

# Using the Passion for Superbowl to Learn About Project Management

## Abstract

Every year, for more than a half century, billions of Americans of all ages, political orientations, genders, professions, gather on a Sunday of late winter to watch the annual championship game of the National Football League (NFL), the Super Bowl. This exercise is designed to teach the triple constraints and the practical application of Project Management (PM) skills to undergraduate and graduate students for both face-to-face and online classes. Students are tasked with planning an “epic” party and must go through the various steps of defining the scope, budget, and schedule planning leading up to their event. This approach provides an enjoyable experiential approach to applying the tools and skills of successful Project Management. The context of the project is well-known, requires no specific knowledge and since it is a common activity, can provide for an interesting and entertaining post-activity discussion that helps students recognize the value of PM tools to achieving project success.

**Keywords:** Project Management, Super Bowl, Experiential Learning.

## Introduction

“I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand”.  
Confucius

There is probably no other sport that says more about American culture than Football. Let's start by the name. In no other country in the world, football means the same thing it means

in the United States. Everywhere else in the world a game called football means the players are running and trying to kick the ball – which is round by the way, with their feet. In the U.S., that game is called soccer. For Americans, football is something much more special, almost a religious ritual (Taylor and Taylor, 1997). Football season starts on summer, and its apogee happens mid-winter, usually last weekend of January or first of February. Always on a Sunday. It is Superbowl weekend!!! Everybody knows! Everybody talks about it! It shapes the conversations among neighbors, friends, colleagues, enemies, and even the financial market on Wall Street (Chew, 2016).

The fact that we learn best by doing rather than just listening or observing others is not new. The Chinese teacher, editor, politician, and philosopher, Confucius (551 BC – 479 BC) is quoted on this for more than 2,500 years. Since then, research all over the world had proved the power of learn by doing to provide richness and context for students and professionals (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2016).

This exercise is designed to teach the basics of Project Management using the richness of the cultural background freely available for American students regarding the American football. The use of Superbowl can also be adapted to any other culture in the world using another sport, art, culture, or any other event. It was designed as the main activity for one of the topics in the core course in Business Operations Management, and applied by two instructors. One of the instructors taught the course on a face-to-face environment and the other in an online platform for a total of 80 students. Learning perceptions will be taken in a likert scale and used for comparison and possible improvements.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

A project is an interrelated set of activities with a definite starting and ending point, which results in a unique outcome for a specific allocation of resources. Project Management is the systemized application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to define, organize, plan, monitor, and control projects to support the meeting of their requirements (PMI, 2013). All projects also need stakeholders and are subject to different constraints, such as scope, quality, schedule, budget, resources, and risks.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The importance to understand and apply the principles of Project Management (PM) have been widely studied and proved for more than half century. One of the main bodies of knowledge is the Project Management Institute (PMI) founded in 1969 and its publication, the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK, 1987, 2013), which is a comprehensive 600+ pages of detailed information of what PM is and how to successfully execute it. A google search with the keywords “project management certification” brought about 58,7000,000 results in 0.65 seconds, and yet, PM remain one of the least comprehended and developed skills in the business community.

The success rates that a project reach regarding its original constraints are still very small. Only eight out 100 organizations have a project success rate greater than 80 percent, on average, less than 70 percent of project met their original goals in 2016, 57 percent finished within their original budgets, and barely half finished on schedule (PMI, 2017).

We use the “Superbowl Party” as an experiential learning activity prior to the lecture of the topic based on Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984). The way most Operations Management Classes are set up and the majority of Operations Management textbooks are organized, the chapters related to Project Management will come after the 3<sup>rd</sup>, (Heizer, Render, Munson, 2018; Pinto and Venkataraman, 2016), 7<sup>th</sup> week of class (Krajewski, Malhotra, and Ritzman, 2016), or even later<sup>1</sup> (Foster, Sampson, Wallin, Webb, 2016). In our particular case, we first applied this activity on the first couple weeks of a spring semester. This aligned perfectly with the Superbowl season and the way the adopted textbook was structured.

## **Learning Objectives**

During the preparation and execution of the exercise (Appendix A), students will be able to:

1. Identify the stakeholders for their project
2. Understand how the key inputs and outputs of a project integrate and make sense to a successful project management using a using a common setting where no specific contextual experience is required
3. Apply the information gathered and define the Supperbowl Party’s Project constraints
4. Create the Project specific data and project schedule, as exemplified on Figure 2.

[Include Figure 2 about here]

5. After the event, analyze the activities and estimated budget and timeframes
6. Evaluate the outcomes and improvement opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of this paper use few textbooks as a reference and understand that each instructor may change the order of each given chapter they prefer to teach as they chose. These are just for reference.

### **Instructions for Running the Exercise**

Prior to the exercise (Appendix A), students read the text chapter on Project Management, followed by completion of the assigned homework problems. These provide background knowledge in the need for PM, appropriate scheduling tools/techniques as well as approaches to dealing with uncertainty or unexpected outcomes. The exercise instructions (Appendix A) are provided to the students who are given one week to build their project plans according to the written questions and prompts.

