Turkey Dinner for 18 and PMBOK OR What Happens When Project Managers Cook

As I mention in my [first post](http://www.thepassionateprojectmanager.com/2010/01/20/project-management-as-fun-as-chocolate-truffles/), for some reason, many people seem to have this misconception that project management is this complicated, dorky discipline where we issue piles of excel spreadsheets, network diagrams and Gantt charts. Now where did a silly idea like that come from? (Yes, my tongue was firmly in my cheek when I typed that last sentence.)

One of my [promises to you](http://www.thepassionateprojectmanager.com/about-this-blog/) was that I planned to prove that Project Management is both fun and cool. And you can actually use sound Project Management principles to do useful things like…cook a turkey dinner for 18 people in your home. And not end up in a psychiatric ward.

And where does one find these sound Project Management principles? Why, in the Project Management Body of Knowledge, fondly known as [PMBOK](http://www.pmi.org/Resources/Pages/Library-of-PMI-Global-Standards-Projects.aspx), the standard for the Project Management profession. Sound surprised? Don’t be. There are some pretty darn useful notions in that PMBOK.

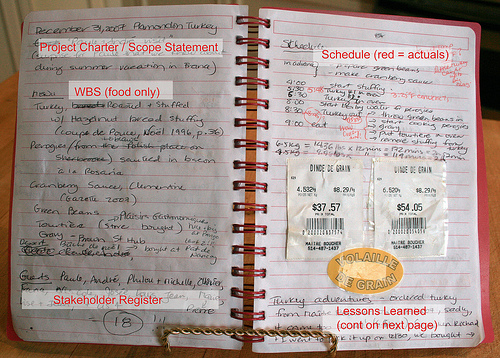
**It’s not a License to Kill with Paperwork.** For some reason, PMBOK has this really bad reputation: people look at it and think that it’s a license to produce piles and piles of paper and procedures. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, right there in 1.1, PMBOK clearly states that you would never apply all of the standard to all projects uniformly: it’s up to the project team to decide which parts of the standard apply to each project. So, if you choose only to apply, say 3 processes, then that’s what you do. As for producing those piles and piles of documents? For my small project “Turkey Dinner for 18”, not every process output is necessarily documented: many are verbal. Still many others are skipped. Again, this is normal. You can hardly expect a global standard that would apply to a $5 billion construction project to be applied in the same manner as a $20K feasibility study…or Turkey Dinner for 18.

**The Answer to the Ultimate Question is 42…but not always.** PMBOK does a really cool thing: it defines project management as 42 processes, proving that maybe it **is** the [answer to the ultimate question](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrases_from_The_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy#Answer_to_the_Ultimate_Question_of_Life.2C_the_Universe.2C_and_Everything_.2842.29). These 42 processes are grouped in five process groups: Initiation, Planning, Execution, Monitoring and Controlling, and Closing. But, does every project need every single one of those 42 processes? Of course not. Because that would be silly. It would be like…using every spice in your spice drawer for every recipe. I should know: I own every herb and spice known to man, including about 10 different kinds of sea salt.

As you can see in the detailed [Table of Processes](http://www.thepassionateprojectmanager.com/lovely-data/turkey-dinner-for-18/#TABLE) for “Turkey Dinner for 18″, I only used about 24 processes, and of those, only 12 are documented. That documentation? Fits on three pages of my Cooking Journal.

Do you think this cannot possibly apply to real life? As Cornelius Fichtner notes at the end of [this](http://www.project-management-podcast.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=302:episode-139&catid=21&Itemid=100017) PM Podcast: “Project management with lots of documents is not project managment.”

Amen to that.

[](http://www.flickr.com/photos/elisabeth99/4476318319/)

See? Five process items on two pages. How hard was that?

**The secret’s in the…Journal.** In my many readings as a passionate foodie, I recently came across an article advising that, in order to truly master stress-free Christmas turkey dinners, one should keep a Cooking Journal, including a schedule for your meal, which can be used year after year. Duh! I have kept a Cooking Journal for more than six years and am now filling my second notebook. Before my Journal, I used to scrawl roast times for turkey and roast beef in the margin of my convection oven manual: these notes quickly became illegible and therefore useless to reuse. Besides the schedule, my Journal has evolved to capture all sorts of information for my cooking projects: the menu, oven cooking times for all major cuts of meat, lessons learned, guests entertained, wine served with the meal, and interesting anecdotes. Thanks to these notes, I can now predict with a great amount of accuracy the time it takes to cook any cut of meat.

In other words, this Journal is my Project Management Information System (PMIS).

As you can see from the example for this particular meal, Turkey Dinner for 18, the Cooking Journal entry contains the Project Charter / Scope Statement, Stakeholder Register, the WBS, detailed Schedule, and Lessons Learned. And all that on three pages.

Yes, this is what what happens when Project Managers cook.

**Show me the money…?** You might notice in my Table that I deliberately left out all processes that dealt with budget and cost, for the simple reason that for entertaining, I spend no time at all making a cost budget and controlling against it. It’s pointless. We have an annual budget for groceries (which includes wine) and, year after year, it is always pretty much the same. Once my husband and I make a decision as to the type of meal that we will prepare for our guests, then the rest of the meal’s cost is frankly irrelevant. What is interesting is that the triple constraints of time-cost-performance really come into play when cooking: an expensive cut of meat like prime rib requires almost no preparation time and is virtually risk-free (as long as you have a meat thermometer). However, a beef stew requires much more preparation time and labour and considerable longer stewing time even though the ingredients are dirt cheap.

But remember, my skipping the cost processes is appropriate for Turkey Dinner for 18. Not at all appropriate for the project “Build a New Airport”. Not at all.

