

Legal Project Management. No Really. You're Going to Get Your A\$\$ Kicked.

By [Carla Landry](#) on November 8, 2022

You've probably heard of [Brené Brown](#). She has an intriguing combination of books and Ted Talks on leadership, vulnerability, and a host of other things. She's also a sober alcoholic, an ex-Catholic, and, according to her website, a (currently enraged) Texan. I'm not sure what she's raging about but, Bre, if you're reading this, let us know.

As a person with little time to spend with a good book, I appreciate an inspirational Ted Talk and she has quite a few. She is not, nor has she ever been, part of the legal profession, but that doesn't mean she can't contribute to the conversation on legal project management (LPM).

Brown is reluctant to talk in hyperbole, but she does say that a quote from Theodore Roosevelt changed her life. It seems early on in her online career, one of her Ted Talks went viral and after CNN.com and NPR picked up the news, Brown suddenly had a very public career. It wasn't the life she had ever imagined for herself, but there it was.

Of course, media-fueled fame comes with a high price tag, and both Brown's husband and her therapist warned her not to read the online comments. But being an independent thinker, she did just that. What she found was that the criticisms were hurtful and personal. They weren't even about her work, but she recognized that avoiding the attack and the resulting vulnerability were the reasons why she had always opted to stay small in her life.

The Life-Changing Quote

After binge-watching Downton Abbey in the aftermath one day, Brown says she found herself prolonging the escapism by researching the president during the era depicted by the series. It was Theodore Roosevelt. Digging a little further, she came across a quote you may have seen from "The Man in the Arena" speech Roosevelt delivered in the early 1900s at the Sorbonne.

"It's not the critic who counts. It's not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doers of deeds could have done it better. The credit belongs to the person who's actually in the arena, whose face is marred with blood and sweat and dust, who, at the best in the end, knows the triumph of high achievement, and who, at worst, if he fails, he fails daring greatly."

This message really resonated with Brown at a time when she most needed it. If you're in any type of leadership role, the quote probably resonates with you, as well. She shared three of her personal takeaways from the quote.

1. It's not about winning or losing, rather it's about showing up and being seen.
2. When you want to create things that didn't exist before and be seen, the only guarantee is that you're going to get your ass kicked.
3. If you're not in the arena, too, getting your ass kicked, I'm not interested in your feedback.

For those of us in the legal arena, and in particular, those who are responsible for LPM initiatives, these are interesting observations. LPM means doing things differently. As a consequence, you're going to hear all types of criticism. In fact,

one of the most difficult things to do when you're part of an LPM initiative is to field criticism about what you're doing and why you're doing it. There will be a number of naysayers that sit in the cheap seats, as Brown calls them, and jeer. You can't control the critics, but you can control how you respond to them.

In any profession, indeed in life, there will never be a shortage of people who could have done it better, whatever it is. Everyone is a Monday morning quarterback. They're even at school sporting events. Sit on the sidelines of any soccer game and you'll hear them. They yell profanities at the umpire and question the sanity of the players, their mouths agape at the audacity of the other team to defend their goal.

Handling the Critics

So, what is the best way to handle the critics? It might make sense to keep them out of the arena in the first place. But that's not something you can control. It's the same for your LPM initiative. The critics are guaranteed to be there. When they come, there are a few things you can do to be prepared.

Be clear and non-apologetic about your values. According to Brown, it can be scary to step into the arena and make yourself open to criticism. The same is true for LPM. But once you've made a values-based decision that LPM is right for your firm and its clients, why would you do anything else? Clients are demanding greater accountability, transparency, and control over legal expenses. Lawyers want to spend more time practicing the law and less time on non-value-added work. You have the tools at your disposal to give them what they want.

Surround yourself with people who are committed to LPM. Brown says to not overlook the external people in your life who really care about you. And, yes, it's great to have a supportive partner or mentor. But it's even better to find champions and sponsors internally that have your back. If you really show up, you're not going to win every battle. Some days you will, indeed, get your ass kicked. That's when you need that person who, as Brown says, is willing to say "Man that sucked. Yeah, it was totally as bad as you thought. Let's get you cleaned up...because you're gonna go back in."

Invite the critics inside. You can't keep them out and you can't pretend they don't exist. When you focus all your energy on defending against the critics, you do yourself and the LPM initiative a disservice. If you're going to develop an innovative new way to work in your law firm, you'll need to make yourself vulnerable. Get them inside the arena where, at the very least, they can see for themselves what's going on. About the doubters, Brown says, "Reserve seats for them, take them to lunch, say 'I see you, I hear you, but I'm going to show up and do this anyway.'" Consider constructive feedback. Everything else is just noise.

The Bottom Line

Are you really going to get your ass kicked undertaking an LPM initiative? Not likely. But it is a good metaphor for the hard work and dedication it requires. The biggest thing to remember is that when you put in the effort upfront, LPM will ultimately make everyone's life easier. Critics can be a noisy crew. Ultimately, however, they don't have the final say. Remember, too, that you don't have to do everything at once and you certainly don't have to do it without help.