

“Keep it Short, We’ve Got Work to Do”: LPM Lessons from the Coal Mine

By [Carla Landry](#) on April 11, 2023

As any Manhattanite will tell you, it doesn’t take long to walk 10 short north-south blocks. It’s less than half a mile. But when you’re under 770,000 tons of hard rock, it’s a very long distance. That was the scene in Copiapó, Chile in August of 2010.

With 33 miners trapped underground, experts predicted that there was a one percent chance of getting them out alive. They were over 2,000 feet beneath the Earth’s surface in a 100-year-old desert mine with a dubious safety record. Every connection to their survival – water, air and power – had been cut. The only surprising thing about that one percent projection is that those were some pretty good odds all things considered. Indeed, 69 days later, the world watched as 33 men emerged. The last one, the supervisor Luis Urzúa, has been widely credited with phenomenal leadership during this harrowing experience.

Urzúa didn’t know if they would make it out, and he certainly didn’t know how. But he knew he was their leader and that their rescue depended as much on what would occur inside the mine as it did on what experts did outside. The Citi Hildebrandt study reminds us that the leadership skills Urzúa practiced in 2010 are quite similar to what will be required of law firm leaders in 2023.

Managing in Hard Times

Rock, meet hard place. That may be slightly hyperbolic, but few would argue that these are increasingly challenging times for lawyers. Each law firm has its own unique circumstances. Not all firms will survive. If there was no silver bullet solution in the past, there certainly isn’t one now. But what law firms do in the next year will largely determine which ones thrive – and which ones merely survive – in the coming decade. As Urzúa discovered, however, there are strategies that help teams remain focused even when the outcome is uncertain.

Looking for Certainty in an Uncertain World

Our brains are hard-wired to find a way to make the uncertain certain. Researchers have found that people who believe they have a [50% chance](#) of receiving a painful electric shock are more anxious than those who believe they will definitely receive a shock. Perhaps your religion, your political doctrine, or your astrologer provides the absolute truths that help you navigate the complexities of your daily life. Human beings, after all, like having a single answer.

But there is no way to make uncertainty disappear, particularly when it comes to the legal marketplace. There are new competitors, market segmentation, billing pressures and escalating costs – all of that before we even consider the precarious economy. The only thing certain is that uncertainty isn’t going away. Honestly, however, we shouldn’t want it to. It’s through our skillful management of complexity that we evolve and create a competitive advantage. So, the best leaders at the best firms lean in to whatever comes next and learn how to deal with it. That’s precisely how Urzúa kept 32 of his men fighting for their future.

Management Skills are More Critical Than Ever

According to the 2023 Citi Hildebrandt study, Urzúa excelled in these three critical management principles:

- Tell the truth – No matter how tough the reality, Urzúa knew that the miner’s survival would depend on the entire team understanding the risk and their collective resolve to do whatever it would take to get out.
- Leverage the team – This meant collective, rather than unilateral decision-making. This may run counter to what some leaders believe will work during a crisis. For the coal miners, it kept them bonded and united. Despite their harrowing ordeal, every last man vowed to remain at the site until the last person, Urzúa himself, was rescued.
- Stay focused – Under Urzúa’s leadership, the team remained focused on the goal rather than on the odds. The odds were not in their favor. Every man had a job to do, from leading daily prayers to providing medical care to digging for fresh water.

Build In Efficiency

If we can count on anything in 2023, it’s that we probably can’t count on much. These are times of economic uncertainty. Now more than ever, you’ll need tools like legal project management to help you to:

- Control the things you can control. Urzúa’s team had to ration the mine’s safe room food supplies. Each man ate one teaspoon of tuna and two cookies at noon each day. It was barely 300 calories. It wasn’t much, but Urzúa was presciently aware that he would need to stretch the rations which were intended for just 25 men over two days. In the legal profession, as in life, there are many things beyond your control. The best you can do is to pinpoint what you can control in order to free up your best resources to handle the inevitable unforeseen. The better you are at managing time in a low-stakes environment, the better you will be when the heat is on.
- Reduce stress by following proven processes. High volume and routine legal work don’t require the same level of effort nor the same type of resources as bespoke matters. Differentiate between work that is complicated, i.e., several discrete, but familiar, moving parts, and work that is complex, i.e., many interdependent and risk-prone elements. Standardization introduces efficiency into your processes so that the workload becomes both manageable and predictable. Granted everything will not fit neatly into a box. That’s not the point. The point is to deploy sound systems and processes that allow you to create value, maximize resources and generate lawyer satisfaction.
- Leverage your team to work together. Arguably, Urzúa’s team would not have fared so well if they had failed to function collaboratively. They were undoubtedly stressed and their temperaments were challenged. The stakes were too high, however, to allow egos to rule even a minute of the day. Team members had to step up, put their individual goals aside, and adhere to best practices for the good of the entire group. There was no roadmap to survival for Urzúa’s team. He made good use of a set of rules and regulations that would be crucial to their survival. It included assigned roles and responsibilities as well as a 12-hour shift for each man. One Friday during the daily medical conference call, he reportedly told a bemused crew of rescue personnel to “keep it short, we have lots of work to do.”

Lawyers Aren’t Coal Miners

Supervising miners isn’t like managing lawyers. There is a certain military discipline required to lead such a dangerous profession. (We’re talking about miners, here.) That doesn’t mean, however, that there are no takeaways from the Chilean mine disaster and Urzúa’s leadership skills. Those 33 miners survived an ordeal that few believed would be possible.

Military-style leadership works in high-pressure situations when the stakes are high.

Lawyers aren't miners. Admittedly the command-and-control style of management has no place in law firms. Still, the best lawyers need additional tools in their arsenal that go beyond individual determination and personal initiative. LPM is that tool. It builds into your processes Urzúa's management principles of transparency, collaboration, and focus. When LPM is an integral part of your management systems, it will serve you well in the long run. If you aren't using legal project management or you're not using it well, you are likely to miss out on the opportunity to meet the challenges of 2023 and beyond.