Thanks for asking me.

Lori Murphy: Karen, your book is all about what you call microstress which is not a term I had heard before. So help us understand what microstress is, how it's different from regular stress, and why we need to understand the difference.

Karen Dillon: So it's not a term that existed before. It's a term that my co-author and I, Rob Cross, came up with to try to describe something we were seeing in our research that we didn't think there was good language for. So microstress in our definition is tiny moments of stress that happen in routine interactions throughout your day that are so brief and so routine that your brain barely registers them but whose cumulative toll is really significant. So microstress is really largely unnoticed or largely invisible to most of us.

I'll give you a difference between microstress and macrostress to explain it a little bit. A macrostress is something that's big, and significant, and it's visible. Our body actually responds to it. So it might be a major health issue, a really toxic boss, and you're aware of it. We know how to talk about and have empathy for and support one another for that. We even know in some ways how to cope with that ourselves.

Microstress by contrast might be you don't have a toxic boss, but you have a boss who's really well-intended but keeps changing the priorities it seems like on a daily or a weekly basis. You're always trying to scramble to catch up to what he or she expects of you. Or it might not be you have a major health issue, but it might be that yet again you have to cancel meeting your friends for the walk. You're just starting to worry about your health slipping away and your friendship suffering as a result of you being the person who once again can't turn up.

So there's a difference between the macrostress that we see and know and microstress which our body just sort of absorbs because it's life but it's actually taking a really significant toll on us overall.

Lori Murphy: How did you and Rob notice this thing that you coined as microstress?

Karen Dillon: We were doing research on a slightly different project. We were doing research into high performers. Initially, our goal was to understand what did they do better than the rest of us and how do high performers stay high performers. But in our interviews, we started to see something that we hadn't expected to find. That even these very high performers, who the world saw as high performers, were kind of hanging on by a thread really to get through a day, a week, a month. They were better than most of us at coping with that, but they also had more than the rest of us. So we thought if they're hanging on by a thread, these high performers who are good at navigating this, what about the rest of us who maybe aren't so naturally hardwired to be the top-top performers?

Lori Murphy: How does microstress impact us, these microstresses that build and are fairly routine?

Karen Dillon: So microstresses happen from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed, and then even sort of work in our brains after we go to bed. So a simple thing would be most of us could leave the house in the morning with having kind of curt words with our kids, or our spouse, or our partner over something inconsequential. But that's already a microstress.

Our body's natural defense mechanisms against stress are not triggered by these small ones, but they build up. So I think a good metaphor for it is you have the cup that you start

filling up in the morning with drops, drops, drops, drops and you can carry that cup all day. But as you get to the end of the day it's totally full and one extra microstress or one extra bad thing happening to you is going to make it overflow.

It's why so many of us come home at the end of the day and we're fried and we're tired, but we can't really even remember why. Nothing special happened during the day, just a routine day. Then unfortunately, because our cup is so full by the time we come home with the microstress, we tend to be more triggered by the microstresses that come at home at the end of the day. We're curt at the dinner table or we don't connect with our spouse the way we want to. It means that you're not the person you want to be with your friends and your family at home. So that while individually each of these microstresses sound small and insignificant, cumulatively they just add up to that overflowing cup and the stress takes a really significant toll.

Lori Murphy: You say in the book that microstress in your definition is interrelational.

Karen Dillon: Yes. From our research, microstress comes in the interactions with other people. It comes because we argue with somebody about the fact that we didn't finish getting something done on time, or we have a slightly tense conversation with a colleague because we're realizing we're on a slightly different page on our priorities, or an ask of us from somebody

requires us to then go in turn and ask other people favors or to put work aside. It's the interactions that trigger the microstress.

Lori Murphy: Can you help us understand primary and secondary microstresses?

Karen Dillon: Sure. Again in our research primary microstress is the thing that directly happened to you - an interaction that causes you to have to respond to that in some way. It can often trigger secondary and even tertiary responses as well. So a secondary, a great secondary example is not uncommon in our research, was somebody that just ended up having to stay late at work to finish whatever late ask or miscommunication or misalignment with a colleague which then leads into their evening. Which means that, secondary stress, they didn't get to sit down with their teen at dinner the way they had wanted to.

