Daring Greatly by Brené Brown

Normally, I write a Column entitled The Agile Practitioner for BPTrends. As an agile practitioner, I need to be continually upping my game. I'm always trying to learn from others. Sometimes that takes the form of sharing ideas with coworkers and sometimes it comes from good reading material.

I will admit right up front that I never review books I didn't like very much (except quick reviews on amazon.com). The truth is that I rarely finish them. I read the first chapter or two, then I start skimming and I usually give up after a few more chapters. It's not that these books are necessarily bad. It is because I tend to read a lot of books and I'm not interested in rehashes of what I already know. Usually.

What Brené Brown has done with Daring Greatly is spell out some very important ideas that most of us probably already know on some level. What is particularly validating about the information in this book is that Dr. Brown has put her PhD to work using empirical evidence coupled with statistical analysis to back her ideas. All too many authors write exclusively from the experiences they have gained in their own working life, whereas this book is built upon interviews with study participants.

We could debate the scientific validity of her conclusions, but I applaud her for putting her methodology in the appendix rather than leaving it to the reader to guess whether she brought any rigor to her research. Few books that attempt to address the intricacies of the human psyche, written for the layperson, even bother.

Dr. Brown's thesis centers around the non-intuitive premise that being vulnerable takes courage and makes us stronger for it. She argues that we are all plagued with feelings of shame and that it is how we deal with it that matters. She also writes us a prescription for becoming shame-resilient. The notion here is that we're all going to feel shame from time-to-time. It's how we respond to the feel that gets us back on the rails.

In both the beginning and end of the book, Dr. Brown includes this quotation:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,

Because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause;who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly…

-- Theodore Roosevelt, Paris, France, April 23, 1910

From these last words comes the title of the book. I suppose, given the quote is from 1910, we can forgive Mr. Roosevelt for his male reference. The reason this quotation has such a strong influence on Brené Brown is the clear reference to the fact that acting in the face of uncertainty brings the risk of failure. This is the very definition of vulnerability. With vulnerability comes the possibility of shame. It takes courage to expose ourselves in this way.

Dr. Brown exposes herself in this book. At first, I felt that the book was a bit too autobiographical for a serious work of research. Then, I asked myself if it is reasonable to write a book about vulnerability and shame without exposing yourself as an author. The answer may be "yes," but you cannot demonstrate that principles and practices are valid unless you're willing to teach them and live them. She does not just regurgitate her research findings, she also offers practical suggestions about how to deal with shame and fear of vulnerability. While these ideas seem to have been reinforced by her research, it also seems clear the much of it came from her personal experiences.

At Work

At this point, you may be wondering why an agile practitioner might be writing a review of what appears to be a self-help book. It is a fair question. Dr. Brown addresses this by speaking of her experiences working with her many corporate clients about the kind of cultures that lead to fear which paralyzes employees who might otherwise be engines of creativity and innovation.

Dr. Brown suggests 10 questions, the answers to which get at the heart of organizational culture. Here's the first five:

1. *What behaviors are rewarded? Punished?*

2. *Where and how are people actually spending their resources (time, money, attention)?*

3. *What rules and expectations are followed, enforced, and ignored?*

4. *Do people feel safe and supported talking about how they feel and asking for what they need?*

5. *What are the sacred cows? Who is most likely to tip them? Who stands the cows back up?*

If you want to know the other five, you'll need to get the book. These questions set up a view of the darkest part of our organizations, which lead to "disconnection, disengagement, and our struggle for worthiness."

This book was brought to my attention via "Menlo Bits," the monthly newsletter of Menlo Innovations. Rick Sheridan, the President of Menlo has written a few books of his own. One such book is "Joy, Inc.: How We Built a Workplace People Love." While his book is more anecdotal, it is an illustration of the practices the Dr. Brown espouses in action.

As leaders, we cannot expect to overcome cultures that hold our organizations back unless we can address the impact it has on individuals within it. We all bring our shame and fear of vulnerability to work with us. Some of us have more than others, but everyone is on guard for the signs. Daring Greatly shows us how we armor ourselves to combat it and in so doing, shows us how to respond after life has dealt us a blow.

Dr. Brown's corporate clients include: Google, US Air Force, Slack, Pixar, Salesforce, Microsoft, Shell Oil, IBM, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, LinkedIn, and Ford. Maybe these large organizations believe that expanding their understanding of the role that safety plays in a beneficial culture can make a difference. Maybe they just want a piece of the hot new ticket in connecting individuals to corporate cultural identity. For whatever reason, Dr. Brown has struck a nerve.

As I said at the beginning of this review, there is very little that is surprising in this book. The real eye-opener is understanding the far-reaching impact that practices and behaviors which often go unnoticed can have on our ability to perform at a world-class level.

Author

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