

Legal Project Management: What Can We Learn from Baseball

By [Carla Landry](#) on October 1, 2024

We can probably all agree on one thing and it's probably not legal project management. There's nothing better than a hot dog at the baseball game, Group 1 carcinogen that it may be.

Maybe we can also agree that it's a lawyer's job to protect their clients against what could go wrong and, in many cases, to prevent things from going wrong in the first place. Legal project management (LPM) protects your clients against unforeseen expenses, costly delays, miscommunication, and the likelihood of errors, just to name a few. Then lawyers should be really good at legal project management. Right? Not so fast.

It's true that LPM is an important tool that can help lawyers prevent their matters from going sideways. It's also true that lawyers who want to use LPM successfully can really knock it out of the ballpark. But not everyone is so willing to play ball.

Speaking of Baseball...

What does this have to do with baseball? My son Michael's coach gave him some summer reading to do. I co-read it as well, picking it up whenever he put it down. The book, *Mental Toughness for Young Athletes* by Moses and Troy Horne, is all about helping young competitive boys and girls build the mental toughness, emotional resilience, and internal confidence needed to succeed both in sports and in life.

Rookie Lessons Applied

Mental toughness is that Kobe Bryant sort of mindset that creates elite athletes. It's that irascible competitive drive that sent 19-year-old Kobe Bryant back to the gym to practice his free throws rather than home to sulk on the sofa, after he launched four air balls to lose a critical playoff game to the Jazz in 1997. The rookie lost the game. But he didn't let one, well four, big blunders keep him down.

The authors' story about Kobe made me think of lawyers and the challenges they confront when faced with an LPM implementation. LPM ought to be an important tool in managing risks for law firms and their clients. Indeed, it is a critical tool in today's legal environment, a must-have, not just a nice-to-have, for any firm, large or small. But mastering LPM is a process. And although many lawyers have built prestigious and storied careers mitigating risk on behalf of others, there isn't a lawyer worth their salt who relishes the mistakes that often accompany success.

Lawyers don't want to be wrong. They don't want their practice group to fail and they certainly don't want to be the weak player among their peers. High-performing lawyers earn a reputation by being the smartest ones in the room, best of breed, or, at the very least, experts in their craft.

Unfamiliar is Risky

But many lawyers, both those who are early in their careers and those who have been around the bases a few times, balk at the idea of doing something that is unfamiliar. They don't want to do LPM at all. Because unfamiliar is risky. Having built their careers mitigating risks, they can't accept the idea that they may commit an error. However, as the authors of

Mental Toughness point out, failure teaches you what not to do.

LPM does not require perfection. But if you want superior outcomes from your matter teams, LPM is one of the best risk mitigation tools at your disposal. Even if you don't get it completely right. Even if you make lots of errors at bat. Next time your methods will be that much better for it.

LPM is a methodology, a very well-constructed one that is designed to help you minimize mistakes. It's your blueprint for your best outcomes. That doesn't mean there is no learning curve to making LPM work for you. It does mean, however, that even if you don't get it 100% right the first time, you're still better off. You will still serve your clients better. Your batting average isn't going to deteriorate. LPM provides the consistency you need so that you can focus on the legal aspects and cope with the inevitable setbacks. It affords you the foresight and adaptability to meet unexpected challenges.

You may never get comfortable with making mistakes. But you can't deny that you've gained tremendous knowledge and wisdom from whenever you got it wrong. In terms of a risk-reward ratio, LPM is a no-brainer. It's very rare that anyone bats 1000, you don't need a hit for every at bat to be a great baseball player. (I'm still trying to learn baseball lingo from my kid.)

Complexity and Shifting Expectations

Lawyers have always used some form of project management. The ad hoc method may have been good enough before cases became increasingly complex, priorities shifted among associates, and clients grew more demanding. This shift means that tools like LPM are necessary to compete effectively and retain loyal clients.

That isn't the only reason why LPM is so necessary. Another critical point the authors made was that it was important for young athletes to write down their goals. That's exactly what one ambitious young man did. His goal was to train 365 days a year. Who does that? Perhaps you've heard of Michael Phelps.

We all know about SMART goals. But it's not just the act of personally committing to goals. The finer point is that once you've transferred all your mental gymnastics to a written plan, you need someone to hold you accountable. That someone would be your clients. The thing is that they will hold you accountable whether you put it in a project plan or not. Better to have the plan front and center. It will increase your odds of group-wide accord and decrease the likelihood of several difficult conversations with a disgruntled client. You also boost your chances of success.

Accountability extends to the entire matter team. Today's associates can look forward to the better work-life balance they seek and perhaps even have a greater chance of making a superior contribution to the firm. It all requires a solid plan, however.

What LPM Can Do

LPM isn't complicated compared to representing a client in a high-stakes trial or corporate transaction. It won't have life-altering consequences. It will, however, significantly improve your work life and perhaps your personal life, as well, reduce your stress levels, and boost the firm's profitability, all while helping you to focus more on the things that matter most. But you must actually do the things, take a few turns at bat, to see the results.

The final chapter of the book discusses performance anxiety and low confidence. It's all part of the challenges a young athlete will face. How confident could Serena Williams be learning to play her sport on the dilapidated tennis courts in

Compton? Still, with her father's help, she rose to the top.

You may have doubts about your LPM skills. But do what the most promising child athletes do. Start small and look to the pros. The best part is that LPM methodology makes it easy in the long run.

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