So there is nothing about the initial microstress that in theory should have affected their relationship, or their concern, or their worry over their teen. You don't feel like the parent you want to be or you end up finding that you're not being the sibling you want to be to your siblings because you're so busy with the first and the second order effect. So microstress almost always has ripple effects. They ripple on in your brain and in your life for much longer than that.

Lori Murphy: That's a good way to put it, ripple effects. I was thinking a spillover effect into other relationships. It sounds like we're actually carrying those microstresses well beyond the day we experience them.

Karen Dillon: We do. Our brains are processing it. But because it hasn't registered in our frontal lobe, literally the way that a more significant stress would, our bodies are feeling the toll of it and we're kind of carrying the emotion of that without even knowing it.

There's a lot of interesting research about the effects of small stresses and microstress. One thing I thought was really fascinating is there's research that suggests, if we are exposed to social stress, within two hours of eating a meal that our body will metabolize that meal as if we ate I think 110 more calories than we did. You know, a couple of extra bites. But if that happened to us every day, if what we ate was metabolized as if we ate more than we actually did, we would gain 11 pounds in a year.

Lori Murphy: Wow.

Karen Dillon: That's just one example of this sort of very unseen effects that last, that linger from having microstress throughout your day. Most of us, most people in busy work-life jobs, just are battered with microstress. So our body is doing

its best to respond, but it is taking a physical and emotional toll.

Lori Murphy: What are the things that we're doing to ourselves that we could stop doing to decrease the number of microstresses we experience?

Karen Dillon: So being conscious of the ones that are routinely part of your day. I will just make a point on why it's such a worthwhile thing to try to push back on some microstress. Individually, if you write down the microstresses in your life, they may sound silly to an outsider. But again cumulatively they're taking a toll.

Our classic response to stress in society has always been doing things to make us stronger for dealing with stress and they're all good things - meditation, mindfulness, showing gratitude. Things like that. Those are good and helpful ways to make you stronger.

There's a lot of research that says that a negative interaction can have up to five times the impact of a positive interaction. So, it's a much higher leverage opportunity to remove some stress from your life rather than just continually trying to find ways to be stronger to dealing with the stress.

So, if you can remove even just a handful of microstress interactions in your daily life, that's going to have a really material impact on the quality of your everyday life in a way



that doesn't require you to just be stronger and stronger for dealing with more stress.

So just being aware that these are significant things that take a toll. If you are in charge of managing or leading people, that's actually a really significant source of microstress. We sort of absorb some of the microstress that's just about wanting them to do well. Or stepping in to sort of over coach and mentor all the time because you don't want them to screw up, or bringing that home. You worry you're having to have your third conversation with someone who reports to you about improving on X or Y thing, you bring that home with you emotionally. So we absorb the microstresses that we are surrounded by.

So being aware of the interactions that are causing microstress for you and thinking is there a different way to do it. In the book we suggest a simple exercise to at least start to get on top of microstress in a way that you might be able to push back on. Which is that we ask you to pick two or three microstresses, the interactions that are happening systemically enough or routinely enough for you that it would be worth seeing can I fix or change or push back on that in some way? Can I stop having this meeting with this particular colleague that always ends up leaving me confused? Can we communicate in writing instead? Or figuring out if you could change two or

three of those that are directly affecting you and you know affecting your sort of overall productivity and your sort of emotional wellbeing.

Then we also say, because reality is reality, we can't make it all go away. Pick two or three that are kind of getting under your skin but you just accept, "You know what? I'm not going to be able to change it. It's not really going to matter six years later in my life." It might matter for six weeks or six months, but just kind of consciously choose to let go of that one. It may be a particular colleague whose confrontational style gets under your skin. It may be a particular task that you have to do even though it's thankless. It's part of your job but you just accept it. But decide to let go of a couple.

One of the most significant things we found in our research for the people who were very good at coping with microstress, better than most - we started calling them the 10 percenters because it was about 10 percent of our research pool - was that those people found ways to make sure their life had what we called multidimensional activities and connections. It just kind of mitigates the intensity of the microstress when you have other things and other people to talk to and activities that refresh your brain in some way.

So I have made a real point of making that an active part of my life and not letting it be the thing that falls off, which it almost does for all of us. As we get older, we sort of let that be the less important thing in our life because we're so busy. I've made time for that and I think it has really a rejuvenating effect pushing back on microstress.

