

LPM Lessons from the Barbie Movie. Yes, Barbie.

By [Carla Landry](#) on October 16, 2023

There are all kinds of reasons to have a visceral “oh hell no” reaction to a production about Barbie, the least of which is the inane movie trailer featuring Margot Robbie in Pantone 219C and some of the 50 other shades of gag-me pink. And, no, I haven’t seen the movie. The media hype seems enough. But I couldn’t help reading the many business articles based on lessons learned. It seems the movie plot runs deeper than I imagined. Barbie has a little something for everyone. Are there lessons for legal project management (LPM), too?

Almost all of the articles about the movie mention feminism and empowerment. But there are other messages, as well. The most poignant are perhaps those regarding stereotypes and the dangers of conventional thinking when it comes to roles.

Barbie and Extreme Thinking

Barbie isn’t the first movie to tackle this theme, of course. There are many examples in some of the most popular movies of all time. As Patrick Swayze’s character Johnny Castle famously intoned in another famous movie, Dirty Dancing: “Nobody puts Baby in a corner.” In this case, he meant that Baby’s parents couldn’t put her in a neat little box and dictate how and who she could be.

In the movie, Barbie has all the power. Sure, the 1959 debut version of the doll was a plastic imitation of the female icons of the day, like Marilyn Monroe, impossibly top-heavy with a glam black-and-white bathing suit and bright red lipstick. But today, Barbie has had more than 250 careers, judge and lawyer among them, and more than 40 nationalities. Ken, on the other hand, is just arm candy and a beach bunny whose only identity is as Barbie’s guy.

However, like all good parodies where the imitation of life is a bit over-the-top, the tide turns. What else would you expect from a movie that features a doll? Ken, having seen a different model of society in the real world and facing his own existential crisis, returns to Barbieland and rallies the men to create the patriarchal society, Kendom. Suddenly, it’s the women who are serving their Kens a beer and maintaining an orderly household in high heels and full makeup.

What does any of this have to do with law firms? Art does have a way of imitating life. For instance, in some firms, there is a split Barbie-and-Ken society. Partners and the lawyers are the Barbies. They are responsible for running a perfect society and everyone else plays an auxiliary Ken-like role. In many ways, law firms today are facing an existential crisis much like Barbie’s waning popularity among children. If that is an overstatement, then suffice it to say that yesterday’s law firm operating model is experiencing greater challenges than ever.

For this reason, there may be no better time for firms to think more creatively about the roles of lawyers and every other legal professional within the ecosystem.

If law firms were the new Barbieland, what are the lessons learned?

1. **There is power in recognizing your limitations.** It’s impossible for Barbie to be perfect in the real world. In a law firm, no one person has the exact blend of skills required to fulfill project requirements on their own. LPM is the tool you need to help you identify the right resources, garner support, assign responsibilities, and empower others

to get the work done. In a world where burnout is rising everywhere and not just among lawyers, mental health and better work-life balance should be a concern.

2. **Partners and project leaders can't fix everything for everybody.** It wasn't up to Barbie to fix Ken or help him find his purpose. It is something he needed to figure out for himself. LPM can help you identify resources, plan your budget, provide milestones, and develop unambiguous criteria so that others can reach their potential. Further, LPM memorializes a common understanding of the issues, risks, and challenges, and can even provide a pathway forward. With this common understanding, it is easier to support others without working around the problem or trying to fix it yourself.
3. **Explore beyond the boundaries of limiting role definitions.** The Barbie movie played in the extremes. Ken's sole purpose in life was to get Barbie to validate him with just a look. Barbie's purpose was to be, well, everything. It doesn't serve your law firm or its clients to overextend (or glorify?) one group and suppress or ignore the many talented resources within the other. LPM helps you ensure that you are optimizing—and balancing—the use of all of your talent and leveraging best practices to ensure greater efficiency. It's how you free up time to include the activities that add the most client value.
4. **There is more than one world.** Barbie has to deal with Barbieland, Kendom, and the real world. The realities of each of these worlds are different. In the day-to-day work, it's easy to lose sight of other perspectives. For example, what does your client need or expect? The process of setting up and then executing your project plan will ensure the flow of communication. LPM can help you avoid, or at least anticipate, budget overruns or changes in scope.

LPM can help your firm become more efficient, using its resources more effectively while delivering true client service.

These are just a few of the lessons that I see from the insights in the Barbie movie. Maybe I will have to go see it after all.