### **Instructions for Debriefing the Exercise.**

The class immediately following the submittal due date is used for discussion. Students are encouraged to share their approach such that compare and contrast methods can highlight there is no single right answer. Furthermore, variation in task detail, estimated times for common tasks and differences in critical path determination are surfaced and emphasized. Students can also be placed in groups of three to five students to discuss their submittals in a smaller setting, followed by a larger discussion of commonalities and differences amongst the groups. Once the Super bowl has been concluded, a follow up discussion can be facilitated for those that actually participated in a party/event. Here the learning is aimed at post mortem evaluation of what went well or not as expected and how Project Managers could anticipate and mitigate unanticipated outcomes. A review of party outcomes post-event also highlights how metrics can influence decision making and the need for SMART objectives with a balanced scorecard to improve operational results.

## Conclusion

The proposed activity is an experiential learning for Project Management for both undergraduate and graduate students. It follows Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) and covers all main learning goals based on Bloom's Taxonomy. Moreover, it gives opportunities for students to learn by doing from a fun and effortless experience. Students will be able to define intended project outcomes, create balanced scorecard metrics to quantify their project success rate. To do this, students will identify activities, estimate timeframes, set precedent or independent relationships and identify critical path. They will also experience with project-crashing, including analytical approaches to schedule implications and potential tradeoffs in outcomes. By simply "preparing a Superbowl party", students will experience first-hand the job of a project manager. Including the identification of project risk and development of risk-mitigation approaches – yes, snow storm do happen in many parts of the U.S. late January. Finally, through discussion, students will create awareness of variability, quantification methods, and approaches to reducing task variation.

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## Appendices

### APPENDIX A

#### *Superbowl Party - Create a Project Plan*

It's mid –January and football season is quickly coming to a close... That means it's time for the SUPERBOWL!!!!

So let's have some fun and throw a Superbowl\* party for 30 of our closest friends.

With two weeks to go, let's put your Project Management skills to use so we can plan, prepare for and host an epic party.

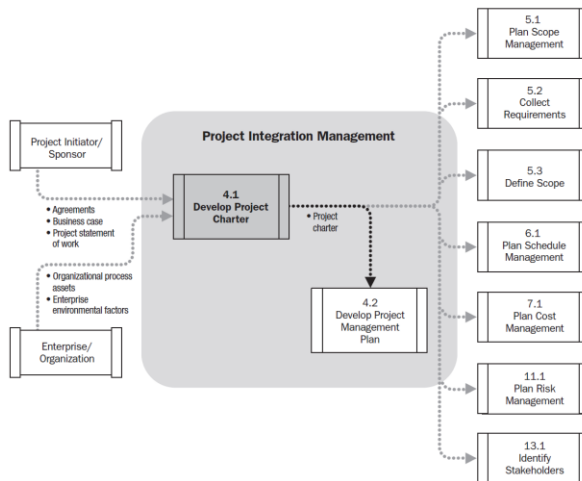
- What is the objective of your project? What does success look like? State it in your words.
- What are the key tasks or activities leading up to and during the party itself; list out at least 25
- Consider how long it will take to perform each of the tasks. An estimate is fine. For example, if one of your tasks is to “Thaw out the frozen chicken wings”, you might estimate four hours for this.
- Do any tasks have to be completed before others can start, meaning for the identified tasks are there any predecessors? Which tasks are truly independent?
- Using excel or a hand drawing, draft out a project schedule, showing the order of tasks from start to finish.
- Identify the critical path.



- Do you have enough time to get ready for the party? If so, when do you have to start your first activity?
- Uh-oh... your car broke down and you could not get it fixed in time to start shopping per your project plan. You are now one day behind schedule. How can you crash the schedule? At what cost (approximate)?
- Other than your car breaking down, what are the key risks to your schedule? Identify at least three risks and discuss how you might mitigate them.
- Note: \* - if you really are not a football fan or having something against the Superbowl, you can do this same exercise as a birthday party if you wish.

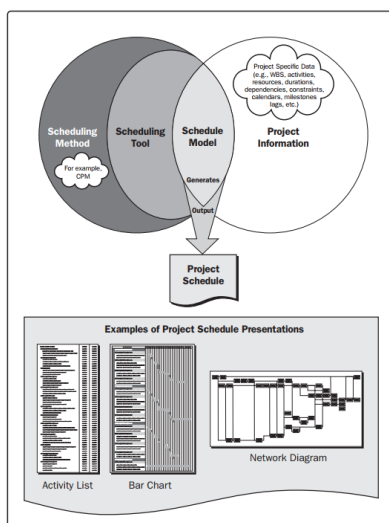
## FIGURES

Figure 1: Key inputs and outputs of project integration



Source: PMI (2013)

Figure 2: Project schedule generation



Source: PMI (2013)