**Plans? Plans?**You will also note in the Table that I did leave in all of the processes involving the preparation of plans, but these steps are all verbal. I most certainly do not write out a PM Plan for my project Turkey Dinner of 18! But we certainly engage in the process: my husband and I sit around the kitchen island and plan **for hours**: we debate options, make decisions, then put them into action by either updating a grocery or task list or by an entry in the Cooking Journal. This is entirely appropriate for Turkey Dinner for 18, mainly because the project team and number of stakeholders is very small. But if you are doing “verbal” plans for the project called “Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics” or “Tallest Skyscraper in the World”, I fear for you. Truly, I do.

**There’s no “I” in Team, is there?**One plan worth noting is the HR Plan, which looks something like this (DH = Dear Husband, D1 = oldest daughter, D2 = younger daughter):

* Project Manager, Master Chef, Master Food Shopper, Goddess of all, Last Word and Veto Power on Everything: Me.
* Sommelier, DJ, Sous-chef who gets fired and re-hired at least three times in the evening much to his sisters’ delight: DH
* Seating plan, Makes the pretty menus and decorations for the table, Folds the napkins so that they look like tuxedo shirts: D2.
* As for D1? She opens the bags of chips when the guests arrive. And that’s about it.

**It begins only with my approval (according to me).** Since every project needs one before it can start, it’s worth mentioning the Project Charter. Quite simply, it’s the document that formally authorizes a project. For this project, it goes something like this:

DH: “Elisabeth, my sister from France will be in Montreal over the Christmas holidays. Let’s have the whole family over for a turkey dinner. That would be about…(counts)…18 people. We’ll have them over on December 31 since your family will be here from December 27 to December 30.”

Were I to promptly file for divorce, the project would be considered…well…dead. But, as I always enjoy a challenge, especially a culinary one, I answered something like: “Hmmm. Okay. Sounds like fun. Let’s do it.”

And so, a project is born. No, it’s not written down but that sentence is essentially the Project Charter. Its approval, though verbal, was obtained from the only person that matters: me. (Evidently, DH doesn’t read my blog.)

**Never Ever Never…And I mean that.** The WBS (Work Breakdown Structure) the subdivision of project deliverables and project work into smaller, more manageable components. You will notice that I have skipped a lot of processes for my project Turkey Diner for 18. That’s okay. Here’s a word of advice based on my 20 years of experience. NEVER EVER under any circumstances NEVER EVER skip this step. NEVER. Or you will be very very sorry. I mean that. If you do one step, do this. Always. Always. Always. Got that?

The optional part to the WBS is the granularity, that is, just how detailed a WBS you feel is required for your project. The part about skipping it? Not optional. I believe I was clear on that…

[Here’s](http://www.thepassionateprojectmanager.com/lovely-data/turkey-dinner-for-18/#WBS) the detailed WBS for a Turkey dinner. Yes, for this dinner, DH did have to manufacture a table extension. Did I not already mention the extensive planning?

**No, I didn’t invite the cops, did you?**Stakeholders are all those people who are affected by the project. In this case, they are all 18 of the dinner guests, which includes me, DH, D1 and D2. Neighbours are not affected in this case since we were indoors. When we had our house-warming party way back in 1991 which was held in the backyard with about 50 guests, I invited the neighbours (2 houses down, both sides). I figured with all of the noise we would be making, they’d feel too guilty to call the cops if they were guests. That, dear readers, is stakeholder management.

**Those fun family “discussions”.** For this project of Turkey dinner for 18, the stakeholder management strategy was basically the seating plan around the dinner table, which was carefully devised so that those family members who tend to…er…loudly disagree with each other do not sit next to each other. My youngest daughter (D2) is always in charge of the seating plan, and has this down to a very fine art.

**Risky Business**. For Turkey Dinner for 18, it turned out that the risk processes were key to our success. We had done many turkey dinners before this point, but only for 14 at the most. The higher number of guests (18) posed a greater risk in that it required a bigger turkey, or two smaller ones. In addition, we were having the party on December 31, which was late for the Christmas turkey season and therefore increased the procurement risk. To complicate matters even further, we were also hosting my family from December 27 to 30, with another turkey dinner in there, so our only fridge would be full to capacity. Similar to the other planning processes, we spent hours and hours of discussing options, something like [this](http://www.thepassionateprojectmanager.com/lovely-data/turkey-dinner-for-18/#RISK). With all the turkey I was cooking, let’s just say that this was the year I became in expert in what to do with turkey leftovers.

**The Second Very Best Part or What overcooked green beans?** My favourite part is when the entire meal is on the table and we finally sit down to eat (I don’t get up any more after that) and I get to hear the “oohs” and “aahs” from the family. My second favourite part is the Closing process. The next morning, I update the Cooking Journal with actual data and include our lessons learned: what worked, what didn’t, and how hard it is to find Diamond Crystal kosher salt in Montreal at Christmas (which explains the three boxes in my pantry.) I also recalibrate the turkey cooking time (mins/lb) and check it against my years’ worth of data. In Project Management terms, this is documentation of Lessons Learned, and I often refer to the lessons captured in my Journal when planning future meals. And yes, if I document Lessons Learned on a small project like Turkey Dinner for 18, don’t you think you should be doing it for all of your projects? That was a rhetorical question, by the way.

**What really matters.**As we reminisce about the meal and the evening, it never ceases to amaze me how, despite the many things that went wrong (the mushy perogies, the slightly overcooked green beans, how quickly that second turkey cooked compared to the first), the family did not notice or care, had a wonderful time, and thinks I am God’s gift to cooking. (I am not but please don’t tell them that.) The next day we get about 20 emails with pictures profusely thanking us for the wonderful dinner, the perfect evening and for the fact that my husband married me.

And that last part, dear readers, is what Project Management is really all about.