Lori Murphy: Give us an example of someone you met who is a 10 percenter and how they mitigate some of these microstresses.

Karen Dillon: I found them fascinating because they have the same number of hours in a day as the rest of us but they just made sure that they worked in time. Sometimes it was a twofer for activities that made them feel more like a whole person. So an example, there was a guy who organized a really informal soccer game on the weekends for parents and kids. You know, friends. It was just a way for him to have other adult contact, but to feel physically fit and be with his family at the same time.

There was a guy who he and his wife just put on Facebook: anyone want to join us for dinner on such and such day, we're going to make a reservation, just turn up. They made it really simple. They didn't make it complicated. It was a way that they could stay connected with their friends.

Or even people who just did their annual getaway, their girls' weekend with their college friends, they just kind of made time. They didn't let months and years go by before they connected with other people.

But I'll give you a great, a really fun example. There was a guy who was a neurosurgeon at a very prestigious New York hospital whose life and career had been consumed by his work for a long time. After the initial phase of research with us where we were talking to him about the importance of this multidimensional life, he literally joined a rock band. Like a weekend rock band. He decided to get his guitar out of the closet, he hadn't played it for years, and he went into his local music store just looking for music to get himself back in the game. He saw a flyer. There was something like, weekend band, what we lack in talent we make up for in volume. Or something like that. He ended up joining it. He was much older than the people in the band, but that was part of what was so refreshing for him. He didn't become best friends with them, but he had a weekend experience that put him in a different space and connected with human beings in a different way. It also made him feel good about dusting off his old talent.

So people found different ways to do it, but they were all good at making sure that still stayed a priority for them. Even

just in small moments, that they found ways to be connected to human beings beyond work and family.

Lori Murphy: Excellent. So there are ways to mitigate microstresses in the workplace and then also in our real lives as well.

Karen Dillon: The real lives I sort of think of as almost an inoculation. It creates something we started to call in our research a resilience network. Meaning there were a variety of people in your life, in work and outside of work, who could help you get through difficult patches in different ways. It wasn't that you had to have more best friends, ride or die friends that would really have your back in crises. That's good, but it's also good to have someone who can help you see a different perspective or can sort of say feel sorry for yourself for a day or two and then get back in the game. Life goes on. Having a variety of types of relationships in your life can help you be resilient to the challenging things that we all go through.

Lori Murphy: What can leaders do besides attending to their own microstress? How can they help their staff to deal with or to decrease the number of microstresses that their staff experience?

Karen Dillon: We cause microstress for other people without realizing and without meaning to. That is not just about trying to be a better boss or a better manager. It's just

the reality. It's it almost always boomerangs back on us. You think about your star performer who you load, load, load, overload with responsibilities. Eventually, that's going to backfire in some way. They're going to want to leave or they're going to be petulant, or be fried, or their work quality is going to suffer. And that's going to come back to you.

So there's some sort of macro things and some micro things. On a macro level, I think most organizations have unnecessary structural complexity. Things get built on top of and dotted lines and new committees. You're on multiple teams and you cross-collaborate in multiple ways. But we almost never sort of look at and challenge, does this make sense to have this many people working on this or having the way this reporting structure works?

Or even our processes. You know we almost always add to things, but we never take things away because organizations have become more matrixed. And because we need to work and collaborate with more people, the more people we collaborate with and the more matrixed organizations and flatter even hierarchies, that create so many opportunities for microstress interactions during the day.

So examining that at a high level and as a leader really thinking about the ways that you unintentionally cause microstress for your team. The priority shift is one of the

biggest things we found in our research. It's that well-intended leaders, without thinking so hard about it, this is our priority and then maybe this is our priority and then maybe we want both things to happen at the same time. You just don't think about the consequences of not having clear straightforward directions and for misalignments with busy people.

Lori Murphy: So that goes back to structure and process improvement. Would it be helpful for a leader or manager to ask their staff what is stressing them out?

Karen Dillon: Yes, yes. I think so much of microstress comes because people don't communicate clearly, or are afraid to, or in a culture where we're all expected to just say yes. And we do. High performers say yes. They get it done. That is why they become the go-to people. I think it would be great to have candid conversations what is stressing them out and literally look at the list of to-dos and priorities. I think people forget sometimes how often we just add.

Go over it with them and see are there points of friction that you can eliminate? Is there something you as a leader can do to make it clearer to both them and people they need to work with or collaborate with what the definitive ask is rather than letting them both interpret? Also coaching the people who report to you for being more independent and for being able to

do the work on their own. Not needing you to micromanage at every step.

That's a win for everybody, if you can coach to the point where they can begin to advocate for themselves and say this is too much, or you are unclear about this, or I need to realign my work because I got too many things going on. Allowing them to have that strength to be able to advocate for themselves is really an important thing.

Lori Murphy: So helping, almost partnering with your staff a little bit.

Karen Dillon: Everybody wins. Everybody wins if you do because eventually you will have less responsibility for the stuff you're worrying about now. That stuff that you do want them to be better, you have to coach them to get there, but then they have the opportunity to grow. They have the ability to self-advocate and they get better at what they do too. So, yes, partnering is a great way to think about it because everybody wins when that is successful.

Lori Murphy: In the judiciary, you know, we talk a lot about purpose. The why. Why are we doing what we do individually as leaders, as agencies? I'm curious if purpose plays a role in mitigating microstress or lessening the amount of microstress for individuals, for teams, for organizations.



Karen Dillon: Absolutely it does. And not in the way you would expect. There were lots of research that tells us that having a sense of purpose is, again, physiologically good for us. It does so many things. Our brains become more resilient when you have a sense of purpose. We are literally happier people with a sense of purpose. So purpose is hugely important in our life.

But here is the mistake that most people make. I could think of few worthier groups than the judiciary, honestly, because purpose is so important, and everybody is playing an important role. But the mistake a lot of people make is thinking a purpose as having to be big lofty things that you achieve or don't achieve. Sometimes I will speak to people and I will say you don't have to cure cancer to find purpose.

The people who are best at dealing with microstress in our research, our 10 percenters, were able to find purpose in everyday life. Yes, it's wonderful to be part of a system that is providing justice in the world and doing hard work of making decisions that will set society in the right course for years to come. But it also can be having a single interaction with someone in your courtroom that day where someone's seen the fairness of the system, or understood their right to present their argument, or had an interaction that could have been confrontational but ended up being constructive.

The 10 percenters look for purpose in everyday moments. Even something as small as mentoring someone or having a good exchange with someone, they allow themselves to recognize that. That has some purpose in that moment today and they almost took stock everyday in a way that the rest of us don't. We hold this bar, the purpose has to be big and worthy of life goals. Those are great. But you can find purpose that's very renewing and very helpful to mitigating the microstress if you look for it in everyday interactions as well.

Lori Murphy: I'm also curious about email because that's an interaction with others and might be contributing to miscommunication, misalignment, et cetera.

Karen Dillon: So, yes, it is absolutely. But what we found in our research is not that the technology itself is the cause of microstress, but the culture around the use of that technology. We've conditioned ourselves to act like we are constantly on and engaged, and we express it through email.

One really interesting experiment that someone in our research did with their team was they got everybody together in a room for a 45-minute meeting. Then they wrote up on the whiteboard all the ways that they communicate and collaborate collectively. So emails, virtual meetings, et cetera. Next to each of those forms, they put a column of practices we want to continue and then practices we want to stop.

So for email, for example, they decided that we want to communicate in bullet points only. No long text because that's too hard for people to quickly go through and see. We will not expect a reply to all unless you have something substantive to contribute. If you sense some kind of a disagreement brewing in the email, go immediately to in-person or phone or video so that you don't let it get buried in passive-aggressive things.

We don't expect you to respond to email after X time of night. If you want to, put it on timed-release to go out the next day. We don't want to create that culture of expectation of 24/7. They estimated by agreeing as a team, so no one felt like they were the slacker, it saved them 18 percent to 24 percent of their work time in a week because they weren't chasing a sense of we're all on all the time, being engaged in all the things.

Think of the potential of things going wrong through email. We have a great example in our book from our research of a woman who gets an email from her relatively new manager at the end of the day looking for something for a presentation he has to make to the board. She was about to go home but it's like, shoot, is that due tomorrow? Then she sends out an email to all the rest of her team. Are we supposed to get data to so and so by such and such?

Then it's an hour-and-a-half later before it's kind of cleared up. It turns out he didn't actually need it right away. He was just asking to get it going. She's now not only going home late, but she's triggered all her colleagues who'd be chasing down stuff, looking for data. And that was just from one errant email.

So we are inefficient. We create a culture of always, and on, and a lot. If you streamline those as a team, agree as a team with our new norms of how we do this, that has a huge potential to take microstress out of your day.

Lori Murphy: Earlier you said we wanted to do two things. Remind us again.

Karen Dillon: To push back on two systemic sources of microstress for you. Mine for example would be the end of meetings and the to-do list. So I literally try to work five or ten minutes into the end of every meeting I'm part of to recap and make sure we're all clear on the next steps and the takeaways.

So that's pushback on two things. Again it's the interaction. The work doesn't have to change, but the way we talk about it is in a matter-of-fact way in the meeting rather than a chase and follow-up and stressful whatever. So find two systemic things and try to find ways to push back or change that interaction. Find two that you're probably causing other people

unintentionally and try to stop or shift that interaction in some way.

Every parent knows, when you henpeck your kids, that does not work well for either of you. So find a different way to communicate with your kids or to check in with them, something like that, that's not going to cause a microstress for them and then it's going to come back in a positive way for you. Then choose a couple that you're just going to say I'm living with it, I'm not going to start, I'm not going to keep worrying about it because it's not going to change. It's something I'm going to choose to rise above.

Lori Murphy: And to add to that, it sounds like you're also saying cultivate this resilience network as well.

Karen Dillon: I think that's probably one of the single most important takeaways for me personally and for my research, is the importance of a resilience network. Just the idea that it doesn't have to be you're more social and you have better friends than everybody else. It's that different people that you have a connection with can play an important role in helping you feel resilient through difficult things.

For most people, our resilience network is - I think the average is 1.5 people because women have two, a spouse and a best friend. Men have one - a spouse. That's not even healthy

in our relationships, when all of our need for resilience comes from that one person. Right?

Think about the time you've had a really bad day at work. You come home and you spend 20 minutes or half-an-hour dumping on some particular set of detail about something that went wrong. That probably, even with the most empathetic listener, is boring to listen to or hard to get engaged with. The rest of your evening is not about anything but that spiral, but also you can unintentionally spiral each other. Whether your spouse is really empathetic, they can be like you're right, they do not appreciate you. You need more X or Y.

You go back in the next day kind of wired up as opposed to maybe having someone else who says, listen, get over it. That's life in the kind of job that you have. There's a path forward. You can talk to your boss about X or Y or you can talk to your colleague about X or Y. You need different types of people to feel resilient through most of what life is going to throw us.

Lori Murphy: Karen, what else would you recommend to judiciary leaders to help us acknowledge, recognize, alleviate these microstresses for ourselves and for those we lead?

Karen Dillon: I think just understanding that it's a real thing and it's a significant thing. Again most of us can experience the phenomenon of coming home at the end of the day being fried without it having been a particularly crazy or

difficult day. So recognizing that that's affecting everybody, it's affecting your quality of life, it's affecting your quality of work. So recognizing that microstress takes a real toll is an important step to recognize.

Then if I can reduce some of it, if I can acknowledge it and eliminate some, it's going to make us more effective as a team, as a group. It's going to make me a more effective leader. And it's going to improve my mental and overall wellbeing. I think recognizing that this is not nothing and it is really taking a toll on us, but you can find ways to make it better.

Back to that research data that eliminating a negative, one negative, can have up to five times the impact of dealing with and adding more positives. So try to eliminate a couple of things. That could make a really big difference in your everyday life and for the life of your team, people that you work with.

Lori Murphy: Karen, where can we learn more about your work, Rob's work, this work on microstress in particular?

Karen Dillon: You can find more about my work on [karendillon.net](http://karendillon.net). You can find more about Rob and the cumulative body of work that he has done and particularly this work on [robcross.org](http://robcross.org). I love to connect with people on LinkedIn. I'm very active on LinkedIn. I make great connections there. I

love to share ideas and learn about how people are coping with microstress and other forms of good things through that as well. So I'm happy to be in contact with anyone that's interested in learning more.

Lori Murphy: Excellent. Well, Karen, I know that I have some work to do too, the 2-2-2, and with my resilience network. Those are my takeaways to your point about recapping a conversation. So I want to thank you for that and thank you for your time today. This has been a great conversation.

Karen Dillon: Thank you, Lori. I've been really happy to talk to you today.

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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